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Storying Autobiographical Experiences with Gender-Based Violence: A Collaborative Autoethnography

Abstract

In earlier work^{1 2} collaborative autoethnography was identified as a viable methodology for researching stories that drew on lived experiences with domestic abuse. Collaborative autoethnography offers a method of working with women outside of academia who have experienced gender-based violence (GBV) and including them as co-researchers whose writings can and should be valued as academic research. In this article, also a collaborative autoethnography, the authors explore methods for storying autobiographical experiences of GBV as a potential way of reclaiming stories whilst navigating the legal, ethical and moral dilemmas sometimes associated with autobiographical writing that might help to make these stories less difficult to write, and also read, avoiding stereotypes that have led to critique around battle-weary narratives of GBV³ and bad romance tropes⁴. They argue that evocative texts drawing on lived experiences but layering the real with the imaginary, the remembered with the fictitious, can be more accessible to read and write. Cook and Fonow⁵ argue that feminist work is often creative and spontaneous, and this article will detail writing methods that were shared by the authors in creative workshops with survivors of GBV as part of a project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)⁶. They also share examples of their own stories that have been inspired by this approach as well as the challenges and motivations of working in this way.

Introduction

Storytelling can help us make sense of the chaotic and confusing and has always been vital to qualitative research⁷. Bringing elements of experience, thought, and feeling together on one page

to be told, mapped and shared, and hence, contribute to the ways in which we make knowledge about the world and senses of our place in it”¹¹ but autoethnographers are at risk of trapping themselves in narratives that once published, may have legal and ethical implications for themselves and others that can be problematic rather than transformative¹². Storying our autobiographical experiences offers a way of writing research that is personal and lived but can also help authors to navigate dilemmas around ethics and legal issues that can limit feelings of vulnerability and exposure that can exacerbate already problematic experiences.

In earlier work¹³, a colleague and I (Jess) detailed a method of sharing stories of domestic abuse that helped us to feel differently about our experiences and closer to each other. We identified autoethnography as offering a potential way of working where: “topics of mutual interest made all members equally vulnerable to each other and became a liberating equalizer in their relationships”¹⁴, aligning with autoethnography’s desire to be inclusive, supportive, democratic and helping us “to create a safe space where writers, teachers, and students are willing to take risks, to move back and forth between the personal and the political, the biographical and the historical”¹⁵. Over words written and spoken, we established a safe and creative space where we explored our intimate histories through our storytelling and recognised these acts as personal and political, part of a feminist methodology that Acker et al.¹⁶ outline as work that should:

- 1 Be about women and can be used by women;
- 2 Not oppress women;
- 3 Develop feminist perspectives that challenge dominant intellectual traditions.

We applied what was positive about sharing personal stories to a community project where we worked with survivors of domestic abuse to tell and reimagine their lived experiences using poetry, prose, textile and sketch¹⁷. The women involved in the project valued space and time to talk and develop skills and techniques in writing and making, but only one member of the group wanted to share their story beyond the workshop room. To insist on deliverable outputs and quantifiable outcomes seemed to disrupt everything that was nourishing and pleasurable about the sessions and would have also been a violation of trust. It was also apparent that for all of us, the stories we were sharing were not just our stories and publishing them would have had ethical and perhaps legal implications that made them unsafe to release beyond the group. Some of the people/characters in my story are known to me and the people I love, and therefore sharing them

could actually do more harm than good¹⁸. Having already disclosed in safe and confidential spaces – with a small group of friends, counsellors and my private writings – meant that for me, sifting through and analysing my experiences felt no longer necessary or helpful. I had held it up, examined it, asked others what they thought and then put it back in a box, “locked inside me, safe amongst the sinew and cells, tucked behind my lungs but not too near my heart.”¹⁹.

Collaborative autoethnography and specifically storying lived events has helped me to think differently about the past without feeling vulnerable or exposed and sharing methods of storying the self has driven more recent projects and work with community groups and colleagues^{20 21 22}. In this article, we offer insights into two approaches to writing that were shared in creative workshops on the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded project - Immobilities of gender-based violence (GBV) in the Covid-19 pandemic - where survivors of GBV during lockdown were supported to tell and share stories using creative fiction to mediate their lived experiences.

The workshops included different creative approaches to story making, valuing the idea that stories do not only exist in words, but also in stitch, objects, photographs, collage, hand-drawn maps and other forms of drawing. Important to this article and the project is the idea of space as we consider the way UK lockdowns changed our perceptions of where and how we could move as well as where and how we felt safe, compared with before 2020. In this article, we map our remembered, internalised fear in reference to places we wander with our daughters and places they wander alone. There are deliberate blanks beyond and within the borders of what we choose to create²³ as we decide what to share and what²³ leave out. When parenting and writing, “we compile mental maps that are wildly skewed,”²⁴ large and complex and we navigate them with personal experience leading the way through societal, cultural and political expectations. During the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, when our autobiographical fictions were written, this method of mapping our memories helped us consider the ways in which lockdowns and social distancing affected experiences of GBV.

One aspect of GBV that soon rose to public consciousness during the pandemic was domestic abuse with a terrifying rise of 700% increase in helpline calls reported by UK’s largest domestic abuse charity, Refuge, while a separate helpline for perpetrators of domestic abuse seeking help

to change their behaviour received 25% more calls after the start of the Covid-19 lockdown²⁵. The AHRC project identified storytelling as an agent for change and was concerned with offering survivors of GBV dedicated time, safe and supportive space and methods and techniques to tell their autobiographical experiences in a variety of ways and employ literary techniques that might help them (and readers of the texts) to feel differently about the stories being told²⁶. Stories have the ability to provide insights into contextual circumstances most people may not have experienced first-hand²⁷ and research exploring human stories is often considered as the ‘flip-side’ of established academic debates²⁸, able to challenge dominant societal narratives and “carry rhetorical weight”²⁹ making it highly appropriate for feminist qualitative research seeking to challenge patriarchal and misogynistic discourse.

Barthes suggested that the lines between autobiography and fiction were muted and blurring³⁰ and this opens up a potential space for autobiographical fictions that draw on lived events, but combines these with literary and artistic techniques that turn the known into the unknown and people we may struggle to write about – ethically, legally, or because we don’t want to give them a voice or platform – into imagined characters. Known or lived plots and settings can be evolved and adapted, established narratives can be mapped onto our own experiences as a way of reclaiming and even better understanding our lives and events that are often too difficult to let out of the box. Celia Hunt describes this method of storying the self as a way of writing that draws on personal memories without worrying about absolute truths or facts, instead portraying a sense of the feelings and memories via a creative text (poetry, prose, graphic novel but also image and textile too) intended for publication³¹. In this way, we contain our memories and create new narratives for our lives.

This article is presented as two interwoven voices, one using a method for fictionalising memories and the other a blend of self-observation, fictionalised memories and self-reflection.³² At the end, we reflect on the experience of fictionalising our lived experiences and consider if this practice can offer a more motivated and even pleasurable writing experience when drawing on memories that are hard – hard legally and ethically, and hard because of what they contain.

I remember – Jess

In 1978, the year I was born, French writer Georges Perec wrote an autobiographical work entitled *Je Me Souviens*³³ (reworked/adapted as *Memories* (1986) by Gilbert Adair³⁴), which consists of a list of 480 memories, each beginning with the words *Je me souviens*/I remember. Perec's memories focused on the seemingly small or trivial but the story remains compelling and aesthetically absorbing because of the evocative detail. Perec's father was killed at the start of WW2 and his mother later died in Auschwitz, but by holding onto the seemingly small details and using them to develop a three-dimensional account of his family's lives before this tragedy, the unimportant suddenly seems huge and meaningful. When we engage with stories, we have to remember to concern ourselves with those things that are included and also, with those that are not³⁵.

This method of writing in fragments, depicting one memory at a time is also evident in *That Reminds Me* by Derek Owusu which explores a "struggle for self-expression, the presentation of a nascent yet powerful self-loathing, a sense of the self being shaped by adversity"³⁶ where the splintered recollections of the protagonist, K, leave the reader with a vivid sense of his experiences growing up and how they have shaped who he is. Both stories – Owusu's and Perec's - offer the narrators a way of navigating deep-set issues that are evocative and intimate but don't simply report details or offer up a linear narrative in a conventional form. This way of writing can give authors power over what they share and what they hold back and in my work, this method has been liberating, enabling me to hold up a mirror to my past that does not seek to reflect it faithfully or concern itself with notions of truth. Instead, I use evocative fiction to distort my lived experiences so that I can share them – legally and ethically – and think about them as stories and not just things that have happened to me. This process means that I am still necessarily vulnerable but that the space between the readers of the text and myself as the writer of the text feels traversable, safe.

I remember Pulp's Common People playing over the shop speakers, the hum of customers choosing one or two scoops, sprinkles or sauce. This is a treat, there is joy here. The coffee machine grunts and whirs, the suck and spit of the milk frother is on constantly during the bank

holiday rush. I am the only woman in the small space behind the counter, my imposed uniform of short black skirt and see-through blouse is already smeared with chocolate, caramel, raspberry sauce, and we are only halfway through the 12-hour shift. One of the men pushes past me, apologising for sliding his groin into me in the chaos. The customer I'm serving berates him light-heartedly and I tell them it happens all the time. He winks and says, "I bet you love it!", gives me a large tip.

It's already gone 11pm when we finally start to close down, someone puts on the Reservoir Dogs soundtrack and turns it up loud. I remember worrying that I won't have the time or energy to revise for my exams which start next week. I remember my mum warning me this would happen, "You can't do it all?" she said, but I love having money to go out when I like and buy new clothes. Compared to my mates who work in Tesco and McDonald's, this is heaven. Over the music, I don't hear my boss creep up behind me, he bends me over the counter and pretends to have sex with me while the other three clap and cheer. When it's over, I wipe over my own fingerprints, making sure the glass is gleaming so I can see my face sighing gently, knowing I will be back here in less than ten hours for another busy day.

"I don't like to pull out old clothes, leave that in the past and done with." Tina Turner³⁷

I like Tina's analogy of old clothes. It works a bit like the locked box I spoke of earlier³⁸ and it makes me think of the outfits – real and remembered - that I hold onto, but will never wear again. My stained white shirt in the story above is one of them, as is my school uniform and another black skirt that I wore in year ten when one of my male friends pretended to have sex with me in form group whenever the teacher went to get coffee. It didn't matter if I laughed along or shouted or struggled – the event became as routine as the register until we all left the following year. The brand-new black dress with spaghetti straps that I felt unusually beautiful in before I was upskirted the first time I wore it is hanging somewhere in there too. I didn't wear it again after a man in a bar on Ship Street saw fit to grope me and run off before I even saw his face. The plaid dress I bought after my old boss told me he'd like to see me in prettier clothes as a condition of getting the job is moth-eaten but hiding in the back, and so are the combat trousers

and crop top an ex-boyfriend encouraged me to wear because they were different from my normal clothes and I wanted to please him because I knew what would happen if I didn't.

Letting go – Mel

I click off Facebook and send a text to my daughter: *Paranoid mum alert – text me to tell me you're safe*. She doesn't. I sit in my summerhouse garden office, sun burning through the glass panes, straining to see my computer with the glare on the screen. I tilt it, then shift a flowery scarf, my makeshift curtain, from one window to another. Just a few minutes ago I was making headway on an editing job, but then as I bit into a slice of bread smeared with houmous, I clicked on my Facebook village community group. A post popped up saying a man had tried to get two girls waiting at a bus stop into his car. The bus stop is on the same long road as our house, running through different villages as it goes. Whoever they are could be driving past our house at any minute.

Almost 13, my daughter is out on her second walk alone, she loves the woods on the edge of our village and wandering off the beaten track. She told me she was going to walk on the golf course, which lies to one side of the village, merges with and is part of a forest. There are patches of woodland in amongst the bunkers and driveways before it gives way to nine square miles of protected English wilderness. The golf club rents the land from the forest conservators and walkers have right of way. It feels like a safe place to walk, especially in lockdown when more people are out in nature. There are usually plenty of dog walkers and golfers around and airborne golf balls are the most dangerous thing I've seen there. But today, after the Facebook post, I panic and thoughts swirl in my head. I try to reassure myself. Whoever tried to get the girls at the bus stop into their car probably won't be parking their car, then walking off into the woods. But at this moment, I don't know that she is in the woods for sure. She also said she was going to the shop first. Shop, road, street, unmade road, path, trees and unknown dark places. My mind travels possible routes she could be taking. Whichever route she takes, in my mind it does not end well.

She has walked on the golf course and surrounding woodland with us since she was a baby. It is her home and her comfort place. She did years of bushcraft after school clubs, can light a fire without matches, build a shelter out of sticks, cook a meal out of nettles, and climb a tree higher than anyone I know. As a small child, she named an ancient yew the Totoro Tree, after the Studio Ghibli film *My Neighbour Totoro*³⁹ which depicts trees and woodland as safe and nurturing for children. Its roots provide a seat, its branches a support for rope to make a swing. It's a good place to shelter in heavy rain and there are sometimes remnants left there, circles made of petals and leaves, fabric tied to a branch. There is a hole where she used to leave offerings of acorns, as Mae does, in the film. Maybe she'll go there. No matter how comfortable she is in the woods, I am suddenly afraid for her. I am not worried about her ability to find her way home or survive. My worry comes from a deeper place.

Writing this, I feel the fear all over again. I know the ending and it's a happy one and I am writing from a position of safety, but tension rises in my chest, rushes through to my now stiff fingers tapping on the keyboard. I clench my fists, feel the warmth of my palms at my fingertips, exhale, stretch and continue. I want to work through this moment in words, find out where the fear comes from by writing to notice, find and make connections⁴⁰. By doing this, my hope is that I'll be able to let go as a mother, bit by bit. I want to let go of my child as she grows and gains independence, and also let go of the fear and worry that I am in danger of passing on to her⁴¹. The spiraling thoughts of what could happen are based not only on what I read in the media and in research reports from support organisations but in my lived experiences as well. Picking out stories to tell on the page and rewriting the narrative creates a container for the fear and displaces it.

While mothering I have at least three concurrent narratives in my head, spiralling, twisting, threading. The present day, concerned with the immediate (finding a lost shoe, chopping onions or listening to what happened at school), forward projecting into the future (if my child doesn't stop playing computer games right now and get on with homework, they will fail all their exams, not be able to get a job and end up living on a park bench, empty cans of Strongbow littering the ground) and insistent memories from my childhood that surface as if they are ready to tell me something⁴².

Such as the Conker Man story:

“Hullo girls,” he says. I ignore him, knowing we’re not supposed to talk to strangers in the street. “Do you like conkers?” I imagine the shiny brown jewels, so rare for me that I can’t even name their tree, and he pulls a handful from the pocket of his shiny brown leather jacket to show us and I can’t help saying, “yes”.

“There’s plenty more where these came from. In there. I’ll show you.” He points towards a small park, the park with no swings or tennis courts, but edged with tall trees and railings. Heart beating, but wanting to find the conkers and share this secret spot with the neighbourhood kids, I follow him and my sister follows me.

“Do you live round here?” he says.

“Over there,” I say, pointing in the general direction. I know enough not to tell him the street.

We walk in through the open metal gate, a clean-shaven man and two small girls, to the park that is always shady. A central lawn, no one else around. He says, “it’s over here, I think,” edging to a corner and kicking around the leaves. We scan the ground, but nothing. No conkers. “I was sure it was here.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll look somewhere else,” and I take my sister’s hand and we walk away.

Conker Man is one-dimensional, a shadow lengthening and rising in my mind. The same as Kebab Man, who I used to encounter on my weekend paper round as he was cleaning out his takeaway shop. He’d put his arm around me, joke about telling him when I became sixteen and legal. Or Hitchhiker Man who, as I rode in the passenger seat of his car asked exactly at which spot I’d be swimming in the river later. As I’m writing, I realise that Conker Man’s brown shiny leather jacket is the same as the description of the conker. I leave it in. These shadows have become symbols and signs on my memory map. All men are not predators. All predators are not men. Except this is a fear that women inherit and pass on to future generations. The threat of child abduction, perceived or otherwise, and of the dangers of young girls wandering in the woods echoes through our ancestors and roots can be found in fairy tales. The

Little Red Cap story in the first edition of Grimm's Fairy Stories⁴³ which is the story Little Red Riding Hood later grew from, gives Little Red Cap a second chance after she escapes from the wolf's stomach. Another wolf approaches her but this time she is more aware. She elicits the help of her grandmother, which for me symbolises her inner wisdom, and together they lure the wolf into a trough of water that smells like sausages and he drowns. She has learned from her experience and comes back stronger, ready to tackle dangers in her path and overcome them.

Each incident layers upon the next in my memory. Each incident from which I escaped taught me something. These incidents, these narrow escapes, build resilience. At least, that is what I tell myself. The truth is that these incidents barely scratch the surface, they are the stories I can tell because they don't involve anyone I know. Turchi's comment about making maps is the same for stories: "The question has never been whether to make maps, but what to select for inclusion and how to represent it"⁴⁴. And this is even more resonant when it comes to mapping or writing trauma, as Atkinson explains in her book, *The Poetics of Intergenerational Trauma*: "truth is not only the thing you must not say, but also *the thing you cannot say*...as such, may be best expressed, creatively, imaginatively, poetically, and affectively."⁴⁵. And in earlier work, she says that writing moments shows the way that traumatic memories exist in our minds "in the form of vivid sensations and images"⁴⁶ and lack narrative coherence. As we perform mothering, such memories are interruptions⁴⁷ acting as a lesson or warning⁴⁸ but sometimes stay and derail us. These are the memories I want to write, sometimes for myself, sometimes to share. Jess's response in stories opens up shared moments, shared feelings, helps me make new connections, insights⁴⁹ and the idea that we are in this together. This feeling is what we hope is replicated in creative workshops for survivors of GBV.

We walk – Jess

We head out to the edge of the South Downs, a combination of dry weather and cold air making the ground hard, but we can see the sun tipping behind the houses and feel the hope of spring. In lockdown, her hair has become a mane of gold and with legs almost as long as mine, she can easily keep up and talk non-stop at the same time. I am happy just to listen, especially on the

hills. After some gentle cajoling, she has started to enjoy our post-home-school walks. Eye rolling and sighing soon moves into revelling in space that is just for her.

She is known and also not known, in many ways we are alike but already, she has evolved far beyond me. At age ten, she has accepted that some people will like her and, “some really, won’t and that’s ok, that’s up to them.” I was not this ten-year-old. I’m not even this 42-year-old, I have spent my whole life trying to please people, to fit in and keep the peace. It doesn’t come naturally, but I have done it for so long it has become who I am, and I still lack the self-awareness (or maybe the will?) to adjust. I shake this thought off, the evening and her voice in the cooling air after a day of work is a happy place. When she links arms with me, I resist the Mirror, Mirror^{50 51} moment and wonder how something so glorious came from me. In dark sunglasses, luminous beanie hat, wedge silver trainers and long winter coat, she looks older than ten and glides along the flint path, sure of foot, while I often stumble in my faded Nikes with the soles falling off. She gleams in the orange sunset and I wonder for how much longer she will indulge me with these evening rambles. The night is coming but I am still basking as she chatters brightly about her friends and her hopes for after lockdown. I’ve already agreed to football camp, a massive garden party and a new cat, my default setting to sate and pedestal people is often misplaced but here, after a year of Covid and a forced hibernation, it feels good to promise her the world and mean it.

The birdsong and her voice are splintered by the noise of a small motor and over the brow of the hill comes a quad bike, driving vaguely in our direction at relative speed but veering all over the field. We stop our walk to see what they will do and as they get closer, we see two boys in their late teens or early twenties riding in tandem. They start whooping and waving until they are right beside us, “Hello beautiful!” one yells, blowing a kiss without stopping and leaving us in their dust. She watches them go and I try to laugh it off. “Was that at me or you?” she ponders. “You, which is creepy as hell.” She looks at me, “Should we do something? Go after them or something?” she is annoyed and uncomfortable. “It’s probably best just to ignore it. You don’t want to wind them up?”. We are walking back now, a little slower and she lets go of my arm, “So we just take it?” I keep walking and the words come out, “Well, it just makes things easier doesn’t it?”

Girrrrrl Power - Jess

My nan knew how to make life easier for everyone. Her cakes and casseroles, roast dinners and pies, perfectly timed dippy eggs and sandwiches with the crusts off, were the stuff of legend. All served with a smile on a polished table and always with ironed napkins in a proper holder. My grandfather wasn't cruel but he had high standards and a very shrill timer that, even after 45 years of marriage, he used frequently. At his small wake in her living room, over sausage rolls and fine china, she announced that she had always hated cooking and didn't want to host another family Christmas or party, "I loved him very much and now that's it. It's time for me now." And she tapped my arm for having elbows on the table whilst telling us she'd already booked a flight to Nepal. And my mum knew how to make life easy too. My dad, an ardent feminist himself, still has breakfast brought to him every day in bed.

As a teenager in the 90s, my friends and I expected to be whistled at in the street, groped in queues and flashed at – sometimes when we were out together but also whilst on our own. We were told by parents, schoolteachers and popular TV and film, not to go out alone after dark and certainly not to dress provocatively, which went against all the magazines we pored over⁵², telling us how to get and keep a man using just our looks⁵³. Once I sat at a bus stop in my school uniform and three men in a white van circled me whilst miming what they wanted to do to me using pelvic, hand and mouth gestures and when I told my friends, most of them blamed the skirt I was wearing. It wasn't short because I had already learnt that to please people, you must eat everything on your plate but that also, to please people, you must be thin. And you must be thin and full and happy.

When I moved to university, I started dating a boy who was not happy which I saw more of a challenge than a turn-off⁵⁴. I stopped seeing my own friends as that didn't make him happy and I started wearing clothes he liked to make him happy⁵⁵. And I lent him money so he could buy weed and play the fruit machines because it made him happy. But he was never really happy. I didn't want to tell anyone what he did when he wasn't happy as I thought they might not believe me or think it served me right. People might not want to hear a sad story about a seemingly happy girl and besides, relationships are hard? Perhaps this was normal, and I was being over-dramatic or asking for too much⁵⁶? Perhaps I had picked the wrong man⁵⁷ or maybe this was just what men could be like?

And this is my story but it's also nan's story and mum's story and his story and that makes it hard to tell, hard ethically and legally, and hard because it might adhere to the trope of "I was a victim, but look at me now" that has led to a "battle-fatigue"⁵⁸ with stories about domestic violence. This trope is dangerous for a few reasons including the notion that there should always be a happy ending rather than – hopefully – the acceptance of a story we can live with or even, (and inevitably) something else. In my case, this happened to me and usually I am ok with it, but sometimes, particularly when my experiences with patriarchy and violence line up and I think about the legacy I am handing on to my daughter, I'm really not. And that is when the box with the key comes in useful, the story is "banished from my consciousness"⁵⁹. Another strategy I've found useful involves focusing on aspects of my story that avoid stereotypes and bad romance narratives⁶⁰ that have come to dominate and, potentially reduce, women's experiences of abuse and GBV and storying myself⁶¹. Tedlock⁶² argues that "women's ethnographic and autobiographical intentions are often powered by the motive to convince readers of the author's self-worth, to clarify and authenticate their self-images"⁶³ and identifies this as a feminist issue. In earlier work, I suggested that storying oneself can offer the necessary detachment that is needed when seeking a viewpoint from which to examine one's lived experiences. This distance can provide a space for reflection that can trigger meaning-making and offer powerful insights into one's own identity⁶⁴. My experience⁶⁵ is that this process can offer women a method for authenticating self-image and recovering feelings of self-worth, allowing for a more expansive and liberated self that is able to critique and also resist oppressive cultures.

In *Laugh of the Medusa*, Cixous suggests that: “Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing...Woman must put herself into the text - as into the world and into history - by her own movement.”⁶⁶ Women’s experiences with abuse have been widely documented and shared in academic and professional work^{67 68 69 70}. Metta suggests that telling stories that seek to change dominant discourse: “places women and their lived experiences of gendered abuse and violence at the centre of self-narrative, plays a critical role in challenging the gendered discourses and structures that underpin the particular social contexts.”⁷¹ The writings developed in the workshops will be used to explore past behaviours and events, personal actions and reasoning, and moral values and attitudes⁷² and to rethink and reimagine these stories in order to gain new perspectives and discover meanings within each other’s lived experiences⁷³. Rather than coding and explaining these stories that are shared, this project seeks instead to value the stories and mix of writing styles and to acknowledge the individual voices within the research instead of simply reporting what happened⁷⁴.

Conclusion

“autoethnography creates the medium for women to reclaim their authority and sovereignty over their own narratives and challenge existing codes of silence.” Marilyn Metta⁷⁵

People are often drawn to autoethnography because they approach research in the spirit of social justice. Ellis and Bochner call it “a search for a better conversation in the face of all the barriers and boundaries”⁷⁶. In this article, we have employed writing exercises that were used in a series of AHRC funded workshops, designed to support survivors of GBV during lockdown to tell and share their stories. It is hoped that these stories will engender better conversations around GBV and promote desperately needed societal and cultural change. We argue that storying lived experiences rather than attempting to hold up a mirror on the past – as if that were even possible - can offer a more motivated and pleasurable writing and reading experience that is ethically and legally safer than disclosing autobiographical experiences.

Sharing our stories here and via the workshops with survivors of GBV has developed our sense of why collaborative autoethnography matters, offering ways of:

1. using storytelling to develop new and enhance existing connections with people in and outside higher education
2. overcoming feelings of silence, isolation and shame through a supported process of sharing emotionally expressive writing⁷⁷
3. deepening our understanding of ourselves and each other via a motivated collaborative writing process that we will now extend via future workshops.

I remember – Jess

At the start of the AHRC project, I had felt resistant to retelling, reimagining and re-remembering my experiences with GBV as they are in the past and the dredging process can be useful and important, but also potentially harmful and disruptive for the authors of such texts. When Mel shared her story about her daughter walking in the woods, it had a profound effect, inspiring me to tell stories rooted in a sense of autobiographical knowing that demonstrate why societal change is still desperately needed and how the legacy of patriarchy can be challenged and shifted via storytelling and autoethnographic work. I have come to know and greatly respect Mel as a result of this project and our collaboration meant I was able to share and discuss experiences and stories without ever feeling overly vulnerable or alone. This is the experience that we will now extend to others via the workshops where we hope that the telling and sharing of stories will lead to urgent societal change, developing connections and the sense of community that these stories can and must bring.

“Not forgiving only hurts you.” Tina Turner⁷⁸

I don't remember what I was wearing when my nan and my mum took me to see about a film about Tina's life⁷⁹. I do remember my nan screaming out: “For God's sake hit him Tina!” when Tina fought back and the rest of the audience whooping along with her. I remember linking arms as we went out into the night. When I recall this gesture of reaching out between us, I know it was not merely physical, but emotional too. I remember the stories we went on to share that

night and after, and I remember the stories we chose not to share, but which are just as much a part of us and our heritage and legacy, they bind us to each other. But this is not all.

Inevitably, my daughter will be part of this connection: but I cannot write that story. That belongs to her.

¹ Jessica Moriarty and Nicola Ashmore, “RISE up: Women Sharing Personal and Shared Stories to Resist and Heal,” in *Autoethnographies from the Neoliberal Academy: Rewilding, Writing and Resistance in Higher Education* 1st ed., ed. Jessica Moriarty (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

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