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# This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper is co-authored by a Ph.D. candidate and one of his supervisors. While the narrative belongs to the candidate, the co-authorship is an exercise in understanding the extent of his creative work towards further healing – or further traumatisation – through trauma-informed pedagogy narrative inquiry. It examines the conscious and unconscious processes that informed the creation of the screenplay, *Burning Time*, and the candidate's Ph.D. TV series, *Say When*, evaluating their therapeutic properties and power, drawing on scholar Jill Littrell's 2009 foundational research. It charts the journey of *Burning Time* – a personal story of child sexual abuse and parental neglect – from its inception as a play, and then its evolving incarnation into a screenplay on its way to production across a 30-year period. It also examines the analogous drivers underpinning the candidate's writing of his TV series *Say When*, set within Alcoholics Anonymous. These works are the nexus of rendering trauma to create and writing to heal, framed by autoethnography. Through narrative inquiry of 12 semi-structured questions as elements of trauma-informed pedagogy, the supervisor explores with the candidate the effect the undertaking of his Ph.D. and professional writing has had on his sense of self and mental wellness.

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## Introduction

Trauma either indirectly or directly privileges art. Artists draw on trauma – their own or others' – to render to the page an impulse to unpack it. Implicit in this is a drive for correction; a transcendence of the dividends of observed or lived disturbance. It makes sense then that the act of creative writing bears transformative properties, and these are both palliative and reconstructive. Van Goidsenhoven and Masschelein tell us that there has been 'an explosion of interest' in this type of trauma writing, ' … for therapeutic, trans-formative, and healing purposes, not only from counsellors, clinicians, academics, and writers, but also from researchers, who have examined its psychological, social, and emotional benefits' (2021, 267). Carello and Butler tell us that as:

> … violence, victimization, and other traumatic experiences may have figured into the lives of individuals … individual safety must be ensured through efforts to minimize the possibilities

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> for inadvertent retraumatization, secondary traumatization, or wholly new traumatizations in the delivery of services. (2015, 156)

The services they write of are academic, including supervisory. But what of the act of writing a work that deliberately processes lived traumatic events outside of a clinical setting? There is a superficial, or partial act of knowing, which arguably implies a quest for the processing and transcendence of the consequences of these events. The fusion of the unconscious and conscious is a productive intersection, which can arguably describe a component part of inspiration itself, but in this alchemy is also a kind of troubled revelation, which is embodied in the artefact, and its ingredients. In other words, the creative act constellating trauma, in its partial reliance on the intuitive landscape and surprises from the unknown, implies an organic impulse that assuages a need. This is the art part, and when it surfaces, its importance is often immediately understood, not only by the artist, but also by people experiencing the art.

This art is the bridge to the unknown, where the mysteries, inspirations, and elucidations are limitless. Inasmuch as an artist then, by very definition, is driven by a need connected to an unconscious impulse, the traumatised artist is bound to reflect and address traumatic experience in the act of creating. When the creative artefact takes the trouble to detail the events that caused the trauma, these unconscious and conscious dynamics still play out, even though the act of linearly detailing trauma implies overt awareness.

But artistic process is deeper and more mysterious than conscious grasping. And how to manage this ethically and safely? Richardson writes, 'When one body touches another – infant and mother, philosopher and cultural construct, writer and text, there resides the possibility of the new' (Richardson 2013, 156). Mapped against trauma studies, Richardson echoes Lengelle and Meijers when they write of the 'second story' telling of trauma, 'Personal development is often the result of responding effectively to pain or suffering' or its first iteration or draft (2009, 58). The nature of this 'new' or second story is multifaceted. On one plane it is cathartic in the Aristotelian sense, and revelatory, creating distance; but on another the affects 'arrive with such startling intensity and yet never quite depart, a lingering of text within self that is inescapable and yet not without cost' (Richardson 2013, 160). In other words, there is an element of reliving trauma by creatively replicating it that sustains it, and like metaphorical 'salt in the wound', it hurts while it heals. This reflects what clinicians Tedeschi and Calhoun discover in their post-trauma research:

> It appears that few people consciously and systematically intend to make meaning out of trauma or to benefit from it. Posttraumatic growth is most likely a consequence of attempts at psychological survival, and it can coexist with the residual distress of the trauma. (2004, 5)

This paper – utilising narrative inquiry as a basis of implementing a trauma-informed pedagogy in the form of semi-structured interview questions – explores the trajectory to date of a candidate writing a television script as a component of a practice-led Ph.D., as well as developing a play he wrote in the 1990s into a film script. All three pieces of writing circulate deep and core trauma events in the candidate's life. When trauma is experienced, 'it's like an open wound' (Groch 2023). As Ings writes:

> … the amplification of the personal voice … in research poses issues to both the research student and their supervisor. As a candidate explores territories of the self, their research

> will encounter distinct ethical, critical and personal challenges that must be insightfully and critically considered. (Ings 2014, 676)

In order to do what Ings prescribes – to 'insightfully and critically' consider these challenges – candidate and supervisor agreed to enter into a focused discussion. It was based around a series of questions devised by the supervisor as a model of trauma-informed pedagogical supervision, to interrogate the impact of the candidate's screenwriting doctoral studies and concurrent development of his '90s play into a screenplay, on his well-being and trauma affect. This discussion was recorded, transcribed, and further analysed.

## *Trauma-informed pedagogy*

This paper's intention is not to delve into literatures circulating trauma-informed pedagogy but is more an attempt to distil the essence of using one form of trauma-informed practice when it seemed warranted. The original intention of this paper was not as it now appears, because the supervisor became alarmed at the affect demonstrated by the candidate throughout a few weeks of discussing and writing the original paper ideas. The candidate explains more fully in the Discussion section what was happening for him at the time.

As a means of checking in on the candidate, the narrative inquiry approach enabled a more personal discussion and possible adjustments of exactly what we were trying to achieve in the Ph.D. Harris and Fallot write of five elements of trauma-informed practice: ensuring safety – physical and emotional; establishing trustworthiness; maximising choice and control; maximising collaboration; and prioritising empowerment and skill-building (2001, 7–10). And as Le Pichon and Lundy tell us, employing a trauma-informed pedagogy is not about 'curing' a student but it does entail that 'there are measures educators can adopt that do not exacerbate and may even mitigate trauma in the course of learning' (2023, 30). As we write, the intention of this paper is not a deep-dive into trauma-informed supervisory pedagogy. It is a small example of a small recalibration, informed by trauma-informed practice, in a supervisory relationship.

And now, some contextual background to the candidate's research.

## *Candidate background (candidate)*

*Burning Time*, the play, now reworked as a screenplay, was written and produced in 1995 when I was steeped in active alcoholism, which in good part was caused by the events the play describes. Five years later, I joined Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) and stopped drinking and am still sober today, 25 years later. There were clearly insights and healing gleaned from the writing process, but the undercurrents of trauma's 'first iteration' were pervasive. The cost of writing and reliving these experiences at that time was sublimated by an ersatz appreciation of the purgatory powers of the creative process. In other words, I held unrealistic expectations of healing derived from grappling creatively with the traumatic incidents described in the work. I thought it might make me feel better, but the real impetus was simply to write it and see it staged. Lengelle and Meijers again tell us that with distance, a writer 'must eventually become aware that he/she is not only the sufferer but simultaneously the observer of the situation. This reflective gap is important'

(2009, 59). They talk about a 'transformational space' between the first and the second storytelling. They write, 'The transformational space is merely another metaphor – we only recognise its existence by the fruit it bears, but do not yet grasp what may be happening inside it' (2009, 59). The 'inside' is a growing, mysterious organism, and writing, and processes around writing, assuage it, massage it, and derive inspiration from it, while also building awareness.

*Say When*, a fictional TV series project and component of my creative-practice research Ph.D., is the continuation of a quest to discover how to 'master this awareness', an ode really to recovery from addiction and its damages. It is set in A.A., and tells the stories, intrigues, and dilemmas of a group of recovering alcoholics and addicts who attend an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting each weekday in Bondi Pavilion. Addiction pays no heed to advantage; it ravages wherever and whenever it can, and if addicts are not disadvantaged to begin with, their rapacious disposition soon levels the playing field.

My parents sent their four boys to private school and owned a beautiful house and luxury cars, but by the time I was 15 the house was sold to pay a tax bill, the boys no longer attended private school, the cars were gone, and the luxurious world had vanished like a mist. All that was left was the grandiosity and entitlement that is the legacy of privilege allied with the indulgence of the addict. These kinds of narratives abound in A.A., and *Say When* explores them, but the primary difference between *Burning Time* and *Say When* is that the former depicts the trauma origins whereas the latter focuses on the *recovery* journey and looks at the residual damage and trauma caused by addiction, and the difficulty the recovering addict experiences when trying to re-integrate into their life's normalities, which compared to the intensity and drama of addiction can appear fiercely mundane.

It is only in the recent processes of re-crafting the *Burning Time* screenplay and creating the *Say When* TV series, as well as the research around it, that I have become aware of the degree of maladaptation caused first by addiction itself, and then by the exposing of its extensiveness in the writing process. This exposure is uncomfortable because the writing process and conversations around it are acutely revelatory but still confusing, and the cross-currents echo the trauma itself. The stirred sediment or 'wet mud' of awareness creates a new anxiety, and writing, because the mere act of it wrangles and displaces, causes a creative incoherence. As Bolton writes in her foundational work on the therapeutic potential of creative writing:

> Literature relies for its impact on highly charged material. That charge comes from the emotional relationship of the writer with their writing, their desire or need to write the novel, the poem, the play, the autobiography. And this is why we read literature. It not only contains insights, acute observations, gripping plots and style, but carries an urgency, a deep need to express and communicate something about the human condition. (1999, 13)

If there is no 'wet mud', there is no unravelling of knowing and no connection to the broader community. Without the 'emotional relationship' of the written to the writer, art suffocates in abstraction and avoids connection. Bolton writes, 'Art has the power to help people understand themselves, each other and their world better … creativity is a process of learning; it can deeply affect self- and world-views because it is attained through experience, exploration and expression rather than instruction' (2011, 17). The wrangling with the interior and the unknown exposes truths to those who are wrangling

with it, and after that, to those who experience its reshaping and dissemination. Littrell warns, 'Under the right conditions, thinking about ongoing distress or past trauma can be helpful; under the wrong conditions, it has deleterious effects' (2009, 301). I have lived this – my life is testimony to the 'deleterious effects'. But she continues, writing, 'Those subjects who benefit from the writing about trauma procedure seem to have recast the situation or changed their view of the situation. They have a new way of looking at it' (2009, 303). Keeping this reappraisal in mind, this paper explores the relationship between the forces of trauma and how they inform art and asks to what extent art can be an ameliorative or therapeutic assuaging of trauma – and this in the specific context of screenwriting.

## Methodology

This paper is co-created by candidate and supervisor in a bid to interrogate, six months from submission of the candidate's doctorate, how the revisiting and reforming of his trauma stories as doctorate and beyond have affected him – both the doing and the knowing.

Through the methodology of narrative inquiry, framed by trauma studies and trauma-informed pedagogy, we conducted a discussion as a semi-structured interview, through a set of 12 questions. We chose a safe, quiet place, both understanding that much of the backgrounding to the candidate's research is intensely traumatic, a trauma the candidate lives with still. The candidate is well serviced with a therapist, an A.A. sponsor, and his A.A. community, with a strong family support and network. At the end of the discussion, which took about three hours, candidate and supervisor debriefed over a coffee before they separated.

Understanding fully that the supervisor is by no means a quasi-clinician, it was still imperative that this dialogue was conducted as ethically and safely as possible within the realms of a candidate/supervisor relationship, forming the basis of a trauma-informed pedagogical practice. The supervisor has written on this subject and published (Joseph and Rickett 2010; Joseph 2011, 2016, 2019) on an ethical model of supervising candidates' writing into their trauma.

The interview was sent off for transcription and then the candidate was given the parts excerpted for this paper in article form and tasked with reflecting on his answers, within the Discussion section, below. From this process we hope to gain a shape of the effect the candidate's doctoral research has had on his well-being, both the positive and the negative; and have concrete reflection for him to take forward into his own thesis, therapy, and support space.

## 'Let's Talk', a discussion between candidate and supervisor

Below is the transcript of the conversation between supervisor and candidate. Before we began the dialogue, the candidate was reassured that he could remove/edit any of his replies if he did not want them published. As Chandler writes:

> Designing and telling a life story is purgative, reconstructive, integrative, transformative activity. The basic requirements of narrative – pattern, structure, closure, coherence and balance – all engage a writer in creating a whole out of fragments of experience. In the process of composing a writer may move through a variety of modes of writing that signal

> a progression toward broader perspective and greater control – from exploration to analysis to speculation. (1990, 7)

As mentioned above, the candidate has strong therapeutic and family scaffolding around him. The supervisory panel was underpinned by a trauma-informed pedagogy but sometimes, candidates *perform* well-being when, in actual fact, they are struggling. The panel expected the candidate to come face to face with some destabilisation through writing into his trauma, and devised check-ins with him regarding his access to his therapeutic scaffold, including A.A. This interview was developed in order to more deeply ensure his well-being – or diminishment of it. There are 12 questions which are edited and collated for length, as are the answers.

**Supervisor**: When we first met, you spoke about writing *Burning Time* the play and immediately I was struck by how seemingly unconsciously you were trying to write familial pain out of your body, with no real therapeutic scaffolding supporting you and no real understanding that that is what you were doing with your craft. Looking back, did the writing alleviate any of this pain at all then? Or did it make it worse? Can you explain how it felt writing that play then and then staging it?

**Candidate**: I don't think there was any conscious kind of application of therapeutic conceit in what I was doing. I was simply mining my experience with drama … in terms of its power on me, I was so engaged in the process, and I was so engaged in the writing task, that I was not really measuring anything therapeutic … I think my relapse into active alcoholism after a two-year stint of abstinence and recovery was connected to my mother's death. I had a successful show on, my mother had just died, and it was only five years into my second recovery –

I'm 25 years sober now, but five years into this, my second, recovery, I realised I had been grieving. When you're a child of alcoholics, both your parents are fundamentally missing. So you're an unconscious orphan. So, when my mother died, I was not consciously grieving or unmoored. But I think my relapsing into alcohol was partially induced by that.

**Supervisor**: How about now, six months from submission, you are re-rendering *Burning Time* to the screen? As Littrell writes, 'if trauma is to be revisited, it should be accompanied by reappraisal' (2009, 300). Is there now a deeper sense of conscious evaluation around your origin story of abuse?

**Candidate**: Absolutely. I think many things contribute to that. The fact that I'm writing. Like I'm in therapy, and I think it teaches me why I keep going back to *Burning Time*. In my thesis I'm writing about the effects, and representations of addiction on screen. I'm writing about trauma and how that affects writing about addiction on screen, and how that screenwriting addresses trauma. So, I'm writing about all this stuff and it's bubbling in my conscience. And also, I'm doing therapy in the sexual abuse unit at the Alfred. What's become apparent to me is the enormity of the implications of the sexual abuse and then the second abuse which is when my abuser inveigled himself into my world when my father died when I was about 18 or 19. He took me around the world. And,

my mother supported that … what it actually did was eviscerate all of my structures and systems and a growing independence. And I remember thinking about it, that I'm going to write about all of this. So, when I come back to now and my relationship to this project, there's a slight suspicion of myself in that I'm still responding to that kind of confection-like notion of exploiting my life for drama. But, based upon my therapy session last week, in which I broke down and sobbed and said 'I lost Nicholas', I have a real deeper connection to the material than I've ever had and that makes me more committed to doing it.

I feel massive grief for what abuse and addiction has cost me. You can say conceptually, like *Burning Time* does, it says conceptually these things are problematic, and this causes that, and this makes you feel that, and this is destructive. But that's an abstraction. That when you sit in therapy, and that drops into you, that drops down into the real Nicholas who's feeling, and you feel that, oh yeah, that does have consequence, that's totally fucked up my life. All the things that you're writing about, they drop in, and it's really powerful.

**Supervisor**: Have you created a second telling or second story with this rendering, as Lengelle and Meijers (2009) write of? How? What is different? Or is the difference in how you feel? Has this second telling been easier?

**Candidate**: I think the second rendering is going to be more about what it is. Because I understand the implications of what it's done. More deeply. I understand the implications of everything that's in that story because I've lived it. I talked to my sponsor about this the other day. About my meltdown in therapy. And he said we're survivors. And it's true.

I've been describing everything that's missing. Everything that's not there that drives me crazy. Because I'm ambitious. I'm entrepreneurial. I don't want not to have a film up. So, I'm in the process of addressing that, while I'm also in the process of deepening my academic credibility. I'm kind of working on two fronts to create stability and to create further infrastructure.

Is purgation a cost? Is realisation of the enormity of what's happened to you a cost or an insight? Is insight a purgation or a destabilisation? I think it's a bit of both. The destabilisation is about recognition of the power of what's happened and how it's impeded me and how it's frustrated me. I'll often say to people in A.A. and they get a laugh out of it generally, I'll say, I've got enough fucking handicaps. I don't want to have another one by drinking.

**Supervisor**: I know you never set out to use writing as therapy in your doctorate but *Say When* is clearly attendant to your trauma affect – alcoholism then becoming sober. Is this a stronger form of well-being writing for you because you are stronger? Is this a form of Littrell's (2009) reappraisal?

**Candidate**: It's about A.A. and about the fraternity of the A.A. community. It's certainly about the trauma that underpins that community. And it's lighter than *Burning Time*. It has been through darker iterations, but I think it'll never get made if it's too dark. But I also think that if you're sitting in an A.A. meeting, there's a lot of gallows' humour, there's a lot of survivalist humour. The community knows that it has to have a laugh. It has to lighten up. Because you can't get through this level of trauma without humour.

So, is it a reappraisal? *Burning Time* was first produced when I was drinking and I was really living the effects; *Say When* is written when I've been sober for 25 years, a quarter of a century without a drug or a drink. There is a reappraisal in the sense that it's about survivors. It's about survivors and people.

What is interesting is that surviving is kind of an act of reductivism. It's in a way, if you've been in a war zone, the war zone is going to affect you but you have to narrow it down and move around it in order to get through a day. And there's a lot of admonition in A.A. not to run on self-pity. There are two levels … there's self-awareness and there's self-pity. Oh, woe is Nicholas. If you live off that, you can't do anything.

**Supervisor**: You always appear so ebullient; resilient even. But recently in discussions, I have detected a less robust person. Do you feel like you don a mask when discussing your doctoral work with your panel? Do you hide how this work really has made you feel? Can you explain?

**Candidate**: My ability to present a reality can fool a lot of people, even myself. For instance, I would have had no idea how much my mother's death was affecting me because I was so busy 'presenting'. This presentation of self which belies the actual real person. But I think it's human to do this. But the addict does it better and, in more extremes, because in order to get by, you can't … It's not strategic to let people know the level of despair … And also, it's a moveable feast. It's not always messy. It just depends on what's going on. As we've pointed out, the whole recognition of the legacy of the abusive events is huge. And certainly, the processing of theorising around them and the writing around them has contributed to that recognition. It's empowering as well as destabilising. And it's about how I manage it from here. It's a volatile time.

**Supervisor**: I guess what I am getting at is, have you felt 'safe' writing your doctorate? Or obversely, have you felt 'unsafe' at times doing this work? Littrell categorically states that 'flashing back on trauma without reappraising the trauma results in increased distress' (2009, 303). I know we as supervisors are not clinicians and I know you have a strong therapeutic scaffold surrounding you – you have had to build one – but has the doing of the doctorate made you feel less or more robust about yourself? How?

**Candidate**: The structure, what feels like a parental structure around the doctorate, is very good for me. It's been very stabilising, and I'm grateful for it. To the extent I'm scared of losing it. But yeah, to answer, this … it's been stabilising. Right now, I'm probably anxious about that whole stabilisation coming to an end. Because I'm going to submit it in September. I'm excited by that. Coming to the end, the pointy end, it's like the anxiety of getting everything together and also the fact that there is a deeper connection to – there is some kind of personal discovery going on, which is obviously a result of the perfect storm of therapy, A.A., writing about trauma. And all this investigation and unpacking is creating revelation and insights, which is making me feel definitely more vulnerable, but also more awake creatively. That's exhilarating. Maybe the addict in me doesn't want it to end.

**Supervisor**: How has the reading for the doctorate affected you? Has it aided in adding a certain rationality to the process? Can you talk about the reading process you have undertaken?

**Candidate**: I find a lot of academic writing really boring. I find it uninspiring. Sometimes I read something which I think, oh, that's interesting, and it triggers a thought process, but that's rare. When I think about it, even when I think about Littrell, I think a lot of it feels really simplistic to me. Like I think the idea that you can write about *Burning Time*, and that it has some kind of ameliorating effect, just as a given, to me seems a furphy. The assumption she's making is that the reappraisal, that writing facilitates the reappraisal. I mean, this writing process has taken over 30 years, and it has contributed to reappraisal, but I don't think it did when I first did it.

**Supervisor**: You recently told me you felt full of grief. My reaction to that is this interview/discussion. I believe in supervising candidates writing into their trauma, boundaries between supervisor and candidate need breaking at times, and I think they need breaking in order to make the space safer. It does not seem you have yet created a new response to your grief through your writing; indeed, your autonomic activity seems heightened at the moment and not in a positive way. Can you talk about this?

**Candidate**: Sometimes I feel that the disclosure of all this incredible, personal stuff actually has a deleterious effect on how others perceive me. And that's an anxiety I feel. Sometimes I think, oh, well, maybe my panel thinks I'm a bit of a flake, or – just because of all the baggage, all the stuff. You share about being in A.A.; do my supervisors think lesser of me because I'm there? That comes up. Because people do. If they hear that somebody's an alcoholic, or is somehow in some kind of treatment facility, they think … I'm just saying that in terms of your boundary crossing and stuff like that, I mean, it is an odd zone, where you're deconstructing all of the stuff which is messy about you, creatively, in a very transparent way. It creates anxieties around perception.

**Supervisor**: I also detected a deep anger when we were talking. Anger at your abuser, and alarmingly, a little at yourself. Littrell writes, 'Beyond failing to benefit from revisiting trauma, the clinically distressed might suffer an exacerbation of symptoms as a result of revisiting trauma' (Littrell 2009, 309). I fear this is what your reworking of *Burning Time* and *Say When* has done, but may be wrong. Have you had this anger inside you since you were 13, despite all your therapies and support?

**Candidate**: I'm deeply angry. I'm very resentful of myself … for the sense that I've been complicit in my own abuse. I'm angry at myself for the time that I've lost. If I had any control over becoming an active alcoholic and active drug addict; if I had any control over it, I wouldn't do it. But yeah, angry. I'm deeply angry. I feel enormous frustration with the time that I've wasted. With the detours that I've made that have been completely unproductive. You know, I like being productive. As a creative person, I like creating. I don't like destroying. The grief is new. That's what's happening. The door has opened. It's conscious. When I say it's new, I'm aware of it, I'm experiencing it. It has a level of flow in me, or activation in me, which is real. You know, when I said I lost Nicholas last

week, I fucking meant it. I lost him. The depth of it and the level of … the reality or the depth of that disappearance … who he is, where he's gone, what it has cost. Yeah, I think the grief is … it's activated. It's more conscious. In that sense, it's new. I am raw at the moment.

**Supervisor**: Okay, I want you to listen to this. Again, it's Littrell (2009, 308), but it's quite interesting. 'Less consensus exists on whether perspectives redolent with anger and indignation are helpful responses to injustice. Should victims of injustice embrace a faith in a just world and focus on the positive aspects of life? Are clients better off remaining vigilant towards the injustices in their world and expending time and effort to seek revenge? What is your view about this in light of your own anger and grief? Are you yet to write fully and revengefully about your grief? Do you feel you need to?

**Candidate**: I have no problem with revenge. If it has merit in the story, to me the demands of the story will dictate whether there's revenge in it or not. I think that when I wrote that new ending in *Burning Time*, when the shadow comes back in, I wanted that to say, well, it never leaves you, that stuff. There's always the shadow. I think the act of writing that play is an act of revenge, because it's a portrait of a destruction of innocence. How dare you? How dare anyone take it? It's incredibly damaging. In terms of revenge, if I'm an actor, that anger that I feel, that grief that you tap into it, it's electric. And the more I actually do it as a creator, in whatever iteration I do it, the more powerful my work is going to be. Because, and I think in a way, some of the frustration is that I've been afraid of that expression … . I don't know whether I'm rationalising it in retrospect. I don't know whether that's what I'm doing. What I'm thinking now is that I didn't really have the appetite to tell that story (*Burning Time*) then. I didn't really have the appetite to tap into that, to anchor to that creative whirlpool of those formative events. I let the event, paradoxically, the events that that writing describes, topple the creative trajectory of that particular project. I enabled; in other words, the trauma won.

Now I feel as though I'm ready, as a survivor, to not be stymied by that. And so, the anger's more real. More tapped into, the grief is more tapped into. Everything's more alive, everything's more raw. But maybe that's more powerful. And maybe this is where I need to be.

So, am I revengeful? Probably not enough. I think that everything, all of that anger that you use as an actor, that you use as a writer; I mean, if anger correlates to fearlessness, it's useful. If it contributes to fear, it's not useful. So, I think it can do both. I think it can destabilise, or I think it can be constructive, and I think that it has to be harnessed in a very proactive way, and I would like to think that I'm vigilant enough to harness it in that way.

**Supervisor**: What could we, as a supervisory panel, do better to support you running towards the end of your Ph.D.? In many ways, you have been immersed in your story of origin pain because of your doctoral studies, looking for answers still. How are you going to feel after you submit?

**Candidate**: As I say, I'm a bit scared of losing the parental-like infrastructure. I feel as though I've made friends. I'm definitely stronger. But I'm also at the moment … I'm partially anxious about September. The finishing of the doctorate. I'm anxious about losing

this support infrastructure that I've got. It's collaborative. But I think in essence anything creative is.

I think that the whole academic thing that I've been doing has been grounding. It's been a privilege to have three supervisors. What I'll often say in A.A. is that my disposition is to focus on what's not there rather than what is there. Which is why gratitude is important. Because I'm grateful for my doctorate, for my supervisors, for my scholarship, for the help that I've been given, the massive care and investment in me that's going on. It's massive. It's beautiful. So it's important to just acknowledge that and appreciate that. For my sponsor, for A.A. itself, for all of the infrastructure that's there.

**Supervisor**: Do you believe you have found 'The operative component is [of] finding the inspiring, uplifting message' (Littrell 2009, 308)? Clinicians Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) write of a post-traumatic growth. They say what post-traumatic growth is, is the experience of positive change that occurs because of the struggle with highly challenging life crises. They believe this growth happens concurrently with grappling with the demons. How do you respond to this? Are you able to signpost any post-traumatic growth you have experienced out of this research?

**Candidate**: I have two daughters who've never seen me drink. But the struggle is ongoing. The survival mechanisms are ongoing. I have to do therapy. The mechanisms around the struggle, the things that I choose to address the ongoing dividends of trauma, they're all active and productive and create resilience. But I'm not cured. And I'm not recovered. You don't recover. You don't recover from trauma. You manage it. And the managing of it, ironically now, is about experiencing it in a deeper way. The academic creative, critical research is contributing to that deepening, that deepening of experiencing of it.

I'm about to hand in my doctorate. I think that I am growing. I think that I'm creating a deeper infrastructure to add to my survival kit. And yes, all the things that I'm doing are contributing to that. I mean, it is a volatile time.

I don't mind you checking in on me. I'm doing a lot and I want to do more. Like, I want to do more that's of significance, that moves this whole game forward. And that's about my anger. That's about my resilience. That's about my grief. That's about all of it. But it's also, it's the struggle.

It's all right, it's a bit heavy. It is what this is.

## Discussion (candidate)

The process of writing about trauma, and writing about writing about trauma – and incorporating real traumatic events in both creative works, as well as autoethnographic writing in the context of a Ph.D. – creates (or has in my case) a complexity of building psychological infrastructure, assailing it, as well as experiencing and leveraging vulnerability and emotional risk – all of which coalesce in a balance sheet showing both productivity and deficit, with an ultimate tilt towards creative and psychological gain.

The Nicholas that sat with Associate Professor Sue Joseph for the interview disclosed above had come fresh from a cathartic therapy session in Alfred Hospital's sexual abuse trauma unit. In that therapeutic context, there was a massive and momentary

meltdown, which occurred after a gaping realisation, which felt more conscious than ever before, of the enormous price exacted by intergenerational drug addiction, and sexual abuse occasioned by my family. In a sense it was about a loss of creativity and expression, the disappearance of art. This doesn't happen to all traumatised artists. Some formative, traumatic events can manifest in great works and social cachet. Jackson Pollock, Tennessee Williams, and Dylan Thomas quickly come to mind.

But the pain that came in that moment of perception in therapy arose from my identifying an artist that was lost, lost beyond strategy; self-belief; coping; or even *interest* in cachet – an attribute which might sound expedient but has an alliance with expression; and lost from the frameworks of what could be arguably described as life's normalities. The degree of that disappearance was masked by the desire to integrate, present coping personas, and strategise. Everyone masks of course to function, but I suspect in traumatised people the gap is perhaps keenly pronounced.

In the interview my supervisor conducted with me, she tested various conceits posited by various scholars who discuss the therapeutic dividends of writing about trauma. When she raised Littrel's perspective, which suggests that trauma is aided through reappraisal, specifically through writing, I responded in the affirmative. However, I emphasised that this reappraisal isn't achieved through a single act of writing, nor even a second one. It's not merely the process of writing itself, but the depth of that process that truly matters. To unpack, or crack open, sealed portions of my psychology took writing, therapy, trauma therapy, attendance at A.A., autoethnography, screenwriting (and the revisiting of an old script, all in the context of a Ph.D. journey). I view all these components as integral to the overall process of reappraisal, rather than singling out any one part of it. As I have already mentioned, the interview occurred at a time when I was raw, after a therapy session at Royal Alfred Hospital. This was the culmination of the many simultaneously occurring processes and the moment I experienced in therapy *was* a reappraisal. It was more than that, it was a seeing. And my anger was exacerbated by this seeing. But it is interesting in the interview that I describe the anger as productive. The unconscious fear-based operating system was supplanted by reappraisal or a seeing, and anger followed but also determination. As I write now, months later, and navigate the challenges of producing a film, whenever I'm tempted to revert to old fear-based narratives, I am grounded and corrected by the coalescing experiences of reappraisal and new perspectives that I underwent. Importantly, I've come to realise that it's not just the act of writing about trauma that brings about this change. This insight has led me to maintain a certain scepticism about researchers and scholars like Littrel (and others, like Pennebaker). This scepticism doesn't diminish the value of their work but rather questions whether the ideas they propose are empirical and truly resonate with the lived experiences of trauma victims.

The important lingering question is: does the act of writing autoethnographically and creatively (and the latter specifically in the context of screenwriting) ameliorate, or a create a productive distance from, trauma? My answer to this is yes and no.

I have been in and out of a chronic state of depression for more than 30 years. Today as I reflect in this discussion, vulnerability is heightened. Someone crucial to my daughter has relapsed into active alcoholism. The scourge of addiction, which to me implies trauma, is relentless. And in this moment art, artistic process, observed degrees about

the power of words to heal, and academic commentary seem like a privilege of the unaffected.

But addiction touches everyone. It is unrealistic to say there is such a thing as the unaffected. Everyone is touched by addiction, whether they know it or not. It is arguable that human experience is an addictive pathology itself, given its appetites that manifest globally in grotesque inequities and cruelties. At the time of this writing Hamas has launched an invasion of Israel perpetrating horrendous cruelties on innocent non-partisan victims, children included. But for many this is a logical outcome of the relentless abuse of the Palestinian people. I abhor inhumanity and cruelty perpetrated by anyone; and never think it is justified. But the complex situation is a legacy of unseemly, unbalanced appetites on both sides – appetites that resemble addictive pathologies. For some commentators, free-market capitalism feeds into this morass. Alexander writes:

> Because western society is now based on free market principles that mass-produce dislocation, and because dislocation is the precursor of addiction, addiction to a wide variety of pursuits is not the pathological state of a few but, to a greater or lesser degree, the general condition in western society. Because western free market society provides the model for globalization, mass addiction is being globalized, along with the English language, the Internet, and Mickey Mouse. (Alexander 2014, 108)

Writing about trauma does create distance, coherence, and perspective. But this can mask the deeper psychological drivers and impeding fear which lurk beneath conscious reckoning. In my case, the Ph.D. journey, and the multiple allied processes outlined above, have created in me a new resilience. But is this real or another mask? Conforming to expectations and adjustments are part of human strategy. We learn what people like and want and then satisfy. But that might be overly cynical. I did posit the question in days of therapy, that this entire realisation framework might be some kind of dance for the Ph.D. process. The therapist and I laughed.

The truth is though that I am empowered. And writing has had a lot to do with it.

## Limitations

Currently, trauma affects more than 70% of Australians (Groch 2023). Although this paper is dealing with clear and implicit Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (C.P.T.S.D.) symptoms, we do not delve into unpacking this concept, except as an accepted affect of traumatic events further suffered by some survivors. We do acknowledge what Groch writes:

> Ongoing abuse and violation … might lower a person's guard against future mistreatment, trapping them in more abusive relationships even as they become extra alert to danger. This kind of reaction to long-term trauma is now known as complex PTSD. (Groch 2023)

There is growing literature on trauma-informed pedagogical practice for all teaching professionals, including supervisors of Higher Degree Research work. As written above, we look at this scantily as our intention is to present what we did, informed by such literature. We do sincerely hope that the research and unpacking of this practice becomes more widespread and taken up by the sector.

## Conclusion

### *Supervisor*

The original intention for this paper was not as it now appears but that is because of circumstances arising through its initial writing. The candidate explains clearly what he was going through at the time in the Discussion section. Always on the lookout for signs of trauma affect with any candidates writing into it, the supervisor changed the trajectory of the paper in a hope that we could both understand what was happening. What we have now produced we further hope aids other supervisors and candidates writing into trauma to glean something from our experiences.

For the supervisor, attempting to conduct the supervision at this crucial time, or moment, in a more trauma-informed way gave her a deeper understanding of the candidate's well-being, or diminished well-being at the time. As cited above, Le Pichon and Lundy tell us that being trauma-informed is not about 'curing' the student. For the supervisor, it is about the resonance of a constant empathy towards what 'might' be happening and an alertness to body language and emotion at certain times, with a gentle, hopefully unobtrusive, checking-in.

### *Candidate*

When my supervisor proposed this paper, it was initially intended to be a more formal construct. Then I rang her minutes after a meltdown in therapy and she was concerned that my autoethnographic processes had spearheaded this moment, opened wounds, and I was dangerously vulnerable. After a day or two I felt her added concern was unnecessary, and that the moment in therapy was cathartic and had facilitated an awakening. Nevertheless, we agreed to reconfigure the paper as an interview to interrogate the moment and processes. I agreed because apart from liking interview formats, I was still raw from therapy and knew I would be less constructed and more candid. Reading my responses, I believe that is the case. The paper is entitled 'This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine'. Prospero uses the words to describe Caliban in the final act of *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare. Caliban is an abused and disfigured creature. I see him as a representation of trauma; but also, we as carriers of trauma are also 'Prosperos', and we need to own, acknowledge, and see trauma, so we can address it. If it lurks unaddressed in the unconscious, it has too much power. This interview itself is now part of that acknowledgement; part of the seeing; and the reclaiming of power.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Ethics declaration

This work is derived from the Ph.D. undertaken by Nicholas Flanagan at the University of South Australia, Adelaide. Ethics clearance was granted on 2 October 2021 (application ID: 204091).

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***Nicholas Flanagan*** is a graduate of the National Institute of Dramatic Art (N.I.D.A.), a Victorian College of the Arts (V.C.A.) Postgraduate of Film and TV, a Master of Sydney University, and currently completing a creative-practice research Ph.D. at University of South Australia. He has acted in film, television, and theatre; has written for TV; and is a published playwright with multiple produced works, including books for musicals he has also composed. He is a performing arts director, screen director, and mentor of professional actors and writers, having directed actors in mainstream N.I.D.A., and taught writing at Melbourne University V.C.A. Nicholas, an avid promoter of diversity in the performing arts, was also deputy head for three years at the inaugural Indigenous Performing Arts course held at Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (W.A.A.P.A.), the first of its kind in Australia. Nicholas, while working on the logistics of producing his *Burning Time* film, is putting the finishing touches to *Say When*, a six-part TV series about recovering alcoholics, which is the creative component of his Ph.D.

A journalist for more than 40 years, working in Australia and the U.K..

***Sue Joseph*** (Ph.D.) began working as an academic by teaching print journalism at the University of Technology Sydney in 1997. As a Senior Lecturer, she taught in journalism and creative writing, particularly creative non-fiction writing. Now as Associate Professor, she is a Senior Research Fellow at the University of South Australia and a doctoral supervisor at the University of Sydney, Central Queensland University, and the University of Technology Sydney. She is currently Joint Editor of *Ethical Space: The International Journal of Communication Ethics* and co-editor of the Literary Journalism Palgrave book series.

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