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leon clowes

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DECLARATION

I confirm that this thesis is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Where the work of others has been used, it has been appropriately acknowledged.

The thesis has not previously been submitted for a comparable academic award, whether at the University of West London or any equivalent academic institution.

The research has not been submitted for or contributed to any other academic award at the University of West London or any other academic institution.

The submitted work is the sole original work of the author.

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CONTENTS

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

There are a number of self-coined neologisms throughout the thesis which were devised specifically for the purposes of thesis to autoethnographically encapsulate lived experiences and aspects of positionality that otherwise lacked a suitable term. In alphabetical order, these neologisms are:

ARTSWORK Rather than use ‘artwork’, a term which I have found to imply a painting or a gallery-based piece of practice, I suggest this alternative word for cultural practice that suggests multiplicity and is transdisciplinary in nature, so ‘*arts*-work’ rather than ‘*art*-work’. When I was making artswork during this practice research, the mediums (film, music, installation, theatre) and usage of them would often blur, requiring a new term to describe the practice.

GRIEF-INFORMED Having an artistic position be grief-informed is a methodology that aims to consign difficult lived experiences to the past.

OUTSIDERING Drawing from the idea of being a ‘Queerdo’ (see below), I’ve navigated the pressure to embody or celebrate externally imposed ideals of white gay male identity – ideals that I neither align with nor feel at ease within. At the same time, I’ve often found myself out of step with

	many mainstream LGBTQ+ cultural norms, therefore being outside both mainstream and queer circles.
QUEERDO	A combination of being a queer and a weirdo. Since being young I have always been ‘visibly’ gay, and yet within older gay – and more recently younger queer – social circles my cultural preferences may be perceived as being ‘weird’ and sitting outside cultural expectations of, for and by LGBTQ+ communities.
SOCIALLY CURIOUS	As an artist with lived experience of the issues explored at the centre of their practice, I approach my practice and exchanges with audiences or visitors as one of aiming to remain inquisitive and open to the knowledges of others.
UNBELONGING	Same as ‘Outsidering’, please see above.
UNDRAWN	A state experienced in early addiction recovery. Following the arrested development that is not uncommon with people with addiction issues, this term captures the liminal space between being stuck in addiction and beginning the process of becoming. It is a not knowing the SELF, the point where learning and development begins where all paths are open.

TITLE OF THESIS

SECRETS+SHAMES=SELFS: Can autoethnography be a self-compassionate praxis for artswork interrogating difficult lived experiences?

ABSTRACT

This practice research PhD investigates the application of autoethnographic techniques, exploring their potential to cultivate self-compassionate approaches for an artist navigating difficult lived experiences as source materials for the creation of grief-informed multidisciplinary artswork. The research addresses a gap in addiction recovery arts by centring the lived history of an artist in recovery, examining intersecting struggles of grief, queerness, and kinship care. Drawing on the philosophical frameworks of Deleuze and Guattari and the affective methodologies of Hickey-Moody, this thesis scrutinises the transformative potential of autoethnography within creative practice.

Through a critical analysis of personal history and creative outputs, the study considers how grief, loss and pain can be recontextualised and communicated effectively while minimising the need for excessively visceral methods. In doing so, this thesis challenges the reductive expectations often placed upon minoritised artists — particularly those who are queer — to make work solely *about* their identities in ways that foreground confession or visibility.

Three key difficult life ‘themes’ – SECRETS, SHAMES, and SELFS – structure the creative and theoretical inquiry, each addressing distinct aspects of identity and lived encounters. The research incorporates queer theory, addiction recovery arts and autoethnographic storytelling to interrogate the ethical and emotional complexities of publicly disclosing intimate narratives.

By analysing artistic works created before and during the research period, the study demonstrates the value of self-compassionate autoethnographic techniques in engendering both personal recovery and scholarly advancement. It highlights the potential of these methods to mediate underrepresented lived insights, advocating for an ethical, dialogical framework in grief-informed creative praxis.

This thesis contributes to knowledge in addiction recovery arts, offering insights into the intersection of artistic practice, lived knowledge and recovery-engaged methodologies. By transforming historical grief, loss and pain into reflective creative outputs, the research presents autoethnography as a self-compassionate methodology for artists addressing difficult life experiences in their artswork.

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

I was an artist *and* in addiction recovery before I knew I was an artist *in* addiction recovery. If I had not been introduced to UWL's Dr Cathy Sloan by Professor Simon Zagorski-Thomas in late 2021 (both of whom would become my supervisors on this practice research PhD), then beyond my attending one Friday night open session at Outside Edge Theatre Company in South London, I may not yet have otherwise known about the field of addiction recovery arts.

During a Zoom conversation with Dr Sloan in December 2021, it became clear that there was synergy between my artistic practice and the wider world of groups and practitioners working with individuals in recovery from alcohol, drugs, and other substance and behavioural compulsions. Moreover, I realised that my intuitive use of autoethnographic practices in my creative work linked with the recovery-engaged performance methods Dr Sloan had been analysing as an academic and formerly practising as the Artistic Director of Outside Edge Theatre Company.

Addiction recovery arts, as an area of creative praxis and academic research, is still relatively new. Apart from several recent USA pioneers such as filmmaker Adriana Marchione, dramatist Sean Daniels and musician Chris Tait, the multiple arts practices would seem to be much longer established in the UK than anywhere else in the world.

Although this research has not focused on tracing the origins of variegated praxis, my co-establishment of the Addiction Recovery Arts Network in September 2022 with Dr Cathy Sloan and *Performing Recovery* magazine editor and fellow musician in

recovery, Alex Mazonowicz, has revealed substantial activity across England and, to a lesser extent, in other parts of the United Kingdom. Whereas, based on my (admittedly relatively surface) enquiries into similar practices in Germany and Japan, such activity seems to be far less prevalent overseas. It would appear then that there is potential for international development of addiction recovery arts praxis.

London College of Music's Dr Cathy Sloan and her peer and colleague at Liverpool Hope University Dr Zoe Zontou are the two foremost specialist pioneers in researching addiction recovery arts. The latter co-edited, and both wrote chapters for the seminal *Addiction and Performance* collection (Reynolds & Zontou, 2014). More recently, both academics have now either published (Sloan, 2024) or are about to publish (Zontou, 2025) monographs on the subject.

Since beginning my research, it has also become clear that academics in other non-arts disciplines such as criminology (University of Derby's Dr David Patton) and psychology (University of West London's Dr Nicola M Miller) have been advocating and embracing cultural activities as means of sustaining and upholding recovery for people who have endured addiction issues, and as ways of innovatively researching lived journeys. What was clear from scoping the available research though, was that there was not yet an artist in addiction recovery who had yet academically scrutinized their own practice. This was the route that I was to take in this practice research PhD to in order to address this gap in knowledge.

Research Aims and Objectives

This research will investigate the agency, identity, and the mediation of challenging and intersecting under-represented lived experiences via artistic praxis. The use of autoethnography may be an *effective* means to represent aspects of lived grief, loss and pain while reducing the need for excessively *affective* emotional or visceral ways to navigate underrepresented understandings in multidisciplinary creative praxis.

To investigate the overall aim of testing if autoethnographic techniques can be applied to grief-informed multidisciplinary artswork in self-compassionate ways, there are three objectives which arise from this research:

- Can autoethnographic practice be used effectively to navigate difficult lived experiences in ethically-engaged ways?

- Can autoethnographic forms be used effectively to navigate challenging lived perspectives in aesthetically appropriate manners?

- Can autoethnographic methods be used to avoid affective excess while still representing grief-informed events in impactful approaches?

Motivation and Positionality

As the artist practice researcher, I use source materials for the artswork in this PhD research from sensitive intersecting historical experiences from my life. In particular these are:

(i) growing up in a kinship care family known to the criminal justice and social service systems, and damaged by incest, paedophilia, and sexual violence

(ii) being ritually bullied and frequently abused as a queer teenager in a white rural working-class community during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, and

(iii) the resulting entrenchment of addictive and co-dependent patterns in adulthood following the marginalisation I faced as a child and teenager.

By using autoethnographic processes, cultural and socio-political factors contextualize the lived experience centred in my creative practice. What I call ‘grief-informed’ artswork are the basis for this research into the assessment of self-compassionate techniques of autoethnography.

Within this thesis, in relation to describing my own artswork and the journey I have undertaken during and since this research period, I replace the word trauma with terms such as grief, loss and pain. The rationale behind this is twofold. The word trauma has lost meaning in contemporary society. As discussed at the beginning of Chapter 2, overuse of the word minimises impact of its meaning. Furthermore, the word trauma (derived from the Greek term for ‘wound’) might suggest that the incident causing this remains present and dominant.

By using alternatives to replace the word trauma, I commit to situating burdensome life events firmly into the past. This corresponds with the life philosophies I have been fortunate to embed through the insights gained from participation in the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) 12-Step program[1]. Living in the present ensures successful ongoing recovery for people like me who manage addictions, mine being alcohol, drugs, sex, co-dependency, overwork, and food.

When referencing other academics, the term trauma is retained when that is the word that they employ.

[1] AA' 12-Step Program is the spiritually inspired guide for living that alcoholics are encouraged to follow for successful recovery: https://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/about-aa/the-12-Steps-of-aa. Throughout this thesis, the American spelling of 'program' has been retained when referring to 12-Step as the practice originated in the United States.

Methodology and Approach

The overarching philosophy of this practice research, investigated in depth in Chapter 1, draws on Deleuze and Guattari's evolving concept of 'becoming' (1994 [1968], 1987) – a dynamic state of constant transformation, differentiation, and identity negotiation. This framework is particularly relevant to the artswork in this research, which grapple with pivotal themes: confronting family-of-origin deceptions (Chapter 3), navigating external perceptions of queerness (Chapter 4) and the internal evolution engdendered through processes of addiction recovery (Chapter 5).

Building on this foundation, Hickey-Moody's research perspective (2013, 2015) extends discussions on becoming by emphasizing the roles of emotionality and affect. This extension speaks to the iterative and emergent nature of my artistic practice and individual evolution. The latter, an unexpected but vital process, emerged as I confronted a complicated history through creating (or not, as in the case of Chapter 4) multidisciplinary artswork.

As a research project, this thesis accompanies three key cycles of experimentation with creative practice covered in Chapters 3 to 5, each offering observations about embedding autoethnographic techniques within artistic processes. Other exploratory artswork and performances detailed in the Appendix, while not scrutinised in the thesis chapters, were instrumental in shaping the methodologies and frameworks presented. The iterative and emergent nature of practice research afforded the refinement and discovery of a self-compassionate methodology. This has become as significant a finding as the creative works themselves.

By interrogating and interweaving fraught incidents into multidisciplinary grief-informed artswork, this practice research audits the effectiveness of autoethnographic methods in enhancing the communicability of distressing personal materials. Reflexive analysis has been central to this process, revealing the nuanced potentials of artistic methods to engage with historical and emotional complexities.

Throughout this research period, I have had the privilege of being supervised by two leading academics who have significantly shaped my mixed methodology. Professor Simon Zagorski-Thomas's categorization of aesthetic and activist qualities in music practice research (2022) and Dr Cathy Sloan's feminist performance approach to recovery-engaged praxis (2024) provided foundations for the analysis stages in Chapters 4 and 5 respectively.

Thesis Structure

To provide necessary contextualisation for the philosophical and theoretical frameworks and practice analysis of this thesis, before the chapters there is an introductory section, Prelude on Positionality, which begins on page 23. The subsections are linked to the research project title, being both autoethnographic recall of historical lived experiences and analysis of these circumstances. These accounts relate to the SECRETS held within my family of origin, the SHAMES of being a gay teenager during the AIDS crisis, and the two SELFS of active addiction and recovery.

Chapter 1 lays the philosophical and methodological groundwork for the thesis. Deleuze's concepts of becoming and repetition intersect with queer theories of time, memory, and identity. Drawing on autoethnographic and recovery practices, the chapter analyses the transformative potential of lived grief, loss and pain within an artistic practice. The chapter highlights how past difficulties, shaped by singular and societal factors such as addiction and the AIDS crisis, informs the present but can be navigated through creative methodologies. Influenced by Deleuze and Guattari (1994 [1968], 1987), van der Kolk (2015) and Hickey-Moody (2013, 2015), the chapter positions autoethnography as a compassionate and reflective apparatus for reconciling fragmented backgrounds, inducing private and artistic growth, and developing a system for addressing themes of memory, loss, and becoming.

Chapter 2 presents the theoretical methods underpinning the thesis, reviewing how lived observations of family, grief, and identity intersect with my creative practice through autoethnographic methods. The chapter critiques dominant paradigms in trauma studies that prioritise catastrophic events over the repetitive everyday traumas

faced by marginalised groups, while surveying addiction recovery arts and queer theories as essential contexts. Through a critical engagement with scholars such as Ellis (2016), Holman Jones (2016), and Van Maanen (2011 [1988]), the chapter highlights the potential of autoethnography to navigate and represent socially taboo, historically repressed knowledges of individuals, while interrogating the tensions between subjectivity, objectivity, and self-compassion. By revisiting onerous memories – including familial secrecy, queer identity during the AIDS crisis, and addiction recovery – Chapter 2 demonstrates how creative methodologies such as impressionistic storytelling can transform trauma into grief and encourage individual and artistic growth. This framing positions autoethnography as both a critical research resource and a means of facilitating resolution, reflection, and the ethical dissemination of lived experiences.

Chapter 3 is the first of the three chapters that focusses on the analysis of creative practice. This chapter's artswork scrutinise some of the intergenerational impacts of trauma that I was born into and from, and how this profoundly affected the actions and behaviours of my family of origin, addressing the first theme of the thesis, SECRETS. The creative methods employed in Chapter 3 include storytelling through performance (*Nan Kids*, 2021-2022 and *Peter x 30*, 2022), spoken word, sound and animation (*Secrets Keep Us Sick*, 2022). In the creation and realisation of these works, I draw on Berlant's concept of countersentimentalism (2011), juxtaposing Khubchandani's navigation of family dynamics (2017) with my own, while incorporating Ahmed's analysis of shame (2014) to adopt a more distanced and contextualised perspective on my family's actions.

Chapter 4 investigates the impact of SHAME through music-making. In revisiting and remaking teenage pop songs that reflect the societal shaming I underwent during the onset of the AIDS crisis, I faced a contemporaneous artistic stagnation. This was one of confidence in my ability to replicate the technological and aesthetic qualities my younger self had envisioned. By retroactively treating these electronic pop songs as research in Chapter 4, I interrogate the original aesthetic and artistic intentions behind my compositions, drawing on Zagorski-Thomas's practical musicological categorisations. During this period from mid-2022 to the end of 2023, I detail in Chapter 4 how I faced a creative stalling, which led this chapter to focus instead on the sensitivities that hindered my creative progress, rather than attempt to focus on my perceived failures of the project. In confronting this inaction, I find parallels and solace in Ngai's analysis of suppressed shame and its long-term impact of irritation (2005). By addressing the 'rock bottom'[2] of my creative and personal isolation in Chapter 4, I come to terms with the feelings of inadequacy that blocked my artistic progress. This contemplation is useful to other artists as an understanding of how to work through irritation and failure to reach new discovery – the breakthrough after emerging from a rock bottom.

Chapter 5 marks a return to creative productivity and the recognition of the need for connectedness with others in order to function and flourish both individually and artistically. I deconstruct and reconstruct my sense of separate SELFS, one being in active addiction and the other of my recovery. I combine three confessional and socially curious practices of interactive performances (*Alky Whole Moon Lick,* 2021-2022, *Queer Mats,* 2022-2023, *The Alcoholic's Tarot*, 2024) in Chapter 5. In doing this,

[2] In addiction recovery, "rock bottom" refers to the lowest point in someone's life caused by their addiction, often serving as a turning point for seeking help or change.

I learn more about other artists in addiction recovery from the co-founding of the Addiction Recovery Arts (ARA) Network with Dr Cathy Sloan and Alex Mazonowicz. Through Sloan's framework of recovery-engaged performance practices (2024) and Sebatindira's analysis of how engaging with the first-hand understanding of addiction contributes to broader liberation (2023), I shift my artistic practice from a solitary to a communal one, transitioning from the internal to the external. The conclusion reflexively considers my neurodivergent perspective on the findings, integrating these with the philosophical, methodological and theoretical frameworks, my autoethnographic artistic practice, and its research.

Access to Practice Research Examples

There are links to the relevant creative practice examples at the beginning of Chapters 3 to 5, and a full annotated list of connected artswork from 2021-2024 is available in the Appendix including links and images.

All links to the film-based practice examples scrutinised in this written thesis can be found in a YouTube playlist. In this, the practice examples are organised in the order they appear in this thesis, with corresponding pagination.

All image-based examples are included within the thesis.

Significance and Contribution to Knowledge

My artswork presents a uniquely intensified paradigm. My queerness is not unique but the intersectionality of my ‘identities’ (kinship care, queer, addict) is a rarified combination that has an increased degree of marginalisation.

Numerous witnesses of my artswork have told me that I take an unconventional, confessional and sometimes uncomfortable approach. There are precedents and influences that are useful to outline to provide context, and I will next name three examples to demonstrate the continuum of where my practice has its roots.

In Andy Warhol’s series *Screen Tests* (1963–1966), his ‘superstar’ participants faced the camera directly for three minutes. Warhol later slowed down these Super 8 film images, creating what Stephen Koch (2000) describes as a profound transformation of simple portraiture into heightened studies of human presence. Koch argues that this deceleration magnified involuntary gestures, rendering the smallest movements — a blink, a twitch, a breath — strange and significant, intensifying the viewer’s encounter with vulnerability and fragility. I am particularly struck by this unflinching quality, the still-life effect achieved within moving image. Slowing down film has since become a regular feature of my own moving image work, first demonstrated in *Peter x 30*, which I discuss in Chapter 3. In Warhol, both as public persona and artist, I saw a deliberate detachment from his subjects — a cool observational distance — and this is something I have aimed to apply within my autoethnographic practice research, utilising my own lived materials.

A still of Edie Sedgwick from one of Andy Warhol's *Screen Tests*

In the 1990s, the emergence of the brash confessional artists, perhaps most famously demonstrated by Tracey Emin, opened my eyes to the possibilities of performance. During that time I saw a great deal of live art at the ICA in London and green room in Manchester.

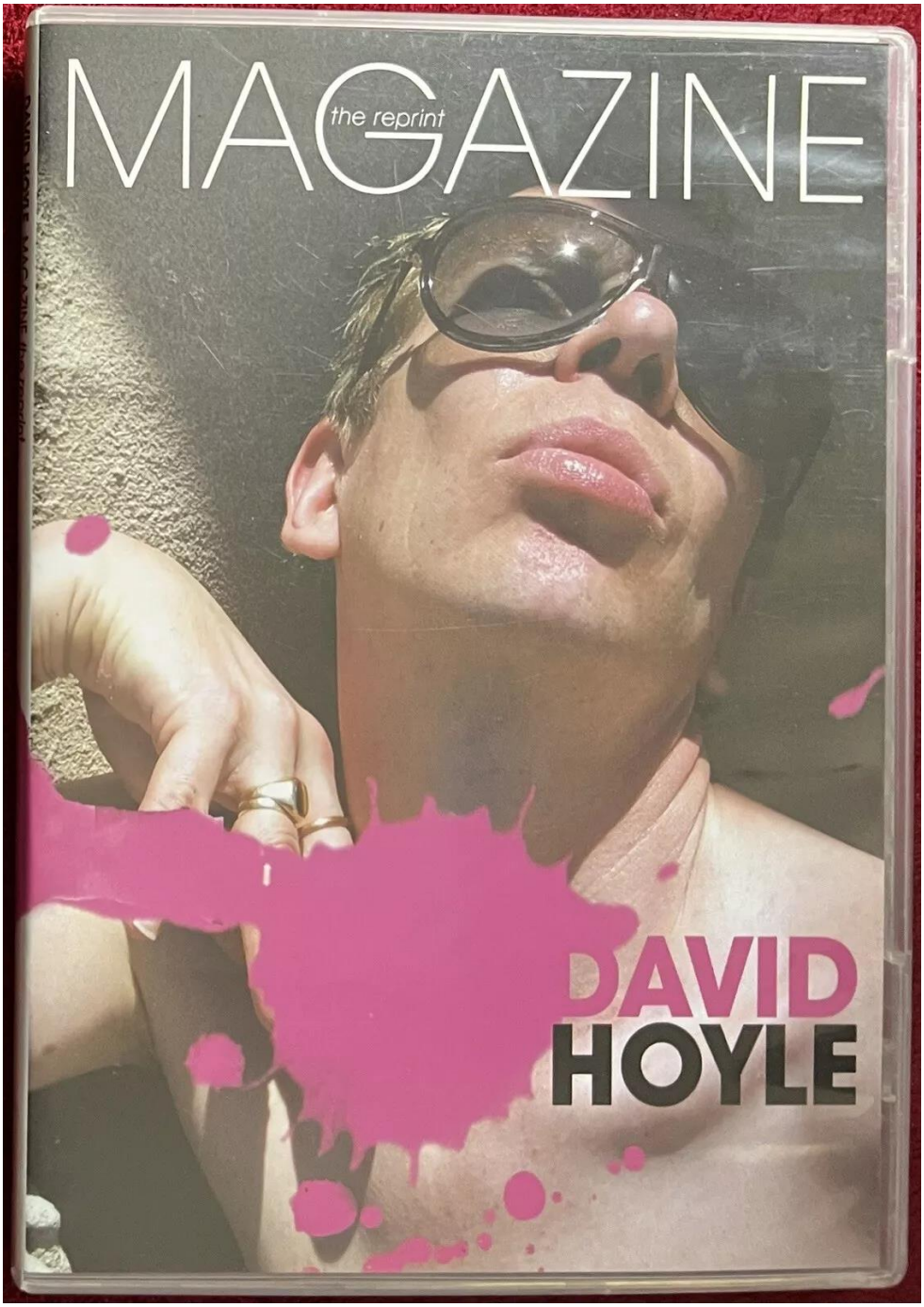
A particularly resonant piece for me was 1999's Lisa Wesley's *Goin'…Gone* (Keidan, 2008). Her durational performance critiqued the monotony and repetition of the weekly working class routine of going out and getting drunk every weekend. Wesley's unrelenting consumption of several pints of water while repeating the script of a heavy drinking Friday night out culminated in the act of her urinating in a pint glass and then drinking this, reflecting the futility and absurdity in the continual pursuit of oblivion. Her use of monotony and repetition would later be echoed in my own work. While I would not have identified myself as an addict at that time of seeing Wesley perform at

Manchester's green room, her representation of the pointlessness of binge drinking can be traced in my practice analysed in Chapter 5.

Lisa Wesley performing *Goin'…Gone*

Lastly, from the queer performance world, David Hoyle is a long celebrated artist. In 2007, Hoyle would address different themes each week in the *Magazine* 10-week performance series produced by Duckie at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern. In the *Alcoholism* special for the first half of the show he sat on stage – in a packed gay pub environment – watching a TV from a sofa, not addressing the audience once. This action upturned expectations of LGBTQ+ cabaret, and created an unsettling atmosphere, mirroring the depths of depression that alcohlism can reach. In the *HIV and AIDS* special, Hoyle took a HIV test on the day of the performance, revealing the results with the audience outside of his more usual drag garb. The Guardian theatre critic Lyn Gardner notes Hoyle's savagery and vulnerability (2007). While determindely

avant garde, Hoyle also retains a dry nothern wit and end of the pier vaudeville about him – he originates from Blackpool. Queer countersentimentalism, a term I adapt from Berlant (2011) runs through my own practice, and like many queer artists, I owe a debt to Hoyle for his boldness, daring and ferocity. His confessional and bold stance as an artist has informed my artistic standpoint.



Cover of the promotional booklet for David Hoyle's *Magazine* performance series

My artswork is also situated within wider contemporary creative landscape. University of West London (UWL) is pioneering practice in the field of addiction recovery arts. UWL funded and hosted the inaugural Knowledge Exchange which launched the Addiction Recovery Arts (ARA) Network in September 2022. The university also seed funded the resulting network's quarterly magazine *Performing Recovery*. These platforms have led to over 2,000 people (arts practitioners, health commissioners, and people with lived experience) to connect online and through other events in Liverpool Hope and Derby Universities. The impact, and evolving interest in this field of arts, wellbeing and research cannot be underestimated.

As mentioned earlier, in the field of addiction recovery arts it is the autoethnographic research of my creative practice probing lived experience that addresses an identifiable gap in knowledge. The 2014 collection *Addiction and Performance* (eds. Reynolds & Zontou) was the first of its kind, but the research focusses on participatory practices. All authors in this volume, including artists-in-recovery Fox and Prest, write about the impact of creative artswork of other people in recovery. Research into recovery arts groups can identify collective overall themes. As an individual artist, I drill down to present multiple facets from the first-person perspective.

PRELUDE ON POSITIONALITY

In this section, I will give summary context to the historical, cultural, and social factors of my personal history that informs the artistic practice analysed in this research.

I was born a white male in 1970 working-class Staffordshire into a family who buried a dark secret. I grew up gay during the time of the AIDS crisis, and developed addictive and self-abusive patterns from early through to late middle age.

My creative practice has autoethnographically examined lived grief, loss and pain since my re-emergence as an artist in 2020. I have applied self-compassionate autoethnographic storytelling techniques in the reflections in this section.

SECRETS: Family matters – the story

My grandparents Sheila and Neil attempted to conceive several children, but my grandmother endured multiple miscarriages. In 1970, they were about to adopt a baby boy, but this was not to happen. It came to light that their only daughter, Sandra, at age 14, was six months pregnant with me. The decision was made that I would be the child they would adopt, and so a formal arrangement to ratify this was put into place within months of my birth.

At age 16, my mother Sandra left our family home to marry her new partner. They had a child, my brother Mark. I have no memory of living in the same house as my mother

or brother, apart from a few weeks after Sandra's first marriage broke down, and they both briefly moved into my grandparents home.

I was raised by my grandparents whom I called 'Mum' and 'Dad' while they were alive. Through formal adoption by my grandparents, Sandra became my sister, although I was told from early on that she was my mother. My grandparents also informed me that Sandra would not tell them who my father was. My paternity became a long burning question for me from childhood.

My grandparents had both died by 2009. In 2013, my mother Sandra also passed away after enduring years of decline due to the aggressive progression of multiple sclerosis. Four days before she died, Sandra told me my father was Peter, the schizophrenic younger brother of my grandmother. My conception was from the sexual violence that he – her uncle – had inflicted upon her when she was 14.

My birthfather, also my great uncle, became estranged from our family in the 1970s. As a small child I recall visiting Peter once at a local mental health facility with my grandparents. In the 1980s, Peter lived in a homeless resettlement centre in Camberwell. From the limited information I have since found out about him, he died living in supported care in 1999. I have one letter that he sent to my grandmother, and have unsuccessfully tried various routes to find more about what happened to him.

On finally receiving my complete adoption records in 2022 (at age 51), it was only at this point that it occurred to me that my grandparents might have known who my father was all along, and that they had actively concealed this information.

In 2023, my cousin Jacqueline revealed for the first time that just before her mother Brenda died, she had revealed to her daughter that Sandra had also told her of my father's identity in 2013. This recent conversation with my cousin suggested new information: my grandmother and mother knew who my father was, but neither my grandfather or any other family member had been told.

SECRETS: Family matters – the analysis

Kinship care is when a child is brought up by another family member or friend. Usually this is the maternal grandparents. In 2021's UK census data, there were 52,050 recorded cases of children being raised in kinship care, but the true figure is likely to be higher. Cases are often not recorded as carers may worry their children will be removed by social services. These family realignments are affected by the informality of this arrangement and a degree of changeability as to who takes the role of the main carer at different points.

UK charity research shows there is a need for 'greater awareness of the situation of young people in kinship care' and that they expressed their wish 'to be heard and to be understood' (Wellard et al, 2017). The lack of understanding about kinship care results in wider public misconceptions about why it takes place. In conversations that I, and others raised in kinship care, have had with people who lack knowledge of this form of foster arrangement may say things such as, *'At least you weren't put into care'*.

In truth, the reality is quite the opposite. Having to be brought up by family members or friends other than birthparents is still a form of foster care. Additionally, the

birthparents may have an ambiguous or undefined role in the child's life. This can present a fraught ongoing dynamic for all involved, as was the case in my own adoption triad of grandmother, birth mother and child. A child does not choose their parents. Suggesting that children should feel indebted for fundamental care needs is at best unsympathetic. Farmer et al's research (2013, pp. 25-34) identifies that children will often have strategies to hide the fact they are being raised by relatives that are not their birthparents to avoid being bullied at school. Children in kinship care feel they have 'outsider' status. *Outsidering* is a concept that emerges in Chapter 4 more specifically in relation to queerness.

As Michele Chappel of the Grandparent Family Apartments in the Bronx said to me during my Churchill Fellowship trip in 2012: 'If a child has to be brought up by grandparents, it's never for a good reason.' (clowes, 2012, p. 6) When a birth parent or parents cannot raise their child, it will usually be because of a fraught situation: addiction, death, illness, teenage pregnancy. Children in kinship care have inevitably encountered significant separation and loss. Statistically, we face the likely probability of poorer health, education, and employment prospects compared to children brought up by their birthparents, although we do fare better than children raised in other forms of care (Sebba et al. 2015, Wellard et al. 2017, Sacker et al. 2021). Moreover, there is an identified lack of social services research into perspectives of people raised in kinship care as opposed to those raised in other forms of adoption and fostering (Dolbin-MacNab and Kelley, 2009) compounding a lack of understanding and empathy for those of us raised in these family settings.

Based on my kinship care background, in 2021 I began to develop the *Nan Kids* arts project and the *Nanterventions* technique which is detailed in Chapter 3.

SHAMES: Queer intolerance – the story

As an identifiably gay teenager in the 1980s, the bullying I remember at school felt relentless and endless. On many occasions, I was publicly abused: physically, mentally, and once, sexually. No adults or other children ever stepped in to help me when the abuse was happening and I did not stand up for myself. In many ways it felt pointless to do so, given the wider negative societal climate around attitudes towards homosexuality at the time. Worse, these bullying incidences would often be of great amusement to the rest of the class or other children in the playground.

Only once did I make a complaint to school teachers about being on the receiving end of homophobic bullying. A dinner lady had told two of my friends not to spend time with me in case they caught AIDS. I spoke to my form teacher about this and he told me that no punitive action was necessary. I then took the matter to the Deputy Head and the dinner lady was asked to take early retirement at the end of that school year. The next term, the dinner lady's son cornered me one breaktime, held me by the throat and pushed me up against a wall to threaten me for his mother losing her job because of my speaking up against her. I made no complaint about this or any other bullying again at school after this happened.

As a teenager, I would not go shopping with my grandparents in the town where I was attending school because of the anxiety of potentially being called names in the street such as 'poof' or 'Larry Grayson'[3] in front of them as this happened daily at school.

At the time, many people in the UK saw gay men as responsible for the spread of the AIDS epidemic. I knew this because my grandfather read The Sun tabloid newspaper which, alongside other media sources, legitimised the intimidation I was experiencing daily during adolescence. This newspaper would persistently lead with salacious and vicious stories about gay 'sleaze'.

At age 17, my grandparents discovered I was having a relationship with a man in his late 20s. On this admission, my grandfather exploded with rage. My grandmother suggested I make an appointment to see the doctor to find a remedy for my homosexuality. I was barred from seeing my boyfriend and was put on a curfew ensuring I was to be at home by 10pm. When this happened in 1987, it was illegal in England for males under the age of 21 to have sex with other men.

After my forced 'coming out' as a gay man, the home situation with my grandparents became tense and I was desperate to leave. Luckily, my A-levels were of a sufficient grade, so I became the first in my immediate family to attend university as a grant-maintained student. I moved to London to attend Goldsmiths in September 1988.

SHAMES: Queer intolerance – the analysis

[3] 'Larry Grayson' was a camp 1980s television entertainer known for his effeminate mannerisms. The name calling of Grayson was commonly used in my schoolyard as a slur to mock and police perceived homosexuality, making it an example for the ritualised homophobic bullying I experienced.

During the 1980s, the onset of AIDS was a mystery in regards to its transmission. Contracting the virus at this point was an almost certain death sentence. This widespread climate of fear led to an acceptance and even encouragement of mainstream intolerance of gay men in particular. With minimal health knowledge available in the early days of AIDS, blame for the rapid spread of the virus focussed on sexually active gay men and intravenous drug addicts.

In 1988, Section 28 legislation 'in effect stopped teachers from dealing with homophobic bullying or supporting gay or questioning students.' (Todd, 2018, p. 41). It is hard to imagine now the level of cruelty and contempt for gay men that was repeatedly promoted daily in the pages of *The Sun* during Kelvin MacKenzie's editorship in the 1980s. The language employed was a bricolage of violence and extremity, most especially as fear surrounding the AIDS crisis gathered momentum. Headlines, editorial, and reportage on quotes by MPs, religious leaders, and senior figures in the police would boast ‘solutions’ such as the recriminalization of homosexuality at best, and brutal and bloody mass incarceration at worst.

While most newspaper coverage of the time was negative towards homosexuality, Todd highlights *The Sun* during the MacKenzie era as being particularly incendiary (2018, pp. 35-39). This had a profound impact on me as a gay teenager. Downs (2012) describes how gay men may feel the need to conform to societal expectations of achievement leading to a constant dissatisfaction and fear of failure. Similarly, Todd’s book (2018) focusses on how societal pressure leads to internalized homophobia and shame for gay men who grew up in the UK in the late twentieth century.

As mentioned in the story above, *The Sun* was the newspaper that my grandfather Neil bought daily. After I left home to attend university, Neil's acceptance of my sexuality became much more forward thinking – I was the only one of my gay friends who was allowed to bring boyfriends home to visit – but when my grandfather first found out I was gay, he lost his temper and swore in an aggressive way I had never seen before and never saw after.

I have a photograph of my grandfather Neil (please see the image below) from the 1980s. He is in his armchair in the living room smoking a Park Drive cigarette and reading *The Sun*. I used this image as part of my *Nan Kids* project. Also, I would sometimes use a 1970s copy of the newspaper for my story readings. Please see YouTube link: p. 37, PRELUDE ON POSITIONALITY, Nanterventions, 2022

My grandfather Neil Clowes in his armchair reading *The Sun*

Foucault states the validity of people's beliefs is only relative to the standards of their society (Gunning, 2005, p. 52) and affirms the significance of these forces with the claim that such sorts of 'discourse transmits and produces power' (Foucault, 1986, p.

86). During adolescence, the influence and opinions of family, peers, and trusted adults such as teachers are paramount. These inform and affect the agency and independence of the emerging adult. Growing up a vulnerable child in a shrouded care arrangement and repeatedly experiencing intensive negativity about my burgeoning sexuality affected me in profound ways.

SELFS: Addiction creep – the story

After studying music at Goldsmiths at undergraduate level, as a musician in the early 1990s, I was commissioned to write music for several theatre productions in London and Glasgow. Later in the decade, I co-created a series of highly successful queer multi-media arts events that garnered national press coverage and had audiences queueing around the block. By this time, I had accumulated substantial financial debt, so rather than continue to pursue creative activities as a career, I decided to focus on working in charity fundraising jobs. I intensely disliked this but it guaranteed security of regular employment. Around this time, I stopped writing music and I became increasingly reliant on self-medication through alcohol, drugs, and co-dependent behaviours.

In 2017, I found the courage to leave my emotionally and financially abusive partner after a seven-year relationship. In 2018, I stopped drinking alcohol and using drugs.

After two relapses, I began attending Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) in August 2021 on a regular basis. I swiftly found an AA sponsor[4] and completed the 12-Step program

[4] An AA sponsor is an experienced member of Alcoholics Anonymous who provides guidance and support to a newcomer in the recovery process.

within my eight months of joining the fellowship. It is at this point only that I would have described myself as being in recovery from alcohol, drugs, sex, food and work. I now accepted that I had disabling lifelong mental health issues arising from and perpetuated through affecting and unresolved grief, deceit, shaming, and previously unacknowledged loss.

SELFS: Addiction creep – the autoethnographic analysis

When important information on a matter such as paternity is withheld in a family, a child will feel betrayed and confused. This area has been extensively researched in the fields of psychology, ethics, and sociology. This is too vast a subject to review here but it is generally agreed – and it is also common sense – that concealment of paternal origins will have significant negative consequences for emotional and psychological wellbeing (Maté and Maté, 2022; van der Kolk, 2015; Lamb, 2004; Warshak, 2003).

The revelation of secrets can shatter an individual's sense of identity and safety provoking a questioning of everything previously thought of as reality in relation to their upbringing and themselves.

I was middle-aged before learning the identity of my father. This has similarities with the case study of Mark (Samuel, 2022, pp. 16–45). This absence of knowledge about his paternity, passed down through three generations, manifested in years of alcohol and drug use, a pattern that mirrors my own. Like me, Mark discovered his father's identity later in life. Samuel highlights the significance of understanding familial identity

for developmental factors, self-worth, and the ability to regulate emotions and reactions (2022, p. 24), obstacles I continue to face today.

On finding out the reality of his paternity from a mother reticent to reveal the truth, Mark was initially reluctant to be open about this (Samuel, 2022, pp. 26-27) but when he did, Mark received the full support of his wife and children. In comparison, it would be two years before I spoke about my father to my aunties, his two surviving sisters. Unlike Mark, my father was also my great uncle. Childless, queer, and in an abusive relationship at the time, the raising of this matter within my family of origin was uncomfortable. I was not met with any support by one aunt. In fact, she was angry that I had spoken to another relative about my father's identity. On the only time this upset aunt and I talked of the matter of my paternity before she passed away, she insisted there was no need to raise the matter again, despite the years I had endured secrecy, and had been actively prevented from knowing the truth about this subject.

Growing up in kinship care and not knowing who my father was, compounded by internally dealing with and outwardly being marked as gay since early in my teenage years, I had no mental health support, and I was hiding that I was being bullied at school daily from my grandparent carers.

As a teenager, Todd (2018, pp. 54-57) found connection in attending the Croydon Area Gay Youth group. In rural England in the 1980s, there were no similar services available. Like Todd though, I shared false beliefs that alcohol, sex, and drugs helped me be 'part of the gay community' (2018, p. 57).

For the majority of my adult life, I have been unable to express openness, trust and intimacy. More, I have lacked discernment in many friendships and relationships. The concealment in my family and growing up gay during the AIDS crisis were affecting circumstances that increased my propensity towards addictive and self-abusive behaviours through adulthood. Todd (2018, pp. 17-26) provides countless examples, both statistical and anecdotal, to evidence the unsettling greater prevalence of self-destructive addictive behaviours ruining or prematurely ending the lives of gay men.

Given that for over ten years now, I am the only survivor from the direct line of my family and that I grew up gay at the time and in the place that I did, this does indicate a high degree of resilience. In Chapter 4, I examine why I could not successfully return to the pop songs I wrote during my teenage years. Rather than attempt to consider elements of this failed practice, I wanted to know what the reasons were behind the avoidance and reluctance I faced in this process. It was during this part of the research that I accepted that self development was, and still is, needing to take place.

Conclusion

Having established autoethnographic context to the layered perspectives informing the artistic practice of this research in the Prelude on Positionality, next is Chapter 1. This first chapter presents a theoretical framework underpinned by Deleuze's concepts of becoming, repetition and difference, alongside queer theories of time, memory and identity. It positions grief, loss and pain as transformative forces within artistic practice, reshaping identity and self-perception through reflective and creative methodologies.

By integrating autoethnographic and addiction recovery techniques, the framework offers a self-compassionate yet critical lens for navigating personal and societal complexities, setting the stage for the practice-led analyses in subsequent chapters.

CHAPTER 1: AFFECTIVELY BECOMING A METHODOLOGY

This chapter establishes the philosophical and methodological foundation for analysing the practice research artswork examples discussed throughout this thesis. Drawing on Deleuze's concepts of becoming and repetition, and incorporating queer perspectives on time, memory and identity, the chapter examines how my grief-informed artistic practice undergoes a personal and creative evolution through autoethnographic methodologies and 12-Step program addiction recovery principles.

My engagement with Deleuze emerged primarily from a resonance with lived experience. As a visibly gay teenager raised in kinship care during the AIDS crisis and later, as an adult navigating addiction recovery, my life has been punctuated by enforced concealments, repressed truths, and painful cycles of repetition such as bullying, abuse and active addiction patterns. These personal dynamics compelled me towards philosophical models that embrace multiplicity, non-linearity, and affect, particularly Deleuze’s focus on becoming, difference and repetition. These frameworks mirrored both the incoherence and emergence I encountered in my own personal recovery and artistic processes.

The chapter begins by scrutinizing the transformative potential of grief and its repetitive nature which shapes the ways in which we perceive the present and anticipate the future. Deleuze’s assertion that repetition alters not the object but the mind contemplating it (1994 [1968], p. 70) underpins this discussion, connecting experienced grief to broader philosophical and creative processes. There is comparison to be made here with the psychological perspectives on trauma by Maté

and Maté (2022) and van der Kolk (2015), who argue that past pain profoundly impacts present-day living. Through autoethnographic reflection and artistic practice, I review ways in which grief, loss and pain have shaped my self-perception and creative trajectory.

Queer theoretical frameworks further shape this methodology, alongside Deleuze's notion of Hamlet's 'time out of joint' (1994 [1968], p. 88) with its relevance to cycles of repetition and return. This perspective is used to interrogate my personal history, including societal shaming during the AIDS crisis and revelations of family deception, which undermined my sense of self. The chapter highlights how this informed my artistic practice, positioning it as a site of resistance and reinvention. Sutton and Martin-Jones' (2008) interpret Deleuze's claim that identity is fluid and shaped by external forces. I situate this within the broader contexts of postmodern and queer theory.

The chapter concludes by positioning autoethnography as a methodological tool that bridges the personal and the universal, offering both clarity and compassion in the scrutinisation of difficult lived experiences in artswork. Drawing on Hickey-Moody's (2013) model of affective pedagogy, I argue that creative and recovery practices enable the transformation of emotionally charged material into meaningful artistic outputs. By embracing the Deleuzian concept of messiness and incoherence inherent in the creative process (Rajchman, 2000, p. 7), I propose that autoethnographic methodologies provide a pathway for grief-informed artists, particularly those in addiction recovery, to navigate and reimagine their journeys.

This chapter establishes a foundation for the analysis in subsequent chapters, where autoethnographic practices delve into becoming, memory and loss. It sets the stage for understanding how grief-informed artistic methodologies can stimulate individual and creative growth, offering insights into the complex interplay of identity, grief and recovery.

The difference made by the repetition of grief in time

> 'The past and the future do not designate instants distinct from a supposed present instant, but rather the dimensions of the present itself in so far as it is a contraction of instants. The present does not have to go outside itself in order to pass from past to future. Rather, the living present goes from the past to the future which it constitutes in time, which is to say also from the particular to the general: from the particulars which it envelops by contraction to the general which it develops in the field of its expectation (the difference produced in the mind is generality itself in so far as it forms a living rule for the future).' (Deleuze, 1994 [1968], p. 71)

Deleuze's reflection suggests that our understanding of the present is intertwined with how our past shapes our expectations for the future. Our perception of reality and identity is therefore not static but a continual negotiation between past occurrences and future possibilities. This perspective echoes trauma research by Maté and Maté (2022) and van der Kolk (2015) who emphasise that unresolved pain from the past has a profound impact on present-day living. In the context of recovery, as articulated

in AA's 12-Step program, the process of alleviating psychic pain begins with an ongoing commitment to subjective inventory and self-reflection.

For much of my life, the grief and falsehoods of my past distorted my understanding of the present. Before entering addiction recovery in 2018 and beginning an artistic practice in 2020, my sense of identity was shaped by confusion surrounding my white rural working-class origins. As a child, this confusion was compounded by the false narratives perpetuated by my grandmother, one of my primary carers. During my teenage years, my emerging sexuality and self-esteem were fractured by the societal shaming of male homosexuality. This was heightened by the moral panic surrounding the AIDS crisis propagated by the press, religious institutions, and state rhetoric (Todd, 2018).

In adulthood, I relied on alcohol, sex and drugs as forms of self-medication, believing that chemical alteration provided solace, thrills and relief. Instead, these coping mechanisms exacerbated paranoia, self-deception and an enduring cycle of disconnection from my true self. Through the dual processes of creative practice and engagement with AA's 12-Step recovery program, I have gradually cultivated a more tempered connection in the 'living present' Deleuze describes (1994 [1968], p. 71). Creativity and connection with others have facilitated my acceptance of past grief, as I discover in Chapter 5. This journey has also allowed me to confront and resolve previously held misconceptions and delusions. Having begun my creative journey at the age of 50, I continue to find this process slow but advancing. While the negative contractions of the past still contend with optimistic expectations for the future, progress is undeniably present.

Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche's 'eternal return' in *Difference and Repetition* (1994 [1968]) becomes especially poignant when viewed through the lens of addiction. The cycle of behaviours such as craving, using, relapsing, regret and withdrawal, is not simply repetition but becomes a site of existential testing. In Deleuze's interpretation, what returns is only what affirms difference, it is what must be overcome.

My artistic practices, particularly those in Chapter 5, reflect this Deleuzian return as an embrace of repetition and as an act of creative and personal transformation. Through this lens, addiction itself can be re-imagined as a site of becoming, containing the potential for change, not just recurrence.

Navigating the present requires me to manage fractured irrealities that manifest as obsessive thinking, insomnia and an inability to relax or enjoy downtime. These recurring habits are tedious, but my artistic practice provides a counterbalance, offering a gradual resolution.

Autoethnographic practice, as uncovered in the following chapter, has proven instrumental in dismantling negative associations tied to moments of lived grief. This is particularly evident in Chapter 3's final practice research example, *Peter x 30*, where I repeatedly confront the moment that irrevocably altered the course of my life. Through these practices, I work toward reconciling the fragmented realities of my past with a more cohesive and hopeful understanding of the present.

The queering of knowledge and time

By mapping this artist-researcher's fragmented memories and nonlinear perceptions of time through instinctual and chance-based arts praxis, new pathways to knowledge may emerge (Rajchman, 2000, p. 11).

Deleuze's reflections on Hamlet's famous line encapsulate central themes of queer theory – failure, temporality and the death drive (Halberstam, 2011; Freeman, 2010; Edelman, 2004) – when he asserts that:

> 'Time out of joint means demented time or time outside the curve which gave it a god, liberated from its overly simple circular figure, freed from the events which made up its content' (Deleuze, 1994 [1968], p. 88).

Deleuze's notion of 'time out of joint' evokes an unbound temporality. The cycles of repetition and return are present in aspects of my creative practice, most especially in Chapter 3. By working with and through fragmented memories and distorted timelines, I navigate grief, loss and pain through autoethnographic techniques, attempting to break the cycles of the original family wound.

I operate in what Freeman (2010) describes as a time out of joint trajectory, inventing new narratives (Halberstam, 2011) to replace former deceptions. The false history overturned at my mother's deathbed exposed irrevocable family-wide mental scars caused by decades of deceit. My grandmother had mistakenly privileged the notion of the 'innocent Child' (Edelman, 2004) in order to satisfy societal expectations.

Deleuze's concept of becoming is predicated on a fluid and ever-shifting identity shaped by external forces and mainstream structures – a quintessentially queer position. As Sutton and Martin-Jones (2008) explain when writing about Deleuze:

> '[I]dentity… is always in motion: the identity of the individual subject, pressured from all sides by forces that will make him or her, articulate him/her, organise him/her; but also the collective subject, pushed together through environmental, governmental, or social forces, or coming together in a resistance to these' (Sutton and Martin Jones, 2008, p. 45).

They further elaborate that, for Deleuze and Guattari, identities are not determined by physical realities but by the reactions and interpretations of others to perceived characteristics (Sutton and Martin-Jones, 2008, p. 48). This is an area I explore in depth in Chapter 4 about my internal resistence to being externally identifiable as queer.

Sutton and Martin-Jones' point (2008, p. 48) nods to long-standing discussions in queer and cultural theory – Hall and Butler for instance, have highlighted how identity is shaped by the surrounding environment (Henriques, Morley, and Goblot, 2017; Salih and Butler, 2004). Postmodern theory, moreover, rejects fixed notions of identity, framing it instead as fluid, relational, and shaped by the 'social operation of difference' (Sutton and Martin-Jones, 2008, p. 72). Drawing from my firsthand perspective of queerness, Chapter 4 queries the usefulness of fixed identity when imposed by others.

Queerness is marked by its difference and is entangled and informed by external judgements. In my case, being raised in kinship care, navigating adolescence as a

gay teenager during the AIDS crisis, and living through addiction and alcoholism. This has shaped a sense of knowledge and understanding that exists outside normatively prescribed societal frameworks, positioning my creative practice as continually rethinking identity and belonging through a queer lens.

Undrawn, unbelonging and outsidering

In developing this theoretical framework, I have created and applied three terms for specific use within Chapters 3 and 4 to describe particular aspects of my lived experience. Chapter 3's *undrawn* refers to a state of undefined or unresolved selfhood – a persistent lack of a cohesive identity. In Chapter 4, *unbelonging* points to my perception of not fitting in with the gay male world and *outsidering* is the experience of being othered by people in mainstream society. These terms encapsulate the sensations of orienteering uncertainty during addiction recovery and creative exploration.

The ongoing search for clarity around my identity is a central theme across all three practice research examples discussed in Chapter 3. This finds some relief through connections made in Chapter 5. The search for agency is pursued through the autoethnographic methods in Chapter 2 and queried in Chapter 4. Deleuze's concept of becoming underpins this methodology.

Spinoza's assertions, as interpreted by Scruton (2003, pp. 112–113) are that truth and permanence are only attainable when one has 'the capacity to distinguish the true from the false, to weigh the evidence, and to confront the world without illusions,'

highlighting the necessity of clarity for my individual and artistic journey. By addressing my paranoid self in Chapter 4 through unpicking the roots behind my feeling of *unbelonging* and sensation of *outsidering*, I take some steps towards reparation of earlier loss and pain.

By Chapter 5, I am building confidence to work with and collaborate artistically with others. The integration of academic research, creative practice and participation in the AA 12-Step recovery program has assisted me, as an *undrawn* artist-researcher, to achieve moments of self-compassion and to confront pain that belongs to the past. Hickey-Moody (2013, p. 84) observes that research ‘can change established patterns of thinking.’ As indicated in the introduction to this thesis, this shift – from reframing my lens as one of trauma to one of grief, loss and pain – is facilitated by the application of autoethnographic artistic practice.

The affective perspective

In this creative practice research, I aim to transform sensitive knowledges into contextualised and reflective expressions. Ultimately, the paradox of this process lies in the emotionally charged nature of these lived experiences. As studied further in Chapter 2 and later in Chapter 4, the intensity of these emotions can become so overwhelming that I find myself avoiding, deferring or rejecting them entirely. This reflects a persistent struggle with a diminished sense of self-worth that undermines my interiority, despite my earlier assertion in this chapter that 'the negative *contractions* of the past battle with optimistic *expectations* for the future, but there is progress.'

Hickey-Moody's (2013, p. 80) model of affective pedagogy provides a vital framework for my autoethnographic artswork. Her focus on how art can 'change people's attachments to subjects' corresponds with the aims of my artistic practice within the parameters of this research project. She elaborates on the theoretical foundation of her methodology, rooted in Spinoza's and Deleuze's thinking:

> 'Deleuze is arguing that feelings mark embodied modulations. This is his Spinozist framework for thinking about the ways in which ideas and interactions create changes. For Spinoza, substance is the stuff of which life is made. It is expressed in modes, which are changed (affected or "modulated") by affections (*affectio*). Affectio are traces of interaction: residues of experience that live on in thought and in the body. They make affects.' (Hickey-Moody, 2013, p. 81, italicised in original)

Building on Spinoza's and Deleuze's theorisation of assemblages, Hickey-Moody (2013, p. 83) suggests that 'how we feel about things impacts on how we can think about them. Emotions are confused ideas.' Autoethnography, I suggest, can provide clarity amid this confusion, yet acknowledgement must be made that engaging with materials that summon daunting feelings of grief, loss and pain may require careful management.

Pain may need to be fully processed by the artist before creating grief-informed artswork. My own practice and the research behind this thesis has sometimes revealed an unanticipated rawness of feelings tied to events I believed to be in the distant past. This was particularly acute in Chapter 4.

Perhaps also, it occurs to me with *Alky Whole Moon Lick / Queer Mats / The Alcoholic's Tarot* in Chapter 5, that I am taking a sidestep away from my own relationship with alcohol and drugs. By using humour – or what I later in this thesis term the queer countersentimentalism model (drawing from Berlant, 2011) – I am in danger of making light of what I, and so many others have been through, in relation to addictions.

This has led me to advocate for the importance of professional and peer support systems for artists working with grief, loss and pain related material. There may be a role for such support via the Addiction Recovery Arts (ARA) Network (see Chapter 5), as we artists in addiction recovery will tend to centre on harrowing personal stories particularly in our early artistic development.

In the next chapter, building on this subsection, I strive to balance the emotional motivations behind my autoethnographic research with the detached perspective of a more traditional ethnographer, John Van Maanen. This balance is a strategy for achieving a wider perspective and an act of self-compassion. By consciously navigating between these two positions, I aim to transform personal grief, loss and pain into creative and academic insights while maintaining emotional wellbeing.

Conclusion

In summarising this philosophical framework, Deleuze's assertion that *'Repetition changes nothing in the object repeated, but does change something in the mind which contemplates it'* (1994 [1968], p. 70, italicised in original) has parallels with the iterative

processes required for sustaining sobriety through both creative and recovery practices. While these practices do not alter the events of the past, they reshape the ways in which it is perceived and internalised. One of the fundamental teachings of Alcoholics Anonymous and its 12-Step program is that we can only alter our perceptions and reactions to events outside of our control, epitomised by the prayer which closes every AA meeting *('God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.').* Conscious and active repetition of healthier new habits is critical in addiction recovery, especially in the early days, which is at the point I wrote this thesis.

Deleuze emphasises how repetition is fundamental to acts of creation:

> 'The role of the imagination, or the mind which contemplates in its multiple and fragmented states, is to draw something new from repetition, to draw difference from it. For that matter, repetition is itself in essence imaginary, since the imagination alone here forms the "moment" of the *vis repetitiva* from the point of view of constitution: it makes that which it contracts appear as elements or cases of repetition.' (Deleuze, 1994 [1968], p. 76, italicised in original)

For me as an artist researcher, memory intersects with grief in affective ways. The repetition of societal shaming of queerness during my teenage years combined with the difference of discovering at age 42 that my father was also my great uncle has warped and altered my sense of self at numerous points of my life. This familial deception and the gaps in memory caused by active addiction required a reimagining through repetitive artistic practices and recovery rituals.

A Deleuzian-inspired, queer theory-infused methodology has been essential to critically examining and informing the practice research artswork and navigating themes of memory, time, loss, grief, being *undrawn* and feeling senses of *unbelonging* and *outsidering*. My research has been informed by Deleuze's philosophical concept of becoming and is balanced with Hickey-Moody's model of affective pedagogy. Together, they provide a methodological framework for employing autoethnography as both a compassionate and detached approach to artistically presenting and privately overcoming harrowing events. An analysis of my creative works has been crucial in articulating the instinctual drive to externalise and reconcile pain. This process of researching and creating has been both contemplative and restorative, offering a broader perspective on intense grief and loss.

In the next chapter, the autoethnographic writings of other researchers have offered practical insights to, and structural guidance for, the creation and evaluation of artswork detailed in Chapters 3 to 5. This process has allowed me to venture into painful exposures related to family deception, societal shaming, addiction and abusive patterns. By selecting and engaging with a focussed and relevant small sample of autoethnographic practice on complex and difficult themes, I propose that adoption of these techniques hold significant potential for investigating becoming, memory and loss. They offer a pathway for *undrawn* artists (which I propose might well include many fellow artists in addiction recovery) to navigate and transform complex situations into meaningful creative outputs, as well as redress felt experiences of *unbelonging* and *outsidering*.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter delves into the theories and scholarly perspectives that underpin the practice research explored in this thesis. Through a critical overview of literature spanning trauma studies, ethnography versus autoethnography, addiction recovery arts and queer theory, I present multifaceted ways in which grief, loss and pain can be mediated and articulated through creative practice.

Central to this discussion are the concepts of trauma and addiction, both of which are commonplace in popular discourse yet often inadequately understood in terms of their nuanced impact on individual lives. This critique provides a foundation for examining how entrenched familial deceit, endurance of normalised daily bullying during adolescence, and the impact of long-term addiction issues have shaped the grief-informed basis of my artswork and this resulting research.

This chapter also foregrounds the key concepts from autoethnography that have informed my research approach. Drawing on the work of scholars such as Adams (2016), Ellingson (2017), and Van Maanen (2011 [1988]), I critically assess the evolving landscape of autoethnographic research, with a particular emphasis on its suitability for addressing intersecting grief, loss and pain within the framework of addiction recovery arts.

In revisiting painful histories – such as the revelation of my paternity at my mother's deathbed or the long-term effects of growing up as a visibly gay teenager during the AIDS crisis – the chapter reflects on the ethical and emotional complexities of using

personal narratives as research material. Here, I situate my work within broader conversations about the validity, contextualisation and confessional nature of autoethnography, drawing connections to existing scholarship while also interrogating the tensions in exposing lived insights for academic and artistic purposes.

This chapter further considers how creative methodologies, including repetition and impressionistic storytelling can facilitate healing and scholarly inquiry. In doing so, the act of revisiting and rearticulating haunting memories through artistic expression can transform trauma into grief, creating a space for reflection, understanding and ultimately, resolution. By situating this within the broader contexts of family dynamics, queer identity and addiction recovery, the chapter sheds light on the transformative potential of autoethnography as both a research tool and a mode of artistic praxis.

As the chapter progresses, I connect these themes to the research objectives outlined in the introduction, particularly the question of how self-compassionate techniques can be integrated into creative practice. In closing, the framework sets the stage for the subsequent chapters which will further contextualise the role of autoethnography in my practice research with specific focus on the interplay between lived experience, creative methodologies and the pursuit of personal and artistic growth.

Trauma, or not trauma

Trauma, like addiction, are subjects central to this inquiry. Both are frequently used terms in general conversation, and on mainstream and social media.

Over- or mis-use of a term has the potential to devalue its impact and undermine serious comprehension of the phenomenological perspective. There is no space to adequately cover the vast body of academic knowledge on trauma studies within the scope of this thesis. Besides, as mentioned in the introduction, I have actively chosen to replace the word trauma in relation to my current state of mind and artistic delivery of artswork so as to situate past lived experiences to history. However, many real life incidents which are described in this thesis and are drawn on for the creation of the practice examples are traumatic.

After recently presenting several papers at various academic conferences and performing numerous times, on every occasion I have had to issue a content warning[5]. This suggests that an external perception of my artswork is related to trauma, regardless of how I might now prefer to describe my history, so I will address this subject here in this subsection.

With this in mind, it is worth noting that certain types of trauma have received more emphasis than others. This focus may hinder a broader understanding and empathy for its causes and effects. Such an orientation could have compounded the negative effects of trauma, particularly by sidelining the lives of marginalised people. For instance, Cvetkovich (2003, p. 19) finds Caruth's (1996) writing over reliant on Freud and Holocaust studies, suggesting this prioritises 'trauma as catastrophic event rather than on every day trauma.'

Vosters (2016) further expands on this:

[5] A content warning alerts readers to potentially distressing or sensitive material in the text, such as themes of trauma, violence or abuse.

> ‘These biases serve to marginalize and privatize not only the trauma associated with sexual assault, but also the insidious traumas produced through acts of day-today *(sic)* racism[6], sexism, homophobia, and capitalism.’ (Vosters, 2016)

The ‘trauma’ of my situations are varied and united only by their mundanity and repetition. Fundamental deceit and deliberate avoidance concerning my paternity within my family of origin. Daily bullying and physical threats during school days. Repeated self-abuse of alcohol and drugs and via relationships. The ‘every day’-ness of these routine trials compounded negative self-beliefs and entrenched behaviours.

Trauma is then embedded within and across my artswork for this research, but I have chosen to proactively manage and deal with the wounds through creative practice. By adopting autoethnography in my processes, I have sought to confront the incidents underlying the trauma, allowing my artswork to then be shaped by grief which can now be confined to the past.

Introducing the unspeakable into the equation

Until I re-entered creative practice in 2020, I mistakenly believed I was coping, or worse, that what had happened to me was either not serious or it was unimportant. I had spent nearly three decades not engaging with creativity since the 1990s. Through undertaking this research, I now believe the impetus of focusing on lived grief, loss

[6] Original source includes a typographic error in hyphenation, reproduced here verbatim.

and pain as the subject materials for my renewed artistic practice reveals that I had been holding onto traumatic incidents.

This, as I later discovered through my involvement in the Addiction Recovery Arts (ARA) Network (see Chapter 5) and during my interview with spoken word poet Hannah Stanislaus (clowes, 2023, pp. 8-9), is a connecting factor for people in addiction recovery engaging with the arts.

> ‘Artistic expression … assists through its liminal state to generate a valence of feeling that might better express the texture of these lived experiences.’ (Sloan, 2024, pp. 70-71)

Regarding addiction recovery arts praxis, Sloan (2024) here is clarifying that art operates outside of conventional structures, enabling complex, ambiguous, or hard-to-define aspects of lives to be explored. Creativity has the power to create space for nuance and provide outlet to emotionally charged experiences. Examining this in relation to family-of-origin deceptions forms the foundation of the artswork discussed in Chapter 3. Bakó and Zana’s analysis (2020, p. 10) highlights a significant dynamic, which I present in full below. Their insights encapsulate how secrecy contributed to a freezing of the original traumatic incident for generations across my family and they offer a perspective on the long-term effects of this, alongside the impact of the imposed shame of growing up gay during the AIDS crisis:

> ‘In the case of social traumas, in terms of both the long-term psychological effect, and of the opportunities for healing, one crucial factor is that the same overwhelming unprocessable traumatic experience is shared by a whole

> community. If the trauma prompts sympathy and solidarity from the environment, if the environment is empathic, and reflects that this trauma is indeed a trauma, this aids the healing process. *If, however, the social mirror is blind, insensitive, or if society itself is the perpetrator, then the traumatized individual or group is left alone with the experience.* If the social processing of the trauma, the mourning process, fails to happen later too, there is a high chance the trauma will become transgenerational.' (Bakó and Zana, 2020, p. 10, italicisation by me)

On my grandmother Sheila discovering the origins behind my conception, my mother Sandra was probably told to always repress (to actively 'blind') the horror of the sexual violence inflicted on her. This meant the 'mother-mirror' that Bakó and Zana (2020, p. 61) say is necessary for a child's wellbeing was never possible between my mother Sandra and myself because the acknowledgement of the tragic occurance that she suffered was always repressed. Consequently, Sandra and I had a complicated relationship. I understand this better now, but only because of posthumously having the hindsight that she was sexually assaulted by her uncle/my father.

I did not have insight into this situation until I was 42 years old. My grandmother Sheila, with seemingly good but 'insensitive' intentions, compounded shame through her concealment about my father's identity in an attempt to protect me, the 'innocent Child' (Edelman, 2004). Both Sandra and myself had been 'left alone with the experience' (Bakó and Zana, 2020, p. 10) by Sheila. The consequences for us both were profoundly negative. Sandra was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis at age 24 and was dead by age 56. I have had poor mental health throughout my life and became an addict in early adulthood.

Further, growing up gay during the time of AIDS, ‘society itself’ was ‘the perpetrator’ (Bakó and Zana, 2020, p. 10). Bullying and the attendant physical, verbal and sexual abuse in the schoolyard was not only acceptable, but it was also approved by tabloid newspapers and wider society. Being ‘left alone with the experience’ (Bakó and Zana, 2020, p. 10) for years, I had unintentionally repressed this. This accumulation eventually led me to act out through patterns of addiction, avoidance and self-abuse. It was not until I re-engaged with artistic practice in 2020 that I began to overcome this. Therefore, the use of artistic practice has enabled me to express the inexpressible and release the pressure caused by repressed feelings.

The validity of the confessional autoethnographer

The landscape of ethnographic research has evolved significantly since John Van Maanen’s original 1988 publication of *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. In this work, Van Maanen (2011 [1988], pp. 101-124) describes the traditional 'realist' ethnographer as a direct, matter-of-fact observer, presenting an ‘unclouded’ account of the field. By contrast, the first-person ethnographer – or what we now understand to be an autoethnographer – is a teller of ‘confessional tales’, focusing more on the researcher than on culture or society.

When autoethnography turns its attention to taboo or hidden subjects, the researcher’s personal motivation becomes undeniably central. Like Ronai (1999, p. 143), I embody the dual role of autoethnographic researcher and 'phenomenon under consideration,' as my family circumstances encompass socially unpalatable subjects much like hers.

With specific regard to my family of origin, Butler (2004, pp. 152-160) questions the extent to which societal expectations and psychoanalytic reinforcement of incest as taboo contribute to the ‘melancholia’ and ‘psychic suffering’ endured by individuals subjected to such circumstances.

Through the *Nanterventions* performance technique discussed in Chapter 3, I interrogate my grandmother Sheila’s need to uphold societal norms, navigating the dichotomy between societal acceptance and maternal protectionism. Being the product of forced incestuous rape, I am uniquely positioned to research this subject, corresponding with Zagorski-Thomas’s (2022) notion that in this type of practice research, such artistic intentions may also serve an activist purpose.

One of the most significant contributions of autoethnography since Van Maanen’s initial work has been its ability to upturn any notion of objectivity, demonstrating that all researchers, regardless of discipline, angle their work through lenses shaped by their socio-economic backgrounds, cultural contexts and educational influences. Ellingson (2017) critiques the rigidity of traditional research methodologies and highlights the diversity of autoethnographic modalities. Zingaro (2009, p. 7) takes this further, advocating for a ‘mosaic’ of methodologies that embrace conflicting voices and perspectives. Even Van Maanen concedes that there are no ‘neutral, objective, observable facts’ in ethnography (2011 [1988], p. 93).

For me, the journey of navigating grief and becoming *undrawn* would have been impossible without having the motivations and positions of those within my family, as well as the broader queer and addict narratives that inform my sense of self. That said, I find wanting to position my research in some ways closer to Van Maanen’s traditional

ethnographic stance rather than to the more subjective ways of Carolyn Ellis and other autoethnographers. Prioritising subjectivity over contextualisation, particularly in my circumstances risks exacerbating the wounds of the past.

I suggest that grief-informed artists should aim, however imperfectly, to pursue a form of objectivity. This strategy, while daunting in the face of unclear truths of family deceptions, can provide a protective framework for engaging with tough material. Striving to maintain detachment from the self as the primary subject under scrutiny can safeguard the artist's emotional wellbeing while enabling creation of artswork.

Turning trauma into grief through autoethnographic artswork

Earlier in this chapter I described why I have sought to move to describing my recent artswork as being 'grief-', rather than 'trauma-', informed. Autoethnography, as will be covered in this subsection, provides the apparatus to do this both effectively and safely.

As Holman Jones, Adams and Ellis (2016, pp. 22–25) argue, autoethnography functions as a methodology that critiques culture, advances research knowledge, articulates individual experiences of stigmatisation and engenders relational exchanges with its audience. For artist researchers, autoethnography provides a pathway to navigate pain.

A prominent proponent of autoethnographic practice, Ellis describes her entry into autoethnography as emerging from the sudden death of her brother and the

anticipated loss of her partner to illness. This catalysed her study of ‘relational and personal experiences of grief and loss’ (Holman Jones et al, 2016, p. 17), suggesting an ontological release and epistemological shift as she documented her pain through writing. Similarly, Adams (2006) reflects on how his fraught relationship with his father prompted a need to process a prolonged period of emotional difficulty through autoethnography. For Holman Jones, the method initially served as ‘a stage and a means for writing, telling, and living the story of my research’ (Holman Jones et al, 2016, p. 19), focusing on contemporary events.

In contrast, my practice research involves an exhumation of historical grief through autoethnographic artswork. The creative work in this thesis addresses events beginning in the 1970s and concluding in the late 2010s, placing my lens firmly on grief, loss and pain rooted in the past rather than the present day.

Sloan (2014) highlights how participants in addiction recovery theatre return to lived experiences to ‘re-write their own life narrative’ (p. 226), effecting personal change and suggesting that revisiting traumatic incidents may be necessary for both creativity and healing. Similarly, Hall (2001, p. 92, italicization in original) argues that revisiting an archival *‘moment of danger’* can lead to transformation through creative practice.

My application of autoethnographic techniques has demonstrated that revisiting and processing past traumas through artistic expression can yield resolution. This practice research then suggests that creative methodologies can achieve sobriety outcomes similar to addiction recovery pathways such as AA’s 12-Step program or rehabilitation routes. Indeed, I argue that creativity not only helps manage repetitive negative

thought patterns and associated destructive behaviours but also provides solutions to unresolved questions that might otherwise remain inaccessible.

My research shows that creative practitioners have the potential to heal grief, moving beyond merely placating or postponing the confrontation of charged issues. For me, the first step involved observing the emotional attachments associated with loss. Creating queer countersentimentalist artswork by Chapter 5 proved to be the most effective means of reducing the impact of *affectio*.

Uncomfortable emotional detachment in grief-informed artswork

Denzin (2018) and Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis (2014) assert that their activist intentions in research stem from the 'personal need' that Zingaro (2009, p. 10) identifies. As a grief-informed artist and researcher, I contest this premise, arguing that my need for objective contextualisation is intertwined with a requirement to release past pain. Nevertheless, Denzin (2018), Fox (2019) and Ellingson (2009, 2017) offer autoethnographic systems that robustly analyse formidable research subjects. Their methodologies incorporate complex triangulations of multiple viewpoints and texts, circumventing what might otherwise elicit emotional responses from the reader. This has been a critical consideration in my efforts to create artswork about family, queerness and addictions, informing my research and future creative practice.

The phenomenological circumstances of my positionality are central to this inquiry, even as disclosure remains a significant concern for this grief-informed artist autoethnographer. Researchers such as Allen-Collinson (2016), Pelias (2016) and

Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis (2014) note the potential risks and exposure possible in writing about serious and upsetting personal subjects. There is risk of exposure from the public display of historical source materials in this practice research. One artswork, *Peter x 30* in Chapter 3, is when my mother told me my father's identity at her deathbed. By revealing that my father is also my great uncle, doing this reveals that I am inbred, a highly taboo subject, and my conscious decision to expose this via my autoethnographic practice carries risk.

For those of us who Van Maanen (2011 [1988]) describe as 'confessional' researchers like myself, Zingaro's (2009, p. 11) discussion of the 'emotional economy' of grief narratives is particularly profound. Zingaro critiques the expectation that storytellers must embody either victimhood or heroism to satisfy public audiences' desire for a 'comfortable relationship' (2009, p. 9) with the narrative. She cautions against assuming that disclosure guarantees cathartic relief, highlighting the phenomenon which can lead to self-harm or even suicide. This emphasises the importance of detaching from feelings when exposing details within creative practice or research.

In sharing my family of origin stories, I often encounter audience members who feel compelled to share their own narratives immediately after a performance. This response is understandable and I strive to offer a compassionate listening ear in such moments. At this stage in my journey, I am no longer emotionally impacted by sharing these stories. These are now narratives I have extensively rehearsed and repeatedly told. The wound of trauma (Maté and Maté, 2022) is greatly reduced.

Fox (2019) articulates a useful rationale for maintaining detachment during public engagement. He is concerned that emotional reactions during the delivery of his

papers may undermine the seriousness and the critical points he seeks to convey. Fox recounts how an audience member at a conference reframed his narrative to fit her need for empathy and understanding, an example of Zingaro's (2009, p. 9) observation that audiences often seek a 'comfortable relationship' with grief narratives.

Given that emotion is a defining characteristic of autoethnography, receiving 'less attention in traditional ethnographic research' (Anderson and Glass-Coffin, 2016, p. 79), how can autoethnography effectively navigate emotion? Connolly and Reilly (2007) emphasise the critical importance of self-care for both researchers and participants, a technique even more necessary in the dual role of the autoethnographic researcher as both subject and investigator.

Seeking emotional distance differentiates my work from certain autoethnographic practices. While Berry (2016, p. 213) claims that 'heightened transparency and emotion in autoethnography call for the heightened engagement of others', I argue that replaying loss through artswork requires nuance and measured reception. My goal is not to control audience responses or their desire for a 'comfortable relationship' (Zingaro, 2009, p. 9) with me as an artist but to manage my own emotional engagement with the artswork. By doing so, I aim to connect with my audience through intellectual and artistic means rather than through raw emotionality.

Painting an impressionist picture of painful memories

As covered in Chapter 1, postmodern theories proposed by Deleuze and Lyotard (Coleman and Ringrose, 2013; Readings, 1991) reject the notion of a singular,

definitive truth. By taking this viewpoint, this assists in the assimilation of the posthumous revelation of my paternity where satisfactory answers otherwise remain elusive. With all the protagonists of my family story now deceased, I can only reconstruct an imaginery through autoethnographic creative practice to help me better understand and communicate the perspectives of my family of origin. This allows me to absorb and artistically embody the multiple stories to interconnect the differing histories presented by my birth- and grand-parents.

Without external evidence or a relational framework for study, my practice research risks being dismissed as what Van Maanen (2011 [1988], p. 93) describes as ‘private muses and demons’ – limited to the researcher’s own interests. Despite this, the 'out of the ordinary' (Van Maanen, 2011 [1988], p. 102) nature of my family’s history presents an identifiable gap in knowledge that warrants robust methodological examination. Berry (2016, pp. 211-212) argues that autoethnography’s complexity, challenge and reflexive incompleteness are integral to its value, offering a framework to engage with such fraught histories.

The task, then, is how best to pursue histories like mine, where untruths have been perpetuated and the past misremembered for decades. Holman Jones, Adams and Ellis (2016, pp. 25-32) advocate for storytelling, engagement, subject embodiment and the incorporation of a multiplicity of voices as tools to create perspective and insight.

Warren (2020) further drills down to suggest the concept of 'definitive' archives as outdated patriarchal constructs, asserting that 'there are no right answers, just like there is no perfect story'. For an artist working with grief, loss and pain from the distant

past, this framing is liberating. It allows me to embrace uncertainty rather than negate complexity.

Through my arts practice, I aim not only to envision the world, as Warren suggests, but also to frame my stories as exorcisms – truths I feel compelled to tell. These tales are confessional in nature, a concept that Van Maanen (2011 [1988]) critiques, but for me, they represent a necessary process of ownership and celebration of survival. Being at the centre of these narratives, I am driven by the need to tell them. Failing to do so risks jeopardising my recovery which may potentially lead to a return to negative addictions and self-destructive behaviours. Although the stories of my family and gay teenage happened decades ago, they persisted as living entities exerting powerful influences over my emotional regulation and self-worth until recently.

The passage of time since these life events affords me a degree of emotional detachment, positioning me as what Van Maanen (2011 [1988]) describes as an 'impressionist' ethnographer. In this framework, repetition becomes a vital tool: 'With each retelling, we discover more of what we know' (Van Maanen, 2011 [1988], p. 118). In my final practice research piece in Chapter 3, *Peter x 30*, I retell the story of learning my father's identity at my mother's deathbed repeatedly, to the point where the narrative becomes numb and meaningless. This repetitive process allowed me to confront not only what I cannot know but also what I never will know.

As I discover in Chapter 3, repetition holds transformative power in my practice, fulfilling Deleuze's assertion that it *'changes nothing in the object repeated, but does change something in the mind which contemplates it'* (1994 [1968], p. 70, italicised in

original). By repeatedly numbing the news of my mother's assault through repetition, I find a strategy for personal acceptance.

The embodiment and release of family SECRETS

McNay's (2009) autoethnography helps extrapolate further on the blind maternal 'social mirror' (Bakó and Zana, 2020, p. 10) that contributed to my feeling *undrawn*. McNay observes:

> 'Absent memories become family secrets, known to some members of the family, not known to other members, and, often, intuited by still others. Secrets serve particular functions in families, but when they disrupt the construction of narrative inheritance they also disrupt the formation of identity in children growing up in those families.' (McNay, 2009, p. 1179)

At the age of 54, I am left with fragmented truths about my parents, distorted by decades of misinformation, silence and secrecy. Georgio (2016, p. 418) suggests that 'memories housed in remaining family members' bodies' may, despite such secrecy, offer revelations to the inquirer.

This proposition strikes a chord with my mother's story. Her physical body, while alive, appeared to reveal much of what she was bound not to say. van der Kolk's (2015) *The Body Keeps the Score* captures this phenomenon. At the age of 14, Sandra, my mother, was sexually assaulted by her uncle Peter – a violent event that led to my conception. By the age of 27, Sandra had become a wheelchair user with multiple

sclerosis. I suggest that her physical decline was her body 'speaking' (Pelias, 2016, p. 398), manifesting as an afflicted embodiment of 'corporeal being in the physical world' (Allen-Collinson, 2016, p. 282).

The impact of my mother's assault by Peter, her uncle and my father, reverberates across time. Sandra endured immense and unrelenting pain, her body becoming a tortured archive of her suffering. The assault marked her *'moment of danger'* (Hall, 2001, p. 92, italicisation in original), one that became inscribed within her body. This terrible moment was uncontainable yet frozen, trapped within her corporeal self. Over the four decades of her gradual physical decline, I witnessed this life-altering sexual assault play out in her body and life. When Sandra finally told the truth on her deathbed, I could, for the first time, 're-read' the narrative of my life 'in the light of the present and the future' (Hall, 2001, p. 92).

I now know that secrets lose their power when spoken aloud and committed to the past. As answers surrounding my paternity were suppressed for 42 years, I find myself compelled to endlessly repeat the moment of revelation in my artswork *Peter x 30* in Chapter 3. Through this creative repetition, I aim to transform something in my mind as I grapple with the unknowable. But what do these creative actions bring to the wider world and the audiences who witness my work?

The revelation of my father's identity marked an epoch in my life – a turning point that catalysed my previously stunted sense of becoming. Re-reading Sandra's *'moment of danger'* (Hall, 2001, p. 92, italicisation in original) on her deathbed brought transgenerational resolution for me, though not for her. This moment of disclosure was

also to eventually spark my creative practice a few years later, initiating a process of rewriting from a place of being *undrawn* to one of agency.

Hall (2001, p. 92) highlights the value of archives in their ability to 'interrogate those moments of transition.' For Sandra, the assault at age 14 was a profound rupture, freezing her in time. Her disclosure to me as she neared death allowed my life to begin anew. This moment of transition became the pivot for artswork in this practice research in relation to my kinship care family. Through this revelation, I was later able to confront the realities of my abusive relationship, my struggles with alcoholism and addiction, and the broader contours of my *undrawn* identity.

My arts practice in Chapter 3 sought to fill the void left by unprocessed family grief. I attempted to do this through embodied and existential reimagining in my creative endeavours. By inhabiting the legacies of my deceased family members' unspoken pain, I create works that queerly articulate inheritances through inquiry, horror and the monotony of repetition. This captures unresolved grief where questions remain unanswered and memories haunt.

After the first public reading of my family story, *The Last Five Days of Sandra* – from which *Peter x 30* emerged – at the Deptford X Arts Festival in 2021, an audience member described the work as a 'mundane drama'. This comment was satisfying, as it suggested I had captured the 'every day'-ness of the awful thing that had happened. The plainness reflects the lived reality of being born into and raised within a family unable to face the internal tragedy that occurred. What might appear extraordinary or horrific to others was, for me, simply routine. Perhaps offering some explanation to this and the secrecy that underpinned this, Kuhn (1995) writes:

> ‘Sometimes family secrets are so deeply buried that they elude the conscious awareness even of those most deeply involved... Characters and happenings that slot neatly into the flow of the family narrative are ruthlessly edited out.’ (Kuhn, 1995, p. 2)

Like Poulos (2009, p. xviii), I witnessed the profound impact of family secrets, addictions and silences. While Poulos’s revelation arose in an unremarkable moment, my discovery came at an extraordinary and heightened point: my mother’s deathbed. This moment, following decades of silence, became the foundation for my creative practice and its research.

The autoethnographic element of my work lies in its ability to realign distorted perceptions and navigate a continuous process of becoming. The mis-remembering in ‘Nan Kids’ and the repetition of ‘Peter x 30’ analysed in Chapter 3 investigates this process. Poulos (2009, p. 13) describes repetition of faulty memories as an act of self-compassion, echoing Deleuze’s (1994 [1968], pp. 7–8) assertion that forgetting is essential:

> ‘And so we find ourselves tacking back and forth between these two vital energies—the memory that holds us in a coherent life narrative and the forgetting that allows us to go on in the face of pain and loss and trauma.’ (Poulos, 2009, p. 13)

Like McNay (2009), I am aware that none of my relatives would have wanted these stories to resurface while they were alive. McNay questions whether it is ethical ‘to tell

the secret he and my mother kept for their entire lives' (2009, p. 1184). For me, there is no doubt. I have seen the destructive weight of family secrets – their crushing toll on my mother, cutting short her life and preventing any possibility of peace. This practice research seeks to finally bring these truths to light and to offer overdue redress, not only for Sandra but also for myself.

Overcoming SHAMES of being queer and gay

Berry (2016, p. 219) reflects on his 'struggle with the academic call to be queer.' Similarly, as I delve into greater depth on in Chapter 4, I grapple with being defined by or conforming to expectations of gay men, experiencing a sense of *unbelonging.* My queerness was rooted via name-calling in streets and playgrounds and *outsidering* led to me being labelled by others. In defining his gay – but not queer – 'spinning reflexivity,' Berry (2016, pp. 222–223) identifies five selves: historical, processing, breaching, contested, unapologetic and hopeful. Borrowing Berry's framework, I situate myself as intersectional, queer, but not gay, while also distinctly removed from other queer identities.

My queerness emerges from specific cultural, spatial and temporal intersections. As a people pleaser still in relatively early addiction recovery I have much work to do yet on the 'unapologetic' self, yearning for the 'sense of assuredness' (Berry, 2016, p. 223) that I can only imagine this brings. Yet, perhaps to exist truly outside the mainstream, as queer people have to, is to live perpetually as the outsider, a theme I return to in more depth in Chapter 4.

The formation of my sexuality during adolescence was shaped by the moralistic social, political and cultural attitudes of the 1980s, dominated by public hysteria surrounding the AIDS crisis. Adams (in Holman Jones, Adams and Ellis, 2016, p. 21) writes about finding a voice to confront 'homophobic experiences in the classroom' through autoethnographic writing. Adams (2012, p. 19) outlines the importance of self-reflection in creative practices seeing autoethnography as the means of 'breaking silences tied to content' related to the repression of LGBTQ+ people and communities.

Maus (2016, p. 345) identifies characteristics such as 'avoidance, numbing, and dissociation' during adolescence, mirrored in creative expressions like the music of the Pet Shop Boys. Similarly, my music-making during the 1980s and 1990s provided an outlet for 'every day trauma' (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 19), archiving moments of *'danger'* as they occurred (Hall, 2001, p. 92, italicisation in original).

Through this practice research, it was through aiming to situate my queerness via creative expression where I faced failure. As detailed in Chapter 4, the procrastination and avoidance that surrounded my revisiting teenage electro pop songs resulted in a moment where I had to address the pain I felt through self-analysis rather than creative practice. This was a rock bottom, but, as mentioned in the Introduction and Context section earlier, it was by reaching this point that a breakthrough was about to occur.

The SELFS of addiction and recovery

So by Chapter 5, I find connection through creativity with others in addiction recovery and in doing so, begin to develop a collaborative ethos in my creative practice going

forward. Yet, confessing to being an alcoholic and an addict outside the safety of recovery spaces exposes me to potential judgement in the wider world.

Allen-Collinson (2016, p. 284) raises concerns about the exposing nature of self-disclosure, suggesting it can make an already vulnerable individual even more so. However, avoiding such admissions may perpetuate the shame it seeks to conceal. As an artist, I aim to confront shame and secrets. In this sense, my work is both confronting and intentionally uncomforting.

My previous sense of disconnection from others stemmed from circumstantial factors tied to loss as a kinship care-experienced child and the pain of being a gay teenager. Growing up, I had no understanding of my father's absence – a silence that was both confusing and isolating. At school, I lived in fear. Regularly bullied and harassed during breaks, I hid pain and shame from my grandparent carers.

This dynamic chimes with Goodall's (as cited in Poulos, 2009, p. xiii) view of alcoholism and strained relationships as 'alternative forms of expression', rooted in the long-term impact of 'family secrets and conspiracies of silence'. Poulos describes how opening a photo album in front of his father acted as a Pandora's Box exposing long-buried family truths. Similarly, my journey through kinship care involved unearthing painful hidden narratives that shaped my identity and relationships.

Adams (Holman Jones, Adams and Ellis, 2016, p. 21) reflects on his career in academia as a deliberate act to combat homophobia because it 'mattered more'. In my case, numbing my feelings with addictive substances, coupled with the

dissociation caused by societal rejection during adolescence diminished my capacity for connection.

Now in recovery for a number of years, I am gradually cultivating self-compassion – a skill I repeatedly strive to attain while still being *undrawn*. Despite having creative outlets, I remain regularly inhibited by mental health challenges, including insomnia, avoidance behaviours and a fragile sense of self.

At nearly 50, I confronted the reality of being an alcoholic and an addict living with lifelong mental health issues. While this realization was an immense relief, my earlier years were defined by diversionary behaviours – consuming alcohol, marijuana and legal highs. These addictions alienated me from both mainstream and LGBTQ+ communities. Hari (2015) emphasizes that 'addiction is the opposite of connection,' a statement that many with addiction issues identify with and a phrase on which I will build further in Chapter 5.

From this autoethnographic practice research and AA's 12-Step program I have been able to acknowledge that many of my subjective thoughts are rooted in paranoia and anxiety. This was long my reality. During acute active addiction I sometimes had blackouts.[7] As Denzin (2018, p. 34) observes, autoethnography allows for the creation of 'new ways of performing and experiencing the past'. Navigating these fractured and often embarrassing moments, as I do in *Alky Whole Moon Lick* in Chapter 5, helped to make sense, face the consequences and ultimately forgive myself and make amends.

[7] Blackout is when memory is entirely missing from period of addiction abuse and while the addict is conscious and acting out, but has no later recall of what was said or done during this period.

I must here acknowledge the relentless nature of my creative drive. Overwork has become one of my latest addictions along with sugar, replacing substances with an all-consuming focus on being an artist. The difference now is that, through AA's 12-Step program and the supportive networks I have built in this new phase of my life, I am more attuned to these tendencies. I maintain my wellbeing through daily physical, spiritual and mental health practices, mitigating burnout, anxiety and depression. These rituals are essential in helping me navigate the complex interplay between recovery, creativity and self-discovery.

Conclusion

For individuals who have experienced grief, sharing their stories can be a critical means of avoiding the terror's prolonged dominance and distortion over time. Left unaddressed, this danger risks turning into an 'unreality' for the survivor, perpetuating what Felman and Laub (2013, pp. 78-79) describe as the 'tyranny' of trauma. This is a motivation for usage of autoethnography in my situation and arts practice. It perhaps also explains my seeming compulsion to create 'confessional' tales from 'impressionistic' stories (Van Maanen (2011 [1988]).

For me, artistic expression has been successful in mitigating overwhelming painful memories. While counselling and the collective wisdom of recovery communities have been invaluable, it is through the act of publicly engaging with what was hidden – through 'confessional' and 'impressionist' storytelling (Van Maanen (2011 [1988]) –

that I have found relief. The mantra that ‘Secrets keep us sick, but shame dies on exposure’ (see Chapter 2) speaks to my process.

When analysing real-life narratives involving topics such as incest, paedophilia, sexual and physical violence, bullying, mental illness, abusive relationships and active addiction, people may make unqualified judgements. These are often rooted in pre-existing opinions that spark unhelpful emotions, as Denzin (2009 [1984], p. 91) observes. The objective of this practice research is to use autoethnography in artswork as a contained and deliberate delving into what many people might perceive as unnavigable. In this way, autoethnography within this research serves a dual purpose: it is both a critical friend for scrutinising the confessional nature of my artswork and a compassionate way of exposing myself through them.

CHAPTER 3: ARTSWORK ON FAMILY SECRETS

Links to Practice Research Examples

There is a YouTube playlist for the video and audio content. The following links provide access to the relevant content corresponding to the practice examples, presented in the order that they are discussed in this section:

1. p. 86, CHAPTER 3, practice research example 1a - Nanterventions @ Deptford X online launch
2. p. 86, CHAPTER 3, practice research example 1b - Nan Kids trailer
3. p. 90, CHAPTER 3, practice research example 2 - Secrets keep us sick
4. p. 94, CHAPTER 3, practice research example 3 - Peter x 30

When a highlighted blue link appears in the chapter text, it leads directly to a specifically timed point in the video relevant to the discussion.

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Introduction

Since joining Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) in August 2021, I have heard countless stories and philosophies from others also navigating their addiction recovery journeys. Two phrases, shared by fellow recovering addicts, particularly spoke to me. Due to the confidentiality necessary in regards AA's attendees, I am unable to attribute these phrases. Besides, given the millions of people who have entered AA meeting rooms

since its inception in 1935, identifying the original sources behind the two phrases would be impossible.

These lines form the opening couplet of the second artswork examined in this chapter:

> *Secrets keep us sick, and*
> *Shame dies on exposure*

Guided by Deleuze's philosophical reflections on becoming and repetition, this chapter queries the conscious and unconscious motivations underlying my family's long-standing secrecy and the resulting artswork inspired by these dynamics. As both the autoethnographic researcher and the subject of this research, I have endeavoured to tackle this sometimes overwhelming material with as much critical objectivity as possible, acknowledging the inherent challenge of this when scrutinising such sensitive and intimate aspects of my family history.

This chapter is divided into three subsections, the first covering *Nanterventions*, a performance technique arising from the *Nan Kids* artswork. This project, comprising audio stories, music and performance installations, was presented at venues including churchyards, bars, libraries, cafés and galleries as part of festivals such as Deptford X, SPILL and Wandsworth Arts Fringe (2021-2022). The project's title, inspired by a comedy routine by Russell Brand, reclaims the notion of *Nan Kids* to queerly confront the wrongly perceived 'cosiness' of kinship care. *Nan Kids* explored the hidden stories and self-perceptions of individuals including myself who were raised within kinship care arrangements. Drawing on interviews and pairing them with my own music compositions, I created 'sound-word portraits' of adults raised in these family settings.

In live performances, the *Nanterventions* performance technique was rooted in working-class domestic practices such as flower arranging, watching horse racing on TV, darning socks and watercolour painting – hobbies I associated with my grandparent-carers. These activities happened alongside audio narratives of grief and adversity, highlighting the tension between 'getting on with business' and the weight of family secrecy. These (distr)actions, performed in public settings, interrogated the rationales behind my family's silence.

The second subsection evaluates my emotional detachment and anger towards my family's history, focusing on the one-minute sound piece and animation *Secrets keep us sick*. Created in April 2022, this work was a direct response to my first full access to adoption records from 1970 – granted in January 2022 after the Data Protection Act of 2018 gave me the legal right to obtain this information. These documents revealed that my grandmother was determined to swiftly finalise my adoption while withholding critical details about my paternity, a suppression likely tied to her awareness that my father was also her schizophrenic younger brother. While her actions may have been motivated by complex circumstances, this concealment also denied me access to my own history, despite my persistent inquiries. The artswork *Secrets keep us sick*, initially shared on Instagram and later made available on YouTube, reflects my reaction to these revelations at the age of 51.

The final subsection's practice research example is *Peter x 30*, a two-hour durational solo performance based on my mother's disclosure of my father's identity as she lay dying. Performed in October 2022 as part of the *Emergency 22* festival via live Zoom broadcast, the piece involved the repeated retelling of a four-minute narrative

approximately 30 times. Throughout the performance, a slow-motion image of myself narrating the same story played on a loop was projected on me while I recited the story, creating a layered interplay between the live and recorded versions. This repetitive structure, influenced by Deleuze's philosophy, sought to reduce the tension of the narrative through reiteration, emphasising both the weight of the unspoken and the liberatory potential of confronting this.

By dissecting these works through the lens of autoethnography and critical theory, this chapter interrogates the intersections of grief, secrecy and creative expression, offering insights into the broader implications of revealing hidden histories.

Practice Research Example: Nanterventions / Nan Kids

This analysis begins with the *Nanterventions* performance technique, a method which aimed to convey the cognitive dissonance I experienced of being raised in a kinship care family by grandparents. This aspect of the practice focuses on the external positioning of the kinship carers – my maternal grandparents, Sheila and Neil Clowes - by contrasting storytelling with domestic performance settings situated in public spaces.

The Prelude on Positionality section earlier contextualised the development of *Nanterventions* as a response to the often-hidden nature of kinship care within broader communities and the limited understanding of how such familial arrangements arise. This lack of awareness was apparent when delivering the *Nan Kids* project. Several audience members commented on how 'cute' or 'sweet' they imagined it would be to

grow up with grandparents, reflecting idealised views of family structures. For those of us raised in kinship care, the relationship with our grandparents becomes fundamentally altered as they assume the role of primary caregivers. Living in close proximity to a birth parent, in my case, my mother Sandra who became my sister through the formal adoption route that was taken with me, this cultivated a sense of hiddenness, contributing to feelings of difference and, consequently, shame.

Ahmed (2014, p. 113) provides a critical lens to understand how shame is harboured in secrecy:

> ‘This double play of concealment and exposure is crucial to the work of shame. The word ‘shame’ comes from the Indo-European verb for ‘to cover’, which associates shame with other words such as ‘hide’, ‘custody’, ‘hut’ and ‘house’ (Schneider 1987: 227). Shame certainly involves an impulse to ‘take cover’ and ‘to cover oneself’.’

Ahmed's tracing of the etymology of shame highlights its roots in the concepts of protection and place, framing shame as tied to home and family. The secrecy embedded within my upbringing nurtured an internalised self-perception that somehow something was ‘wrong’ with me. As Ahmed observes, shame redirects negative feelings inwardly: ‘In experiences of shame, the ‘bad feeling’ is attributed to oneself, rather than to an object or other’ (Ahmed, 2014, p. 104).

An illustrative video example of how *Nanterventions* demonstrated the impact of secrecy was prepared and shown at the national TaPRA conference at University of Essex in September 2022. This excerpt re-enacted a performance delivered at several

arts festivals featuring a spoken word poem recounting a childhood afternoon. The narrative centres on the precise moment I realised that my sister by adoption was, in fact, my mother by birth. The poem is soundtracked by a 1970s Grand National horse race television commentary, and I am reading the poem from an original copy of *The Sun* newspaper from the early 1980s. This evokes memories of my grandfather's favourite hobby while simultaneously acknowledging the societal shaming I was enduring at the time about my being gay, as explained earlier in the Prelude on Positionality.

The poem I recite reflects on the vivid temporality of this realisation, which I have a problem situating in time. Originally written with the line ‘I might have been nine, I might have been eleven,’ I later amended this to ‘I might have been five, I might have been seven,’ after realising the major inconsistency of my recollection. This unreliable memory highlights the queer temporalities described by Freeman (2010), who argues that mainstream society enforces rigid rhythms of time that queer memory disrupts. Halberstam (2011, p. 54) further contextualises these temporal irregularities, describing queer memory as fragmentary and operating ‘at the very edge’. I suggest my poem’s historical error reflects a stifled sense of time engendered through long term repression, anxiety and confusion.

Halberstam’s (2011) assertion that ‘forgetfulness and seeming foolishness’ can lead to ‘a new form of knowing’ (p. 54). My outsider perspective has prompted insights that others may not have. During interviews for both my US-based research into kinship care families (clowes, 2012) and the 2021-2022 *Nan Kids* project, several other adults I spoke to who were also raised in kinship care remarked that they had not previously thought about the impact of being raised by grandparents until our conversations. The

complexity of what Freeman (2010, p. 10) describes as a productive asset of trauma offers the potential to 'discombobulate the knower into new epistemological possibilities.'

Through *Nanterventions*, I sought to disrupt the silence imposed by societal norms around family. Unlike Khubchandani's (2017) celebration of queerness embodied in the dance of their aunties, my grandmother was invested in maintaining mainstream appearances, actively avoiding any suggestion of deviation from social norms.

In *Nan Kids*, the *Nanterventions* technique was utilised by juxtaposing outwardly mundane actions – flower arranging, darning socks, painting watercolours – with audio recordings of real-life kinship care stories. The actions symbolised my grandmother's attempts to present a façade of normality. In contrast, the stories being played on a vintage radio revealed a darker reality behind a social gloss.

Unlike Khubchandani's celebratory performances, my actions in *Nan Kids* expose a dynamic of detachment and deception. By foregrounding working-class domestic crafts as symbols of normality, I illustrate the obfuscation central to my grandmother's efforts to conceal the truth of my father's identity. These fragmented recollections and performances, while steeped in grief, form the foundations of this aspect of my artistic practice. Without loss, shame and secrecy, this creative work would not exist.

Grief, loss and pain were constant undercurrents in my upbringing, shaping my perception of self and others. Ahmed (2014) asserts that heteronormativity hides in repetition while queerness is marked by its difference. Through *Nanterventions*, I aimed to upend hidden mechanisms of societal expectations by giving voice to untold

stories of kinship care. Ahmed (2014, p. 12) notes that lifting the lid on hidden histories shows ‘how we become invested in social norms’, a process central to *Nan Kids*.

Practice Research Example: Secrets keep us sick

This subsection scrutinises the second piece of artistic practice in this chapter: the *Secrets keep us sick* sound piece and animation centring on an alginate sculpture of my right hand with the middle two fingers twisted backwards. This sculptural object, titled *The Inbred’s Hand* (see image on next page) serves as a visceral representation of the complex and painful themes addressed in this artswork.

The Inbred’s Hand alignate sculpture

In the animation, the hand emerges from decaying flowers, accompanied by the sound of scraping stones recorded with delay effects, evoking the image of a rising from the grave. The heavy stone-like hand drags across the ground as I spit out the words of the poem with palpable contempt, reflecting the anger I initially felt at finally comprehending that my mother had likely been coerced by my grandmother into a silence that forbade her from revealing the identity of my father.

The thematic underpinnings of *Secrets keep us sick* are informed by the tragic circumstances that ruined my mother's life. As noted earlier, she lived with an aggressive form of multiple sclerosis, the onset of which may have been linked to the sexual assault that ruined her adolescence (Maté and Maté, 2022, pp. 79-82). This said, ascribing causality to one specific and awful incident in this context remains speculative, highlighting the limits of such theorisation. In evoking the uncertainty surrounding unanswered questions, the audio of *Secrets keep us sick* features a single wavering synthesiser note manipulated with a pitch-bend wheel signifying ambiguity and a lack of resolution.

Secrets keep us sick was an animated expression of raw emotions as they were happening. This artswork tested the practical application of techniques aimed at circumventing the direct experience of *affectio* (Hickey-Moody, 2013), offering a way to engage with emotionally charged material without being overwhelmed. At its core, *Secrets keep us sick* is a countersentimental response to the revelations uncovered in my adoption papers. I was granted access to these documents the month before making this piece. Social services had redacted the papers nearly twenty years before in my first request for their access. In light of the information contained in the documents, I was furious with my grandmother for what was now quite clearly deliberate concealment of my paternity. My response is not the 'cute' or 'sweet' picture of a grandson-grandmother relationship that people unfamiliar with kinship care might have expected.

Upon receiving the complete set of adoption documents (having only been given a redacted version from social services when I first requested them in my 30s), I was overwhelmed with rage, now certain in the knowledge that my grandmother had been

deliberately duplicitous in her handling of my adoption. While her actions were in part motivated by what she considered good intentions, I interpreted them as a deliberate effort to obscure painful truths under the guise of propriety.

In *Secrets keep us sick,* I frame my queer reaction and reject the mainstream societal requirement to sanitise and suppress uncomfortable realities. In analysing this response, I draw from Berlant's concept of 'countersentimentality,' which Doyle (2013, p. 82) describes as works 'lacerated by ambivalence' resisting mainstream ideas of what narratives should be:

> 'Countersentimental works explore the possibilities of feeling differently. They manifest a commitment to the transformative effects of emotion but also resist the universalising imperative of sentimental traditions that use emotion to negate difference' (Doyle, 2013, p. 82).

Through the cathartic and countersentimental framework of *Secrets keep us sick*, I sought to exorcise the ghosts of my parental origins while undermining the idealised image of a doting grandmother. While my grandmother may have believed her actions were necessary and benevolent, I argue that they were not selfless, and worse, resulted in negative consequences for those around her.

In the way that Edelman (2004) critiques the societal sanctimoniousness that surrounds the reverance afforded the 'innocent Child,' my critique of my grandmother similarly obfuscates dominant narratives of heteronormative family values. Harpin and Nicholson (2017) highlight the societal expectation to 'feel the right way' as a

prerequisite for political and social participation, but I propose that queer modes of feeling – such as those expressed in *Secrets keep us sick* – resist this imperative.

To this end, Ahmed (2014) captures the way shame operates within familial structures to reinforce conformity:

> ‘Shame secures the form of the family by assigning to those who have failed its form the origin of bad feeling (‘You have brought shame on the family’). Indeed, some identities become stigmatised or shaming within the social order, so that the subject in assuming such identities becomes committed to a life that is read by others as shameful’ (Ahmed, 2014, p. 107).

The phrase ‘Secrets keep us sick, and shame dies on exposure’ highlights the necessity of autoethnography in addressing lived grief within my artistic practice. By employing countersentimentality, I am able to maintain a degree of detachment enabling me to navigate personal material with clarity and purpose. For an artist negotiating raw and charged subject matter, countersentimentality offers a means of transforming this into nuanced creative expression.

As Samuel (2022) observes, the suppression of emotions often leads to dysfunction, a dynamic I know first-hand in my family. Verrier (2012) writes of the adoptee’s mourning for the loss of a birth parent. I fundamentally understand this from the adolescent and adult longing I had in the 42 year search for the birthfather I was never meant to know, and it is to the resolution of finding out who my birthfather was to which we will next turn for the final piece of practice research in this chapter.

Practice Research Example: Peter x 30

This subsection reflects on the final piece of practice research in this chapter, *Peter x 30*, in which the reveal of my father's identity and its aftermath is deconstructed through a countersentimental durational performance.

Adoption specialist Nancy Verrier (2012) has written extensively about adoptees mourning the loss of their birth mother, but what happens when the search for an *undrawn* self is entwined with a father whose identity was deliberately obscured? Such concealment, especially in cases involving rape or incest, as Goldberg et al. (2020, p. 193) note, is often justified by a belief that secrecy protects both the child and the family from shame. Although, as these authors state, secrecy ultimately breeds shame, undermines trust and inflicts harm upon the child.

The discovery of my father's identity occurred in June 2013, during the final days of my mother Sandra's life. Amidst the practicalities of my managing her end-of-life care, dealing with her friends and our family at her deathbed, and liaising with health professionals, my mother revealed that my estranged, deceased and schizophrenic uncle Peter was my biological father. In the face of Sandra's imminent passing, there was little space to process or discuss this revelation further.

Six years later during a life-writing course at the Arvon Foundation and soon after I stopped drinking I wrote a short story titled *Peter*. This story is the basis of *Peter x 30*, a durational live Zoom performance that took place in October 2022 at Manchester's Contact Theatre as part of the Emergency 22 festival. The work reflects the psychological toll of repeating this story in my mind – a ceaseless cycle of recall that

is mirrored by the repetition in the performance. The performance unfolded over two hours, during which I repeated the four-minute story approximately 30 times.

Deleuze's reflections (1994 [1968], p. 19) on the dual power of repetition reverberate with this artswork: 'If repetition makes us ill, it also heals us; if it enchains and destroys us, it also frees us.' In *Peter x 30*, repetition functions as both a form of exorcism and a mechanism for healing, subverting the familial secrecy that perpetuated harm across generations. Through this performance, I endeavoured to expose and confront the taboo dynamics of this history, transforming its oppressive weight into a deliberate monotony. By taking this queer and countersentimental outlook, I confront the uncomfortable.

In *Peter x 30*, I employ grinding repetition, whispering the same story over and again in a vacant tone, embodying detachment as I recount my mother's dying words and name my father alongside his act of violence.

The absence of a live, visible audience was a deliberate choice for this performance. *Peter x 30* was broadcast via Zoom to a theatre room I had never visited. I have no knowledge of whether anyone attended, remained in the room, or had any reaction. My whispered words, flattened and distorted by Zoom's transmission and connectivity, further evoked a sense of alienation, disconnection and ambiguity. As Harpin and Nicholson (2017, p. 1) observe, audience attention affects the dynamics of live performance. Yet here the spectator and performer are both absent, reflecting the detachment from the recalling of the heinous event being repeatedly described.

Why do this? Why broadcast, bored, casting this terrible and exposing story outwards into a meeting room I've never visited to strangers I'll likely never meet? Artist Abbas Zahedi may hold a key to this unconscious reasoning that 'the opportunity to be witnessed in your grief, or to witness grief, serves an important social and emotional need that we have. Allowing yourself to be vulnerable, and not shunned, creates a sense of acceptance' (Khong, 2022).

Conclusion: If looking for clowes

I propose that personal archives, combined with fragmented memories, provide rich terrain for a grief-informed autoethnographic artist. The family loss, abandonment, and fragmented understanding that underpinned my creative imaginings are where I try to make 'clues mean something' (Gale and Featherstone, 2011, p.9).

Nelson (2013, p. 11) distinguishes 'clew' from 'clue,' emphasizing the 'thread' of the researcher's interconnected 'doing-thinking.' Interestingly, the Staffordshire pronunciation of my surname is 'Clues' or 'Clews,' as I heard it throughout childhood, offering an ironic twist to my family history. The long-concealed family secret that was finally revealed to me later in life had always been present. It was hidden in plain sight.

The creative interrogation of my upbringing presents both hurdles and opportunities, particularly because it is steeped in ambiguity and incomplete knowledge. Neither my birthmother Sandra, my birthfather Peter, nor my grandparents Sheila and Neil are alive. None are able to share their voices or offer perspectives. My storytelling is then necessarily constructed from assumptions, fragmented memories and emotionally

charged conversations at my mother's deathbed during a period of heightened external stress.

The awful event at the heart of this narrative – the sexual assault that led to my conception – did not happen to me, I am the product of it. Thus, my perspective lacks the lived immediacy that Harpin (2017, p. 19) suggests is essential for character voice. This then raises a question about the ethics of narrating such a story. What gives me the authority to recount words spoken by my mother on her deathbed? Is it justifiable to publicly present a narrative involving an uncle's sexual assault of his underage niece as an artswork?

The ethics of revealing shameful family secrets was discussed by McNay (2009) and this was covered in Chapter 2. At the time of making this artswork, all central figures in my family of origin were already long deceased. Were they still alive, I do not know whether I would feel justified in creating and performing this artswork. Nevertheless, my ignorance of my origins until after their passing, compounded by my mother's ability to reveal it only on her deathbed, informs my decision to address it now. *Peter x 30* seeks to communicate the burden Sandra carried for over four decades – her silence, the repression and the pain it caused.

Denied the truth of my paternity for 42 years, I defend my right to recount this story today. Through queer countersentimental storytelling, I aim to address the long-standing shame-induced concealment. By repeating this story in my practice, I seek to unearth generations of repressed familial grief and offer a space for its collective acknowledgment. As touched upon in the Introduction and Context section, while my late aunt urged me to remain silent about my birth father's identity, I reject this stance.

By performing Sandra's deathbed revelation in unfiltered detail – in churchyards, pub gardens, art galleries, and to all who will listen – I honour the complexity and unimaginable circumstances through which she lived.

Though I can no longer offer Sandra amends for the misplaced frustration I felt toward her during her life for not telling me who my father was, my creative practice allows me to process this and articulate her story. Knowing what I do now, I better understand the unconscionable pain she was forced to carry. Through creative practice, I make a path toward healing myself and telling the history she had to repress.

In the next chapter, I will move forward to the 1980s – a time when I began writing music as an outlet for my creativity. These were my teenage years, a period when my sexuality became apparent to my peers and coincided with the onset of AIDS, which had significant consequences for me and many other young gay men of the time.

CHAPTER 4: AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF GAY SHAMES

Link to Practice Research Example

The following link provides access to audio content corresponding to the practice example and is available in the YouTube playlist:

p. 103, CHAPTER 4, practice research example 1a - original demo of "A Love Divine"

Introduction

In early 2022, I began my practice research with the aim of recording electronic pop compositions I created in the late 1980s. Despite access to professional facilities at London College of Music, I avoided engaging with this project, eventually recognising a reluctance to revisit this material.

While I have successfully written new compositions, delivered performances, and created installations during my PhD, this archival music exploration remained elusive. My failure to complete the project intrigued me, prompting a closer inspection of its emotional significance. This chapter considers how societal shaming and *outsidering* – a state of being defined and excluded by others based on my homosexuality – have influenced this avoidance and my broader sense of *unbelonging*.

I contemplate here how a persistent irritability, stemming from unmet needs and unresolved grief, has shaped my responses to assumptions about my music preferences. By querying this irritability, I aim to uncover the long-term impacts of societal shame.

My aspiration to produce and perform songs from my teenage years which were originally created under the moniker of *Damian's Deviants* has been marked by inconsistent and self-sabotaging efforts. These songs, now symbolic of lost time and missed opportunities, embody the tension between youthful intentions and the realities of ageing.

This chapter is an autoethnographic reflection on failure – not as a celebrated queer failure (Halberstam, 2011) but as a poignant confrontation with self-perceived inadequacy. Drawing on concepts from Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) 12-Step program and Deleuzian becoming, I reframe irritation as resentment, offering insights into the emotional toll of societal shaming and isolation.

Two mentors warned me that some projects are best left in the past, advice that proved true as I unsuccessfully grappled with the unfulfilled potential of these songs. Yet, this creative failure has spurred a critical journey of self-analysis, revealing the effects of what I call *unbelonging* and my disconnect between mainstream and gay male communities.

This chapter also critiques the expectation that minoritised individuals frame their work within identity-focused activism. Instead, I argue for the emancipation of individual artistic practice, rejecting homogenised narratives and focusing on aesthetic concerns.

Ultimately, my unrepeatable, unfinished songs have become a pathway to reconcile unpalatable truths and embrace a critical resolution in the present.

The art of gay failure

> ‘Some successful artists are deeply insecure, self-sabotaging, struggling with addiction, or facing other obstacles to making and sharing their work. An unhealthy self-image or a hardship in life can fuel great art, creating a deep well of insight and emotion for an artist to draw from. They can also get in the way of the artist being able to make many things over a long period of time.’ (Rubin, 2023, pp. 74-75)

Rock music producer Rick Rubin encapsulates here the trials many artists face, noting that self-sabotage, addiction or other obstacles can both fuel creativity and hinder long-term artistic output. Despite my efforts to re-record demo songs from over 30 years ago, the process of doing this invoked dissatisfaction and disappointment, prompting me to question why this occurred.

Hall (2001, p. 89, italicisation in original) describes archives as having a *‘moment of danger,’* which speaks to me of my teenage music creations. This artswork – pop, experimental and cabaret songs made before my descent into addiction in my twenties – represent a fraught period of hope and loss. My return to creative practice in my fifties reflects what Sloan (2014, p. 226) identifies as an attempt to ‘re-write’ my life narrative. These decades-old songs serve as symbols of a lingering, unpalatable past that I now seek to reconcile.

My compositions originated in my grandparents' home, improvising melodies on an upright piano and later expanding to electronic instruments, including a polyphonic Elka synthesiser and a Boss Dr Rhythm drum machine. This led to the inception of *Damian's Deviants*, a solo bedroom-based music project for which I wrote and recorded extensively but shared sparingly. These songs, created during the societal persecution of gay men during the AIDS crisis, unknowingly foretold the upcoming roadblocks I would face of co-dependency, unsafe behaviours and substance reliance.

The lyrics of my first synth-based song from 1987, *A Love Divine*, capture the defiance and resignation of the time:

> 'Shoot me with your AIDS Gun,
> Pierce me and deflate me.'

Escaping to London at 18 for university offered hope but my creative pursuits were overshadowed by escalating self-medication. Despite achieving a 2:1 degree and some artistic success, my music-writing ceased by the mid-1990s as addiction took hold. I felt alienated at home, at school and even in gay bars. My early music had been prophesy: this feeling of disconnection contributed to a template of self-destruction that was now being played out in real life and real time.

Reflecting on this process recently, I realised my perceived failures – feeling excluded among gay men, losing years to addiction, and creating songs that remained unheard – were rooted in unresolved suppression and avoidance. For the remainder of this chapter I will ask if memory and emotion, triggered by personal archives, can

contextualise difficult lived experiences. The following sections detail the derailment of creativity during my twenties, shaped by addiction and exclusion, and being on the receiving end of relentless teenage homophobic bullying during the AIDS crisis. During these times, music provided vital catharsis and comfort.

Creative practice remains essential to my healing. Lo (2018, p. 33) highlights the dual-edged nature of heightened sensitivity and creativity, which I identify with, demonstrating the importance of a recovery-engaged artistic practice in overcoming addiction. I conclude by surveying how the feeling of irritation, framed by Ngai's perspective (2005, pp. 174-203), as a potential effect of long-term oppression.

By shifting my research lens from a 'gay' identity to a broader artistic focus, I reject reductive categorisations and embrace a new, individualised creative identity. This duality – navigating *unbelonging* and *outsidering* while honing resilience – defines my current practice and informs my ability to rise above *outsidering* of the past.

The 1990s. Where it all went right?

David Halperin highlights the 'vehement cult of gay ordinariness' (2012, p. 443), where banality becomes a tool for mainstreaming. But why shouldn't gay men be ordinary? Are we not allowed respite from societal expectations? Building on Todd's (2018) insights into the pressures on gay male performativity, I propose that societal notions of sexuality create unattainable expectations, portraying gay men as extraordinary and excessive – a caricature that is often unhealthy and destructive.

Todd (2018) advocates for middle-aged gay men in recovery, particularly white Generation X males who face pressures to embody stereotypical traits: sharp dressers, gym-fit, Madonna fans with cutting humour. These expectations, as I argue, persist today, making it unsurprising that so many ultimately pursue sobriety. Research shows gay men in the UK disproportionately face mental health challenges, with higher rates of alcohol misuse (37% vs. 24%) and drug use (25% vs. 10.5%) compared to heterosexual counterparts (Pitman et al., 2019). These disparities are attributed to discrimination, stigma and minority stress (Jackson et al., 2019), despite improved societal acceptance.

For white gay British males of my generation, the 1990s represented a paradox. On the surface, societal attitudes were shifting: the age of consent dropped to 18 in 1994, gay pubs shed their frosted windows and queer visibility flourished with Britpop's fey influences and New Labour's rise. Yet, the scars of the AIDS crisis lingered. The 1980s 'gay plague' rhetoric still hurt and for many of us substance misuse became a faulty coping mechanism. Drugs and alcohol, once celebratory, masked unresolved pain.

The gay club scenes of the 1990s reinforced stereotypes of gay musical preferences, dominated by diva anthems from Whitney Houston and Cher (Dyer, 1979; Amico, 2001; Butler, 2003; Aronoff and Gilboa, 2015). I did not want to be in these spaces. Much like Halperin's critique of '*those* gay men' (2012, p. 41, italicisation in original), I felt alienated, and as a consequence, I would drink more and consume drugs due to my perception of my not fitting in. Instead, I found solace in the queer scene who's outsider status was confirmed by Mark Simpson's 1996 'Anti-gay' collection of essays. We rejected mainstream gay culture's commodification as noted by Chris Morris in The New Statesman in 1999. In these alternative spaces, musical obscurities became

markers of distinction. As I later reflected (clowes, 2019), this was where I finally felt belonging – not through musical activism but aesthetics, to draw from two of Zagorski-Thomas' practical musicology categories (2022), as I prioritised musical taste over identity politics.

The 'Anti-gay' scene was a haven for misfits like me, enamoured with avant-garde and electronic pop. It celebrated *unbelonging*, rejecting mainstream gay tropes like Eurovision and diva anthems. Yet, assumptions about my musical preferences – 'You don't like Eurovision? You're not much of a gay, are you?' – were stinging. These comments diminished my passion and reinforced *outsidering*. The relief I found in 'Anti-gay' clubs allowed me to redefine belonging on my terms, circumventing the unconscious judgments of others.

The roots of irritation here though trace back further to my 1980s adolescence in a rural working-class Midlands village. Here, amidst public hysteria over AIDS – 'the big disease with a little name' (Prince, 1987) – and the secrecy surrounding my family, I grappled with being visibly gay. Music, particularly alternative electronic pop, became my escape and catharsis. It was here that my artistic practice began, serving as a self-compassionate response to painful lived experiences.

The 1980s. Where it all went wrong

Growing up in a white working-class village in Staffordshire during the 1980s, my focus was survival. What I faced at home and school was beyond my control and it was shaped by the societal climate induced by the mainstream response to the AIDS crisis.

Daily intimidation, isolation, and bullying were the norm, and this was negatively compounded by the impacts of my complex family history. These events, described in the Prelude on Positionality, were set against a backdrop of relentless anti-gay rhetoric from religious leaders, media and authorities (Todd, 2018, pp. 35-42), creating a mentally destructive environment. Section 28 legislation further stifled any hope of support, making me feel isolated and vulnerable in my rural setting, far removed from any LGBTQ+ community.

Social acceptance, critical to mental health development, was absent in my life. At school, I was ridiculed; at home, my attempts to conceal my sexuality failed, resulting in punishment. Internalised homophobia compounded this alienation, exemplified by my own shameful mockery of a Lesbian and Gay Switchboard volunteer when I called them for a joke when I was eleven years old. Lacking connection or guidance, my only solace was music.

Music provided an escape and a way of coping. My early influences included David Bowie, Tamla Motown and Marc Bolan, which later expanded to include the darker, experimental sounds of Soft Cell, The Associates, and Psychic TV. These musical outsiders, mixed with Beethoven, Burt Bacharach, and Joni Mitchell, formed a sonic refuge. Writing songs became my outlet, documenting the pain of my teenage years amidst the AIDS crisis, homophobia and an unequal age of consent.

My songs like *A Love Divine* captured the provocations of the time with its attention seeking couplet:

> ‘Shoot me with your AIDS Gun,

Pierce me and deflate me.'

My compositions rejected the idea of unifying gay anthems. They were DIY, dissonant, and deliberately individualistic, aligning more with outsider aesthetics than activist agendas. My early practice fits more with Cameron Dodds' 'Weirding-as-process' (2021, p. 74), as this prioritises experimentation and individuation over conformity. His approach, rooted in outsider perspectives and delivery, resonates with my past and current practice, which draws on Deleuzian concepts, spirituality, magic, coincidences, and DIY aesthetics. Weirding transcends distinctions between heteronormative and queer frameworks, rendering personal identity irrelevant. It offers a cultural lens rather than a sexuality-centred one, challenging the assumption that LGBTQ+ artists must prioritise sexuality in their work – a focus that has minimal overlap with my own praxis. By distancing myself from prescriptive gay male activist tastes, I embraced a cultural orientation that transcended sexuality.

This focus on individuality, however, did not erase the long-term effects of repression. The external world – with its homophobia and societal shaming – embedded a sense of negative self-belief that taught me to suppress emotions. Beyond familial deceptions (detailed in Chapter 3), this *outsidering* engendered a lingering irritability, which Ngai (2005) describes as an 'ugly' feeling masking resentment, which shall be the focus of the next subsection.

The 'Aboutness' of Feelings and the 'Wrongness' of Irritation

Philip Fisher contrasts emotions like envy and despair with more worthy ones such as grief (2002, p. 200). In light of this classification, I focus here on the seemingly petty emotion of irritation, scrutinising how this persistent sensation reveals grief tied to *unbelonging* and *outsidering*, as discussed earlier.

Heather Love (2007, p. 10) critiques the assimilation of LGBTQ+ identities into mainstream culture, arguing that inclusion often demands severing ties with those deemed unacceptable. While I acknowledge my privilege as a white gay man, my working-class background, recovery journey and inability to integrate into the '"well-heeled"' (Love, 2007, p. 10) LGBTQ+ circles reflect a persistent exclusion. My aesthetic preferences, particularly in music, further reinforced this sense of alienation. Sara Ahmed (2014, p. 7) muses on the 'aboutness' of emotions, showing how they signify social and relational contexts. For me, irritation at assumptions about my musical tastes mirrors this relational tension and reiterates how *outsidering* manifests in everyday interactions.

Music in queer spaces often affirmed my alienation. Assumptions that I would prefer mainstream gay musical tastes felt disheartening and dismissive of my identity as an aesthete. Hickey-Moody (2013, p. 83) describes emotions as 'confused ideas' and my irritation reflects this – a response to my perceptions of *unbelonging* and *outsidering*. Ngai (2005, p. 175) frames irritation as a 'low-intensity negative affect' suggesting it masks more profound emotions like sorrow or resentment. Assumptions about my tastes became daily affirmations of *outsidering* compounding an undercurrent of irascibility.

Ahmed's (2004) concept of affective economies highlights how emotions circulate between bodies and signs, shaping individual and collective identities. Emotions are relational rather than solely internal, mediating the psychic and social realms. Rei Terada (2001, pp. 13-14) builds on this, asserting that emotions arise from others' actions, reflections or even absences. This entanglement, she argues, can lead to defensive emotional deployments. For me, irritation is a residue of grief – a ghost of unresolved sorrow stemming from societal shaming and exclusion.

Ngai (2005, pp. 174-189) looks closely at the evident irritation in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* observing how the protagonist Helga's responses reflect societal oppression. Helga's irritation masks emotions tied to racial and class-based exclusions.

While I cannot fully relate to Helga's experiences, the root of her frustration parallels mine in two ways: assumptions about her identity, and the creative potential stifled by social constraints. Similarly, assumptions about my music preferences and the sadness evoked by my unfulfilled creative ambitions have amplified my sense of loss and frustration.

Irritation, as Ngai (2005, p. 179) notes, often lacks a clear object or occasion, yet it becomes a persistent mood. My irascibility stems from repeated affirmations of my otherness compounded by *outsidering*. Revisiting these painful patterns offers some comfort. Facing the long-term mental health impacts of societal shaming and the failures of my creative projects has been a step towards understanding and healing. As this chapter concludes, I reflect on the insights gained from embracing failure, both in my music and in my self-perceived queerness.

Navigating queer identity beyond cultural monoliths

In this thesis, I have sought to articulate a queer identity that is neither fixed nor reducible to stereotypical signifiers – particularly around taste cultures within gay male scenes of the 1990s. My book chapter *Got Any Gay Music? London's "Anti-Gay" Queer Clubs 1995–2000* (clowes, 2019) explored how so-called 'anti-gay' club spaces emerged precisely in resistance to the homogenisation of queer cultural life. These clubs challenged the cultural assumptions that gay men would — or should — automatically enjoy a repertoire of diva anthems, Eurovision hits, or commercially-coded camp aesthetics. Yet, as I reflect in that chapter, these spaces were no utopia. They often simply inverted hierarchies, privileging obscure musical knowledge or arch taste performances over mainstream belonging.

Nonetheless, what felt radical within those spaces was the refusal of reductive identity politics based on consumption patterns or sonic preferences. As Ahmed reminds us, emotions circulate and stick to certain bodies and objects (2014, p.7). My own irritation at being asked "What do you mean, you don't like Eurovision?" was less about taste, and more about the relational work such assumptions imposed upon me: to perform a legible, market-ready gayness, or risk exclusion.

This tension extends into artistic practice, where, as bell (1990) and others have argued, minoritised artists are frequently expected to foreground their identity as the primary lens of value or explanation. The expectation that gay artists must always 'make gay work' (or Black artists 'Black work'; women artists 'feminine work') risks

reproducing the very essentialisms that queer, feminist, and anti-racist politics might otherwise contest. Heather Love (2007) has written about the pressures towards assimilation in queer life, whereby survival can sometimes entail severing ties with those aspects of one's experience that are considered 'unpalatable' or 'difficult' by the mainstream. This is particularly pertinent within recovery contexts, where stories of trauma or addiction are often encouraged to follow recognisable, redemptive arcs.

My own trajectory has been to resist this double-bind — not by rejecting queerness, but by resisting the expectation that queerness must always equate to disclosure, confession, or marketable coherence. Instead, I position my queerness — like my outsidering — as relational, contingent, and often awkwardly dissonant. The ‘Anti-Gay’ club scene was one such site where these frictions played out publicly through music. But equally, my broader artistic practice rejects being pinned down by identity categories alone.

This is not to deny my queerness, nor my recovery journey, but rather to situate both within a larger refusal of easy cultural legibility. This resonates with Halperin’s (2012) critique of ‘gay ordinariness’ and with Berry's (2016) discomfort with the ‘academic call to be queer.’ For me, to make work about grief, class, shame, or outsidering is to make queer work — but on my terms, not solely on the basis of sexual identity.

As such, I would argue that the significance of the brief-lived ‘Anti-Gay’ scene lay less in its particular musical choices, and more in its commitment to unfixing gay identity from cultural expectation. This has shaped both my personal recovery from addiction and my emergence as an artist willing to risk difficulty, awkwardness, and unbelonging in the service of aesthetic and emotional truth.

Conclusion: Situating the past into the past

Through performative autoethnographic methodology developed during this practice research, I attempted – but ultimately failed – to re-record the demo songs I composed between 1987 and 1991. My heart was not in it. Too much time had passed and I was no longer the person I once imagined myself to be – if I ever had been.

Despite losing most material possessions during nearly 30 years of active addiction, I held onto a case of 20+ four-track recorder demo cassettes. Without the means to play them, these inaccessible recordings of a troubled teenager became a symbol of unfulfilled dreams. Hall (2001, p. 89) describes the archival moment as 'the end of a certain kind of creative innocence and the beginning of a new stage of self-consciousness.' For me, these tapes embody a shift – from the dream of becoming an edgy pop star to accepting their value as prompts for collaborative work with other older gay men who share similar histories, which is what I next intend to do with them.

Adopting Zagorski-Thomas's (2022) classifications, the failure of the original ambition transforms into an aesthetic enrichment. Sebatindira (2023, p. 7) captures this transition from the position of also being in addiction recovery: 'I questioned how I could have an accurate sense of who I was when I could barely remember some of the most formative years of my life.' My *Damian's Deviants* demo cassette tapes reflect an angry, vulnerable teenager's diary, but their rage no longer resides within me. This personal music archive represents a ghostly remnant of a time before hope gave way to disillusionment through addiction.

Caoimhe McAvinchey (2014, p. 6) warns against singular narratives, emphasizing the complexity and fluidity of identities. In this light, Cathy Sloan (2024, p. 101) highlights how performance enables people in recovery to 'form, re-form and reimagine the social contexts' of their lives. Creativity offers the potential for fluidity and identity reconstruction, a process I have embraced through addiction recovery arts, as I will detail more in the next chapter.

Returning to the philosophical framework underpinning this thesis, Deleuze's concept of becoming highlights the tensions between my adolescent aspirations and developing sense of self. Identity remains in perpetual flux. Hickey-Moody's (2013) affective pedagogy provides further insight into how moments of societal rejection during the AIDS crisis can be transformed into opportunities for reflection and growth in my creative practice.

What I once viewed as grief and loss – not fitting in, years of addiction, and unshared 'Anti-Gay' songs – now feels balanced by a newfound understanding. By revisiting this uncomfortable history, I can finally draw a line under it, moving from *'Why am I so irritated?'* to *'Ah, this is why.'* This understanding allows me to inhabit a better present and channel my creativity toward a brighter future.

By prioritising aesthetic over activist concerns I situate my work within an inclusive practice research space that moves beyond mainstream expectations and queer constraints. Perhaps much more importantly though, through facing internal conflicts through addiction recovery, I can now overcome internalised homophobia and accept that I do share many commonalities with other older gay men and younger queers.

This sets the stage for the final chapter where I open to a newfound sense of community I have since found through addiction recovery arts praxis.

CHAPTER 5: THE SELFS OF ADDICTION RECOVERY ARTS

Link to Practice Research Example

The following link provides access to audio content corresponding to the practice example in the YouTube playlist:

1. p. 125, CHAPTER 5, practice research example - my story with alcohol

Introduction

This is the final chapter before the thesis' conclusion. In this, the final of the three chapters concerned with the analysis of this PhD research examining self-compassionate ways of using autoethnography in a grief-informed creative practice, I now draw together the learnings of academic analysis, collective action and artistic endeavour around the subject of adult active addiction.

> 'I hear people who got sober later in life bemoan waste decades.' (Sebantindira, 2023, p. 20)

I am guilty of being one of the people that Sebantindira refers to here as I have spent some thirty years from age 18 to age 48 in mistaken thrall to addictive substances including alcohol and illicit drugs such as marijuana, legal highs and cocaine. Further,

it was on entering the world of 'recovery rooms'[8] that I also reached a point of self-realisation that addictions can be behavioural as well as in relation to substances. In this case, along with alcohol and drug addiction issues, I would also list co-dependency, sex and overwork addictions as well.

On entering into my sobriety journey I also discovered that cutting out the use of one addiction can, if unchecked, lead to a diversion towards other forms of what otherwise might seemingly be unassociated substances such as to caffeine and sugar or to cross addictions such as overworking or overeating. Underlying and overlapping with this, perhaps unsurprisingly~~,~~ given the life circumstances I was born from and grew through as detailed in the previous chapters I have also had lifelong mental health issues of paranoia and anxiety.

In 2018, I hit a rock bottom where the accumulation of my life's difficulties combined with out-of-control addictive behaviours resulted in what felt like the point of no return. A phrase known to many of us who reach recovery rooms, and a term I used to describe during the creative hiatus in Chapter 4, rock bottom can also be the turning point where we have no choice but to face up to the mess that our lives are in and make a change for the better.

In this chapter, I begin with how it was first creativity, rather than the connection of recovery rooms, that underpinned my addiction recovery. Then I will review a socially conscious arts project that iteratively developed over three stages from 2022 until 2024 – *Alky Whole Moon Lick / Queer Mats / The Alcoholic's Tarot*. This artswork inquired

[8] a term referring to the meeting places of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and other 12-Step programs for recovery from addictions.

into the thoughts of individuals and societal attitudes towards the use of alcohol and drugs in UK society. Finally I will speak of the establishment of the Addiction Recovery Arts (ARA) Network, and how, through this, I have found connection with other artistic practitioners.

The opposite of addiction is creation

The action of creation, for me, came some two years or so before I would, or could, allow myself to admit that I was an addict and an alcoholic.

I first gave up alcohol in 2018. I had habitually consumed various drugs at different stages of my adult life since being in my twenties. This usage became most progressively excessive during my early 40s in the first half of the 2010s. By the end of my 40s though, I had overcome daily usage of marijuana, cocaine and legal highs. It was alcohol that lingered as the main addiction I still had to overcome.

For three years from August 2018, I stopped drinking for most of this time but when I had two relapses during this period, I took part in risky behaviours that threatened to endanger my physical health and personal security. These moments were the necessary wake-up calls that convinced me that I could not entirely achieve sobriety by myself, and so in August 2021, soon after the end of my second relapse, I reached out and asked for help from a friend who I knew was part of the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) fellowship.

I began attending AA meetings and for 18 months I followed the fellowship's recommendations to the letter. It worked. I attended 90 AA meetings in 90 days. I found a sponsor who was over 21 years sober and with his help, over eight months I completed AA's 12-Step program. During this time, I also regularly volunteered at various meetings in Central London. Through attending AA and other fellowship meetings, I listened to and was counselled by others on their own addiction recovery journey via this proven, well-regarded and longstanding spiritual route of recovery.

Historically, the majority of AA meetings – unless the meeting is specifically designated for a particular constituency such as women only, LGBTQ+ or people from the Global Majority – tend to be white heterosexual male dominated. That said, AA meetings are places where all people are encouraged to share their feelings and consider vulnerabilities. Perhaps they are the original safe spaces. In the vast majority of meetings I attended, the fellowship's rigourous principles were uniformly upheld.

The AA 12-Step program principles encourage meetings to be environments where everyone is guided and encouraged to be self-reflective and open about their mental health in mutually respectful ways. Open to all regardless of religious or political beliefs and social or cultural status, I had, unlike in the mainstream 1990s LGBTQ+ scenes mentioned in the previous chapter, finally found my kith and kin in the recovery rooms. In church rooms and community centre halls, there was no option of self-medication and numbing through alcohol and drugs.

Two years before I knew I had to find connection with others in recovery, I had already found a way to fill the void when overcoming addiction. In my early attempts at being

sober I became compelled to tell my story, much of which I'd repressed for nearly 50 years by this point. I started to make artswork by writing and recalling life experiences.

Righting through Writing

For people in addiction recovery, there is an accumulation of evidence from academics in criminology (Patton & Best, 2022) and culture (Sloan, 2024; Reynolds & Zontou, 2014) that shows effective arts practices reinforce positive behavioural changes. Arts engagement gives agency to people with addiction issues and allows people in recovery to probe and improve underlying mental health issues.

Increasingly, people with lived experience, academics and rehabilitation charities such as Forward Trust are convinced that recovery-engaged arts strengthen the CHIME framework (Leamy et al. 2011), a conceptual model of five key components for a person's successful addiction recovery journey: Connectedness, Hope and optimism, Identity, Meaning in life and Empowerment. These elements represent the building blocks for a positive sense of self and a fulfilling life post-addiction with each aspect playing a vital role in the recovery process. When applied effectively arts underpin the social contagion of recovery (Best, 2019) and enhance recovery capital (Vilsaint et al. 2017).

Through Dr Cathy Sloan at UWL, I became aware of the existence of the emerging field of addiction recovery arts. I will describe more about this wider cultural movement later in this chapter. During this research period I have become closely involved in this field. From meeting other artists such as Hannah Maria Stanislaus who wrote a poem

on the first day of their sobriety (clowes, 2023) it soon became evident to me that it was not only myself who needed artistic expression in the early days of recovery from active addiction. Even long before I entered addiction recovery, journal writing was my way of working out and through troubling thoughts.

In the fourth step of AA's 12-Step program, people in recovery take inventory of their actions and the stipulation is that this should be written out by hand. The act of 'writing it out' is crucial as it enables us to identify and release resentments such as the irritations discussed in Chapter 4 as these necessitate a meaningful outlet in order for them to be resolved.

In inhabiting the text there is a parallel here with Ingold (2016, pp. 14-17) claiming how line-making in the form of writing is intertwined with understanding and learning. In medieval monastic culture the act of hand-copying sacred texts was a way to internalize, meditate on and better understand the teachings. This practice connected the monks to the text in profound ways, transforming the task into both their devotion and education highlighting how creating, tracing and following lines contributes to ways of knowing and perceiving the world.

Artistic expression for people in addiction recovery is often an activity of soul-searching. Handwriting can be one of the most direct routes to our own internal truths. Through journalling and my creating autoethnographic artswork on secrecy and shame the interplay between writing and artistry has amplified my ability to scrutinise and find a voice. In writing the story that was the basis of Chapter 3's *Peter x 30* at the Arvon Foundation in 2019, I purged a key transformative moment in my life.

Practice Research Example: Alky Whole Moon Lick

Another AA recommendation is that people should engage in service with others to maintain recovery. Stanislaus established the Lost Souls open mic nights to platform other poets (clowes, 2023). I co-created *Nan Kids* with other people raised in kinship care, as detailed in Chapter 3. In relation to creative practice artswork during this research period focusing on addiction and recovery, *Alky Whole Moon Lick* was the template from which I was to involve others through *Queer Mats* and *The Alcoholic's Tarot*, the iterative project to which I will next turn.

Alky Whole Moon Lick / Queer Mats / The Alcoholic's Tarot took place from March 2022 until August 2024, artswork I prefer to describe as 'socially curious' rather than 'socially engaged'. The term 'socially engaged' implies an expectation for artists to adopt a specific stance. By doing this I believe it re-affirms marginalisation and *outsidering*, as described in Chapter 4. The aim through this stage of my practice research was to subvert the conventional expectations of queerness in my practice. Instead of embracing a label imposed by others, I invite us to view queerness as a conversation rather than a fixed identity based on sexuality, broadening the discussion about pigeonholing through identity raised in Chapter 4.

With all three stages of *Alky Whole Moon Lick / Queer Mats / The Alcoholic's Tarot*, through being socially curious and queer in their manner, I aimed for a non-partisan position towards addiction. I worked in a participatory way with passer-by and not previously vetted adults. Some people who took part were known to me, but approximately 70% of people who were involved in this project were unknown to me and I had no prior knowledge of their relationships with, or experiences of, addiction.

For many of us in recovery, there is a perception that discussion on this matter or being in social settings that involve drinking or drug taking can be problematic. I often get asked *'do you mind if I drink this in front of you?'* and I know this to also be the case for other people who are in recovery. It is important to remember though that people who have been in recovery have necessarily built a certain degree of resilience to the societal expectations in UK adult culture about drinking. Also, as I am in addiction recovery myself I felt confident in being able to handle delivering this project with the broad spectrum of people that I was inevitably going to encounter throughout.

I am pleased to report that, overall, this project successfully engaged with a complex subject area through queer and countersentimentalist autoethnographic techniques first outlined in Chapter 3. This time, the countersentimentalism was delivered in an entirely different way: with gentleness and frivolity rather than with rage and fury as was the case in *Secrets keep us sick*. This change in method proved effective in facilitating discussions with the adults participating in these performance exchanges.

During the discussions within the *Alky Whole Moon Lick / Queer Mats / The Alcoholic's Tarot* project, the atmosphere was marked by a blend of good humour and nuanced thoughtful conversation. I must acknowledge that I lack longitudinal evidence regarding any long-term positive or negative impacts on the anonymous participants. That said, I ensured that each performance exchange concluded on a positive note.

The first part of this socially curious inquiry – *Alky Whole Moon Lick* – was a series of 33 captioned photographs. Please see four examples below.

The pictures above were mounted and presented as part of *Recovery: the shadows & light*, an exhibition I jointly held and organised with artist Emma Bettine Hewitt at SET Lewisham Gallery in March 2022. These mobile phone-captured images documented personal 'sites of shame', mostly of pubs and bars around London that related to incidents I could recall from my time in active addiction.

The concept for this series of captioned photographs arose from undertaking Step 4 (*'Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves'*) of AA's 12-Step

program. As touched on above, the principle behind completing this Step is that the person in recovery must address festering resentments that are causing unease so as to avoid the potential for them to re-engage with addictive substances or behaviours again.

What I was aiming to capture in these captioned images – similar to *Secrets keep us sick* and *Peter x 30* in Chapter 3 and in the couplet of *A Love Divine* in Chapter 4 – was to aim for a disconcerting confessional. I wanted to present uncomfortable realities, this time those of being in active addiction.

This aim was successful. One of the gallery visitors, the organiser of a festival I had been involved in, recognised the site and caption I had made to a night where I had turned up drunk two hours late to a closing party. The usefulness of this was we were able to have a conversation about what had happened in the context of my now being sober.

Alongside the captioned photographs in *Alky Whole Moon Lick*, I installed a sound piece entitled *My Story With Alcohol* (available to hear via the link at the beginning of this chapter on page 114). This was created by layering the mobile phone recordings of the three rehearsals ahead of my first Chair[9] at an AA meeting. This piece is again of a confessional nature and numerous gallery visitors listened to the majority of this 20-minute piece. Through headphones they had the prurient privacy of hearing my downfall through alcohol and drug taking and confessions of several embarrassing sexual misdemeanours. After listening to *My Story With Alcohol* and viewing *Alky*

[9] A Chair at an AA meeting is the person who shares their personal recovery story to set the tone for the discussion and guide the meeting's focus.

Whole Moon Lick, several people spoke to me about their own experiences in relation to alcohol and drug use and asked me about mine.

AA meetings are confidential and external discussions of matters that arise in recovery rooms are prohibited. By taking my own story and sharing it with passers by and friends outside of AA in the gallery setting with these autoethnographic captioned photographs and sound piece I was deliberately doing what Zontou warns against (Sloan, 2024, p. 44), and what Holman Jones (2016, p. 16) describes as the 'personal, relational, and ethical risks' of sharing revealing stories.

This is though, in essence, what an artist in addiction recovery might do if they are going to label themselves as such. In some ways, being open about an addiction is contrary to the principles of AA and the other 12-Step fellowships. It is morally right that no-one should not discuss the addictions of other people but if we cannot be open about our own addictions then this perpetuates the shame and stigma of addiction.

I acknowledge that as a white man I have the opportunity to talk openly about my addictions with minimal fear of recrimination. I recognise and understand that other groups such as Black men or pregnant women potentially face judgements which I am privileged not to be affected by. I hope this will change, for as artist FK Alexander says 'we are all in recovery from something' (Sloan, 2024, p. 50).

One of the most edifying moments of presenting *Alky Whole Moon Lick* was a conversation I had with a woman whose sister was a long term alcoholic. We spoke

at length about how the dis-ease[10] of alcoholism had impacted her and her parents in deeply affecting ways. The insight from this sparked the idea I had for the potential for further investigation into conversations around attitudes to alcoholism and drug addiction through my arts practice. I realised that through socially conscious practice using queer and countersentimental means, I could engage with people in intimate and safe ways about the subject of addiction.

When exhibiting the 11cm x 11cm captioned photographs, because of their size, an attendee at the private view suggested that the images reminded them of beer mats.

Inspired by this comment the project then evolved into a series of informal and interactive sessions where I invited willing adult participants to anonymously create their own *Queer Mats* which I will reflect upon in the next subsection.

Practice Research Example: Queer Mats

Drop-in voluntary *Queer Mat* sessions took place at the following places and/or events with an estimated 200 people aged 20 to 70 (please see the Appendix for a full breakdown of the dates, places and attendees). At these small group or one-to-one drop in sessions, using felt tip pens on blank beer mats, people committed their moments of regret while under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol. Please see four examples below:

[10] AA describes the 'dis-ease' of alcoholism as a physical allergy combined with a mental obsession that compels destructive drinking.

While participants were making their *Queer Mats*, they would talk to me – usually very openly – about what had either happened to them or to people they knew in relation to what they were making. Through this collective action of autoethnographic research, we became what Van Maanen (2011 [1988]) might describe as tellers of 'confessional tales' sharing and opening up about secrets that are the common currency of AA recovery rooms.

At each of the events and venues where *Queer Mats* took place, when first engaging with participants I did not personally know, I would explain that I am an artist in

addiction recovery. This was important to do in establishing trust with others, most especially people who were in addiction recovery themselves.

As the artist with lived experience in close conversations with the *Queer Mats* makers, I generated what Sloan (2024) describes as a recovery-engaged atmosphere so as to allow for open discussion and exchanges about the social, cultural and political motivators that perpetrate stigma and disinformation about addiction. As Sloan says here:

> ‘Through approaching addiction as an assemblage, we can appreciate more fully how systemic features of society, including systems of law and order, can exacerbate the psychosocial factors of addiction. Indeed, through the sensorial experience of arts activity, we can create new recovery-orientated assemblages that are more fluid in how they can respond to the nuances of lived experience.’ (Sloan, 2024, p. 8)

By inviting people to create their own *Queer Mats,* this attunement generated between participants and myself was a fleeting connection that led to intimate reflections through low level creative gestures. By establishing this recovery-engaged atmosphere, people needed little further encouragement to share something they, or someone they knew, regretted while under the influence of drugs and alcohol.

From this process, themes that reoccurred were broadly in three categories: (1) of being physically sick, (2) embarrassing behaviour, and (3) resulting in unnecessary confrontational situations. Sometimes people would use the *Queer Mats* as an opportunity to brag about bawdiness.

There were over 100 *Queer Mats* created in total. The three captions I have chosen to focus on below are the most extreme confessions that were shared with me:

- *'I DRANK WAY too Much! Result… HIT BY A TRAIN & 7 Day Coma!'*
- *'Had too much to drink woke up in a girl's flat and she had left me with her baby!'*
- *'A long time ago, I spiked someone for fun'*

Context is everything of course. I know each of the people who created these particular *Queer Mats*, which is fortunate, as otherwise this part of the initiative might have ventured into an area requiring safeguarding actions to be taken. The advantage of being in one-on-one dialogue in this project is that in my having a conversation with these particular *Queer Mats* makers, they were keen to provide the full story through our conversations.

Regarding the three incidents above, the first fully recovered from the coma; the girl came back for her baby; the person whose drink was spiked was unharmed and the protagonist behind this was still full of regret years later and highly unlikely they would ever do it again. More than this, on numerous occasions of the *Queer Mats* sessions, people took the opportunity to engage in conversations about their own addictive natures or might ask my advice about people that they loved who had addiction issues. We would share stories and discuss our lived truths. There were frequent moments of connectedness.

As with all my artswork discussed in this research, *Queer Mats* had a confessional nature. The project generated a range of recorded responses demonstrating a spectrum of attitudes towards alcohol and drug use. In these exchanges, I often asked participants where they believed the line is drawn between the normalisation of binge drinking and drug use in UK social culture. Together we would discuss the prevailing worldview that frames addiction as a source of shame or insists that 'addiction is a choice and not a disability' (Sebatindira, 2023, p. 34).

With numerous participants, we discussed how in many quarters of UK society it is accepted and often assumed that alcohol is necessary in social settings such as gallery openings, clubs, festivals and parties. With this embedded societal attitude, getting excessively drunk is widely accepted, normalized and sanctioned. At a micro level, we agreed that many of us either knew someone or were ourselves individuals for whom addiction posed a problem, with the shame surrounding it often exacerbated by the frequent centring of drinking and drug use in social settings which excludes those struggling with addiction.

Queer Mats generated anonymous responses from individuals which I analysed and categorised into broad overall themes. Following this stage, I amassed the knowledge gathered and grouped these into archetypal behaviours to create *The Alcoholic's Tarot*. In 2024, by continuing a queer countersentimentalist strategy I was able to generate further intimate and anonymous conversations encouraging people to talk about their relationships to addiction. My aim for this was to gain further insight into participant views on UK society's prevailing attitudes towards alcohol and drugs, this time by adopting and subverting tarot symbology.

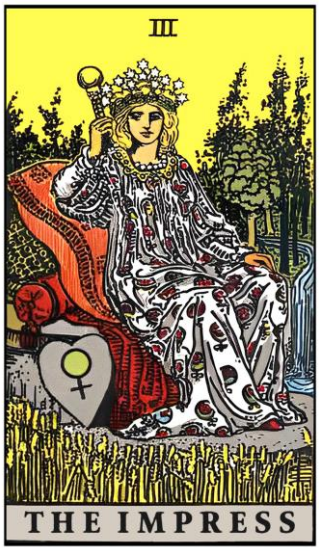
Practice Research Example: The Alcoholic's Tarot

With *The Alcoholic's Tarot*, I ran one-to-one and small group readings using this bespoke tarot pack with an estimated 200 people aged 20-80 at art exhibitions, academic conferences and festivals, details of which can be found in the Appendix.

As with *Queer Mats*, each time I read *The Alcoholic's Tarot* with willing participants, I began by sharing that I was a recovering alcoholic and addict. I also explained that I had reinterpreted the Major Arcana in my tarot deck based the Victorian Rider-Waite-Smith design. During my pilot phase of this intimate performance with some, but not all, individuals in addiction recovery in Brighton, their responses suggested that they felt I was foretelling their future or implying that they might relapse into active addiction. I carefully managed this through reiteration that I was in addiction recovery myself. I stressed that the reading was not intended to be anything more than a game and a discussion about addiction. This proved to be an effective way of reassuring the few nervous participants.

The mystical and fortune-telling associations of a tarot reading provided a heightened and magical framework for insight. One participant drew 'The Sycophant' card (my version of The Hierophant, card V of the Major Arcana), and I explained that, under the influence of alcohol and drugs they might have a tendency toward excessive people-pleasing and obsequiousness. Startled, the participant shared that just a few nights earlier they had been questioning themselves at length about the negative effects of their people-pleasing.

On hearing this, I then told them that out of the 22 cards in *The Alcoholic's Tarot*, two cards represented this theme. I suggested they draw another card for further insight. They did – and, remarkably, chose the second people-pleasing card, 'The Impress' (my version of The Empress, card III). Both of these cards are below:



I then told the participant: 'The cards never lie.'

The difference between *The Alcoholic's Tarot* and *Queer Mats* was that the broader, more universal archetypes in the tarot readings led to discussions that were equally intimate but much wider in scope and content. Themes of addiction then allowed us to touch on interrelated subjects.

Using the tarot shifted the power dynamic of me as the performer. Rather than inviting people to talk about addiction as in *Queer Mats,* I was in the position of surprising the participant with intuitive insight into an aspect relating to their personality, as in the case of the self-describing 'people-pleaser' above.

This led to a candidness and frankness of ensuing conversations prompted by *The Alcoholic's Tarot* readings. A participant told me about their former partner's repeated attempts to murder them. Another spoke of the parallels between their career and life trajectory with their recent gender transitioning. One person discussed their time as a sex worker.

The format of this final iteration of the project allowed for more free-flowing conversation about life circumstances that connected to addiction in broader ways than in *Queer Mats*. By breaking through shame via 'sensorial experience of arts activity' we were autoethnographically co-creating 'new recovery-oriented assemblages' (Sloan, 2024, p. 8) where nuanced conversations about delicate subjects could safely be held.

The Addiction Recovery Arts (ARA) Network

Given my self-defined sense of being an outlier, it has been a 'gift of recovery' (a phrase used by people in AA) to be in the wider world of addiction recovery arts practice through the supervision of Dr Cathy Sloan and with the support of London College of Music since early 2022. Through organising events and being involved in the founding of the Addiction Recovery Arts Network and its online magazine *Performing Recovery*, I have become part of an international network of artists in addiction recovery. This has been a significant artistic practice research opportunity and so the final subsection will focus on the network itself.

The Addiction Recovery Arts (ARA) Network is now a Community Interest Company that was established following a Knowledge Exchange event curated by Dr Sloan at London College of Music in September 2022. In total, the Network has so far held five events (three in London, one in Liverpool and one online). I have been central to the organisation of these gatherings. These events brought together individual artists in addiction recovery along with those who support us in roles such as healthcare, probation and social services, to share and expand our practices and reach.

Three of the events mentioned in the paragraph above have been based on Sloan's performance model of a recovery-engaged arts café. Sloan foresaw the potential connectivity of this type of event for artists in addiction recovery when trialled at her alma mater, the Central School of Speech and Drama (2021, p. 9).

Sloan's vision was both prescient and on point. As a direct result of ARA Network events, The Baring Foundation recently commissioned and published a report by Dr Sloan with case studies from 15 key practitioners in the field. Another example of ARA Network's impact is that at our first event in September 2022, two addiction recovery arts companies – Liverpool's Fallen Angels Dance Theatre and Brighton's New Note Orchestra – collaborated for the first time. Since then, the two companies have created significant new work together, were subsequently featured on ITV News and have now twice performed at the Royal Opera House in London with a long-term partnership in place with this high profile international arts organisation.

Perhaps the most significant development so far by the Network is the establishment of a quarterly magazine which is for, by and about artists in addiction recovery. *Performing Recovery* is the official publication of the ARA Network, proposed and

edited by Alex Mazonowicz, a musician in recovery himself and a professional freelance editor. Launching in January 2023, this led to the establishment of a six-member Editorial Board of which I am a co-founder. Half of our board are academics, two-thirds are women and the majority of us have lived experience of addiction.

Since January 2023 I have been a writer, sub-editor and primary source researcher for *Performing Recovery*, resulting in publication of eight of my articles (see Appendix) platforming artistic practitioners: Theatre director Dr Cathy Sloan, spoken word poet Hannah Stanislaus, artists Harold Offeh and Melanie Manchot, dramatist Jason Brownlee, music promoters Craig Hyman (USA), Marco Sebastiano Alessi (Italy) and three Manchester gallery curators.

Increasingly, *Performing Recovery* is gaining traction internationally, most notably with other USA practitioners in this field. Through our research and advocacy, new partnerships and alliances have formed between artists such as between Bournemouth's Vita Nova and Fallen Angels Dance Theatre for the former's 25th anniversary production in November 2025.

Beyond the many evident physical outputs and artistic exchanges of ARA Network and its magazine, I have two observations to make from my first-hand close involvement in the Network and its manifold informal members.

Firstly, to my view there are three distinctly broad types of constituents in our sector. I would categorize these as:

(i) Addiction Recovery specific arts. This category describes companies using cultural praxis to directly address addiction and recovery-focussed themes as one of the central tenets of their artistic voice. Examples of this might be Outside Edge Theatre Company in London, Stafford's The Detox Factor or the orchestra and choir that are part of Bristol Drugs Project. These groups are only open to people with addiction issues to ensure safety for their participants and their priorities might be defined as being on cultural expression, maintenance of sobriety and engagement of their memberships.

(ii) Artists affected by addiction. I fit into this category by nature of my being an artist in addiction recovery. This would also include musicians of Brighton's Not Saints record label such as the queer punk band Daffodildos or visual artist Antonia Rolls who has lost two sons to addiction and tours a visual arts project connecting with people who have also faced this loss. Equally, this category includes artists and performers who have experience of addiction such as Amy Liptrot, author of the novel 'The Outrun' detailing her recovery that has been recently adapted into a feature film, or musician Pete Townshend of The Who whose practice does not cover addiction issues per se but is an artist in recovery himself.

(iii) Praxis with, for and about people affected by addiction issues. This third category includes arts companies such as Brighton's small performance adventures, Birmingham's Geese Theatre and Bournemouth's Vita Nova. These companies are expert at working with people affected by addiction and also with other people in marginalised situations such as having

> unsettled migrant status or experience of the criminal justice system. This category would also include mainstream arts organisations who are engaging both creatively and as advocates – including the British Ceramics Biennal in Stoke-on-Trent, artists Harold Offeh and Melanie Manchot or London's Dante or Die theatre company, the latter having recently delivered an interactive theatre project focussed on people affected by gambling addiction.

While there is overlap, I suggest there is also a case for separately identified needs for each of these constituencies which, I would propose, requires further research and auditing beyond the parameters of this practice research PhD. The first group might be seeking funding and knowledge exchanges through collaborations. The second constituency would seek different types of collaborations or mentoring or be wanting to find galleries, festivals and venues attuned to hosting sober-friendly events and exhibitions. The third group may be looking for expertise and best practice models or ways to effectively reach people affected by addiction issues.

An informal collective, the ARA Network has the potential to meet the needs of artists and individuals in addiction recovery. Both funding and research are essential to build the infrastructure needed to effectively support and elevate this sector. There are similar longstanding infrastructure models in the UK's subsidised arts sector in the arenas of homelessness, prisons and mental health. Full consultation and a number of pilot projects need to be undertaken with a wide variety of stakeholders in the field of addiction recovery arts. As Sloan (2024, pp. 106-107) identifies, the praxis should not be seen as a replacement for health services and ongoing funding should be prioritised to ensure effectivity.

My second observation, from conversations with artists in addiction recovery and from reflecting on my own artistic practice, is that Johann Hari's famous line from his TED Talk (2015) – that 'the opposite of addiction is connection' – could be adapted to encompass the transformative role of cultural practice within the recovery journey.

I agree that connection in recovery is indisputable for many. When we enter addiction recovery, it is vital we make good connections with others in the same situation as ourselves. Often, we also have to reconnect in new ways with the family and friends who have been alienated by the impacts of our active addiction. Further, in my case – and to which a large part of this autoethnographic practice research is focussed – when I entered an AA recovery room at age 51, I desperately needed to find connection with myself that I never previously knew.

That said, in just over two and a half years, the ARA Network has demonstrated – through its expanding directory and the promotion of 'common connection to performance practice' (Sloan, 2021, p. 20) – that the addiction recovery arts community is greater than the sum of its parts due to its connectivity. This need was recognized in 2020 by practitioners who convened online during the first lockdown as outlined in Sloan's 2024 report for the Baring Foundation.

I have, up until the end of this practice research study, maintained my status as a mostly solo operating crreative in addiction recovery, occasionally recruiting artist friends to fulfil my own cultural projects and ambitions. In this time, I have touched on themes of addiction and recovery in various artswork. I maintain close friendships with a few people I have met in recovery rooms, though perhaps tellingly they tend to be

people who are writers, photographers and performers, but I rarely now attend AA meetings and I have met several artists in addiction recovery who also no longer do – or never did in the first place.

As was detailed at the beginning of this chapter, my own addiction recovery journey did not begin with AA or recovery rooms. This is not to diminish the impact nor the respect I have for the fellowship. It was critical, essential and game changing for me that I spent 18 months attending 12-Step fellowship meetings when I did. I am certain that if I had not, relapses would have kept occurring on an increasingly frequent basis. Even in light of this though, the fact remains that I started getting sober in August 2018, I began creative practice in March 2020 and I only started to attend AA meetings in August 2021. It was initially creativity and then it was connection that saved me.

Before and after my entry into AA, I was already making artswork and I still continue to create. This is foundational to my sobriety and good mental health. From my perspective, the opposite of addiction isn't solely connection; for me, creative solitude – whether walking around London to generate ideas, composing music on Logic Pro X or using tarot cards and automatic writing to untangle my thoughts – is just as vital to my wellbeing as connection with others.

Therefore, I believe there is an alternative to Hari's (2015) oft-quoted line 'the opposite of addiction is connection' that is equally as valid and should stand alongside his phrase. I am not able to take the credit for this as the line below was coined by film curator Lumi Etienne. They adapted the Hari phrase, and this has now become the tagline for ARA Network's magazine *Performing Recovery*. It has struck a chord with me for the reasons detailed above. The line is this:

The opposite of addiction is *creation*.

From trauma-informed to recovery-engaged?

By drawing my addiction knowledge and insights gathered from others through the *Queer Mats* exercise, *The Alcoholic's Tarot* allowed me as an artist using autoethnographic techniques to have collaborative exchanges with other people about our relationships with alcoholism and addiction.

The philosophy of AA rightly focuses on saving us, as alcoholics, from ourselves, emphasising that we can only address what is within our control. This is essential for individual rehabilitation. Millions of people follow the AA Steps and Traditions embracing the robust structure of AA and other 12-Step programs and it works. Maintaining secure recovery is paramount and ongoing for anyone affected by addiction. That said, through scrutinising issues and attitudes surrounding my own addiction and the viewpoints of others in the wider context of societal attitudes and mores, there is another form of connectedness here to investigate.

As Maté and Maté make explicit, 'when it comes to addiction, "free will" is in many ways a neurobiological non sequitur.' (2022, p. 214). They suggest an inevitability that counters the mainstream narrative that people facing addiction issues are mostly to blame for their conditioning. Under the UK's Equality Act 2010, Sebatindira (2023, p. 25) notes that 'addiction is explicitly excluded from the legal definition of disability'. They extrapolate that the legislator's reasoning suggests that 'addiction is a choice

and therefore not a disability' (Sebatindira, 2023, p. 34). I might propose then that if we concern ourselves with a social model of addiction-as-disability[11], this will help us counter external world barriers imposed on people impaired by addiction issues. Insights gained through addiction recovery – and the arts practices of artists and facilitators in the growing ARA Network – have much to offer in terms of positivity and wellbeing, not only within our niche but also to the broader arts, recovery and health communities.

There is a current movement of providing 'trauma-informed' creative facilitator training in UK arts and health practice. Two of the workshops I attended in Barnsley's Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance Conference in October 2023 were in this arena, and training in this area that I am aware of is provided by and for arts practitioners working in mental health, homelessness and the criminal justice systems, queer and youth settings. Yet, if as a sector, we could champion what Sloan surveyed and broadly classifies as the variegated 'recovery-engaged practice' (2024, p. 102) of addiction recovery arts, then the resilience and fortitude of people in recovery and the wisdom of AA and 12-Step fellowships might help us all move on from the grief that freezes us in our pasts.

Conclusion

In the Introduction and Context section at the beginning of this thesis, I outlined how in my practice I was working towards replacing the overused word trauma with phrases such as grief, loss and pain. My concern is that rather than be perpetually overpowered

[11] See UK national disabled-led campaigning charity Scope's definition of the social model of disability: https://www.scope.org.uk/social-model-of-disability

by the omnipresent ogre of trauma, there is personal power to be gained by acknowledging, framing and situating Walter Benjamin's '*moment of danger*' (Hall, 2001, p. 89, italicisation in original) to the past. Benjamin's formulation proposes that the past does not simply wait inertly to be remembered but flashes up in moments of crisis – '*moments of danger'* – offering a critical opportunity to reclaim memory from dominant or conformist narratives (1940). In this practice research, grief becomes one such flash – a resource that can be worked with, rather than worked against. My approach seeks to reclaim lived experience, not by retelling a fixed version of events, but by holding space for what Benjamin calls 'the spark of hope in the past' (Benjamin, 1940, Thesis VI), making visible those fragile and fleeting connections between then and now.

Being recovery-engaged, as opposed to being trauma-informed in our arts practice and our ways of thinking, living and being, I suggest, acknowledges that we are not stuck, but we still have the potential of becoming. Ingold tells us that the 'wayfarer is continually on the move' (2016, p. 78) and Halberstam suggests that embracing queer failure provides us with 'an opportunity to live differently' (Sebatindira, 2023, p. 19). Sebatindira relishes the very fact that the term recovery itself suggests failure (2023, p. 18). I would like to extend this further and encourage that openness about our failings will kill our shame, as in my animation analysed in Chapter 3, 'Secrets keep us sick, and shame dies on exposure'.

The participatory nature of *Queer Mats* and *The Alcoholic's Tarot* reflects a reconciliation of the fragmented SELFS explored earlier in this thesis. Drawing on queer theory's notion of Hamlet's 'time out of joint', these works exemplify a non-linear trajectory of recovery, where past pain and present connections coalesce to form a

more cohesive self. This technique is informed by the critiques of grief paradigms and the potential of autoethnographic storytelling to reframe lived experiences.

As assessed in Chapter 2, the concept of countersentimentalism provided a critical tool for addressing the emotional complexities of revisiting past creative works. This methodology led to *Queer Mats*, through the interplay of personal narratives and communal interaction demonstrating the transformative potential of socially curious artswork.

Acknowledging the philosophical Deleuzian standpoint and the addiction recovery journey, the process of 'becoming' is a constant ongoing process that never completes, but continually evolves. From conducting this research and from becoming involved in addiction recovery arts, I am now at a point leading to my moving away from being mostly isolationist in artistic standpoint to one that involves co-creation with others. Via *Queer Mats* and *The Alcoholic's Tarot* I have demonstrated that autoethnographic arts practice need not be a lone pursuit.

CONCLUSION: AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS A SELF-COMPASSIONATE TECHNIQUE IN GRIEF-INFORMED ARTSWORK

Introduction

My transdisciplinary creative praxis has been one I might describe as a DIY 'making-it-up-as-I-go-along', seriously researching, queerly countersentimentalist, increasingly socially curious one. It has been unravelling as an interconnecting self-story. Through this process of my trying to autoethnographically make sense of it all, the hope has been that if I can understand it and tell it, this exorcism may offer some meaning and strike chords with others. In respect of my origin story, I felt compelled to spew family SECRETS out loud. By *not* revisiting the music and compositions of my younger gay self I rejected and simultaneously accepted SHAMES put upon me. In my addiction recovery adulting, I've worked towards discovering the real SELFS. The latter of these has undoubtedly been the most strenuous, yet the most rewarding.

The period of artistic practice under examination in the previous three chapters spanned four years and four months. This began with the *Nanterventions* technique developed in my *Nan Kids* project. This commenced at Deptford X festival in June 2021. The final piece of practice was *The Alcoholic's Tarot* readings at the Central School of Speech and Drama's Collisions Festival in September 2024. Please see the Appendix for the full list with contextualisation information.

In constructing and sharing artswork, I have engaged in many nuanced conversations on grief, loss and pain with audiences in various ways, from *Nanterventionist*

storytelling with Ipswich Art Gallery audiences to one-to-one confessionals on addiction with queer festival revellers at SUPERNORMAL in Oxfordshire.

Equally, this artistic journey has also instigated an uncomfortable but necessary route to scrutinise the impacts of SECRETS and SHAMES in order to uncover my SELFS. By making autoethnographic works relating to my origins, sexuality and addictions, this has emboldened and codified my self-compassionate practice.

Through researching my artswork as a PhD candidate at London College of Music for three years, I have reached a turning point. Following the catharsis of my practice so far, the time is now one of change. Future artswork will embrace more collaboration and co-creation now that previously embedded grief, loss and pain have been better resolved – or at least questioned and ruptured – through creative actions. This has been documented through Chapters 3 to 5 and informed by reflection from the autoethnographic praxis and research involved in writing the Prelude on Positionality through to the Theoretical Framework that is Chapter 2.

From my involvement in the Addiction Recovery Arts Network and the confidence I have built from my creative practice achievements, the major shift is how my artistic vision will next evolve through collaboration and co-creation. In the first half of 2025, I will be one of twelve in New Note Orchestra's inaugural six-month Key Changers programme joining others in addiction recovery who seek to extend their artistic practice in a leadership capacity.

Before summarising the findings of this PhD research project, I will reflect on a list began in the Notes function on my mobile phone in August 2024. This is my

neurodivergent method of collecting (un)connected tangential thoughts. After that, finally, to conclude this thesis, I will reflect on how and if adopting autoethnographic techniques has provided the self-compassionate means to explore challenging life circumstances in my arts practice.

To begin this conclusion then are 22 learnings that I discovered about developing self-compassionate autoethnographic approaches to making artswork on lived grief, loss and pain. These were written on my mobile phone when thoughts occurred between August and October 2024 at the beginning of the revision and write up phase of this thesis.

The 22 lessons learned:

1. Put it away and come back to it. Years later if need be. Maybe not 30 years though, that's too long. And sometimes just leave it (See: the failure of music making in Chapter 4). Half ideas and incomplete things are meant to be.

2. Responses of an addict's mind can be pancakes (Sloan, 2024, p. 42). Likely reject the first one and check in with what is behind the negativity? It's a grief response not reality.

3. Think across. Different ideas might be - especially in transdisciplinary artswork - meant to mismatch together. Put it away and forget about it. Those half ideas might reappear as shiny new jewels that crown the new piece. (See: taking the

confessions of the *Queer Mats* and grouping the themes into tarot archetypes in Chapter 5)

4. Also, put it away after it's finished. Having just worked on it, combined with the addict pancakes mindset, the artswork might only be visible with the perceived flaws. Later (months, or even years) the forgotten can hold delightful surprises.

5. Get numb to your own story, and don't ever let yourself get numb to your own ego, but do own your own story. Have self-care mechanisms in place for after. Rest. But don't feel bad if it's impossible to rest. I don't know how to rest (See: performing the durational piece *Peter x 30* in Chapter 3).

6. Apply 12-Step wisdom. It will help you remember all you can ever control is your reaction to anything. Everything else is not in your hands. People, places, things.

7. Be ok and that there will be mistakes and get over your perfectionism (Pretty much everything I've done).

8. Make a joke about it. Queer countersentimentalism (Or a coping strategy).

9. Involve them. People love it when you do, and besides, they really only want to know about themselves anyway (see: *Queer Mats* and *The Alcoholic's Tarot* in Chapter 5).

10. Don’t try and fix things. They will fix themselves when you are not looking (See: Chapter 3 and all versions of representing my family story).

11. Don’t try too hard. No-one likes a ‘try hard’.

12. Choose your safe spaces well. You are putting yourself in a public arena. People will ridicule you, and worse, not care. (See: various performances and showings I have deliberately avoided mentioning in this research as they were excruciating. But, there is mention of one particularly nasty one in the Appendix if you look hard enough.)

13. I’m no good at being gay and I’m definitely not queer, I’m weird. A queerdo. I’m an outlier. (Chapter 4)

14. Involuntary resisted repetition is what gets grief memories stuck. Voluntary active repetition is what numbs and eases (See: *Peter x 30* in Chapter 3).

15. If you do confessional work people will call you brave (See: pretty much everything I’ve done).

16. Don’t confuse popularity or social media likes with people taking you seriously or really turning up to see you perform.

17. Accepting that all your first thoughts are bad pancakes, and the opposite is usually the truth is not only liberating but handled the right way, it’s creative (See: coming into the light in Chapter 5).

18. Others have good ideas too so listen to them – and remember you're likely to reject them at first – never mind that you're neurodivergent and an arrogant fear-filled alcoholic and addict (Re: my initial attitude to every collaborator I have ever worked with).

19. Accept the alienating effect of admin (It's the modern day curse that ensures practice opportunities and resources, unfortunately).

20. It's ok to plan a working life around a 10pm bedtime. Do an access rider. Naps are important too as good sleep is critical to positive mental health and artistic productivity.

21. Do you need costumes? I still don't know. I've not ever really been one for dressing up. I think part of delivering intensely intimate work is about stripping it back and not wanting to divert with trinkets or sparkles (See: not being a glitter beard queer, Chapter 4).

22. With autoethnography you can perform any time, any place, anywhere. Also, in academic settings it gives you some currency and you stand out more in a dreary day of straightforward dry conference papers (See: *Nanterventions* in Chapter 4 and all the papers I've presented over the last three years).

In the Appendix, I provide details of additional artswork and academic presentations not discussed earlier in the thesis. While I chose to focus on a select few works in depth for this analysis, I have created numerous other pieces and delivered several

presentations that contribute to my canon of autoethnographic practice. Examining all these works would have necessitated a thesis far longer than its current scope, so I prioritised a thorough scrutinisation of a smaller selection.

Did I answer the questions?

This practice research was undertaken to explore whether autoethnographic techniques could be applied to grief-informed multidisciplinary artswork in self-compassionate ways. It sought to address two objectives: how such methods navigate contextuality when lived grief is central to creative practice and whether they can ensure self-compassion for an artist disclosing intimate materials. Set within the broader context of addiction recovery arts and autoethnography, this research was informed by my personal and artistic journey through grief, queerness and recovery.

The main advancement that marked the most significant change for my creative practice is that autoethnographic practice can be collaborative or participatory in a way that leaves room for the sharing of insights from the audience or participant(s).

During years two and three of this research, I have been engaging with others and incorporating their perspectives (see Chapter 5). This happened while facing and owning the failure of my initial project (Chapter 4) and I have moved far from the (necessarily cathartic) artswork I was making to overcome the grief about my family (Chapter 3).

This insight into the collective working has greatly enriched my artistic processes and informed the focus of the autoethnographic techniques. This has allowed my practice to become increasingly less isolationist and more relevant to others – the audience. This was through one-to-one and small group interactions in *Queer Mats / The Alcoholic's Tarot* and via the wider sector learnings from involvement in the Addiction Recovery Arts Network as an editorial board member and writer for our magazine *Performing Recovery*.

Regarding the second objective, the art that has influenced me the most – whether by Andy Warhol, Tracey Emin or Soft Cell – shares a common factor: it has prompted me to think in new and different ways. If I can do that to people who are exposed to my work, then it's fine if they don't like it, but if what I set out to do has been achieved and I have looked after myself and them in the process, then I have fulfilled this objective.

In October 2024, I presented a work-in-progress sound installation at an ambient music conference. It featured confessional material about my early recovery – content the audience wasn't necessarily expecting. Despite this, the piece was well received by everyone who engaged with me, from seasoned musicians to undergraduates. The keynote performer spoke to me at length during the break about my practice and the presentation. The next day, he messaged me to say how much my sound installation and practice had stayed on his mind.

On receiving that message, I knew then that this is what a successful artswork looks like to me and it is what I seek to achieve through autoethnographic practice: I presented a complex artswork self-compassionately utilising intimately confessional

material. It landed, it was heard and understood, and it made at least one person think in a new way as a consequence.

Does this really matter anyway?

This thesis contributes a unique first-person perspective to addiction recovery arts, addressing a significant gap in the literature. It highlights the intersectionality of kinship care, queerness and addiction recovery as an enriched paradigm for understanding underrepresented insights. It also advances methodologies in practice research, illustrating the transformative potential of self-compassionate autoethnography for artists navigating grief and recovery.

Using transdisciplinary creative autoethnographic expression on a journey of becoming and the making progress from being *undrawn*, I have imagined untold family stories. In doing this, in Chapter 3 I performed representations of my grandmother's failed attempt at concealment, endlessly muttered release for my repressed mother's sexual assault, and steered and queered rage towards my family of origin via countersentimentality with a tenor of dispassionate disappointment. Mediating through the repetition of rupturing memory and delineating outsider difference in queerness, this phase of practice has resulted in multi-modal means of expression new to my practice and boldly dealing with themes ranging from kinship care to incest that barely dare be mentioned in the outside world.

Despite the failure of reconstructing my teenage songs in Chapter 4, I have the seeds of the idea to interpret and give voice to those of us who were gay teenagers during

the time of AIDS. It is one of the ironic gifts of recovery that while living as an adult addict for thirty years, the payback has been to learn about how to connect and face the exciting prospect of working with others through my recovery.

As detailed in Chapter 5, likely my role in the formation of the Addiction Recovery Arts Network is probably one of the most significant things I have achieved in my life, let alone through this research. Because of this, already we know hundreds of other creatives are managing their addictions better by our having helped platform this important area of internationally emerging arts praxis.

In the emerging field of recovery arts, it is the autoethnographic research of creative practice exploring my lived experience that addresses a clear and identifiable gap in knowledge. As outlined in the Introduction and Context section, the 2014 collection ‘Addiction and Performance’ (eds. Reynolds and Zontou) was the first of its kind but the research focusses solely on participatory practices. As an individual artist, here I am presenting multiple facets of first-person positionality.

There is a need to engage in such artistic practices in ethically contained ways supporting expression of challenging lived experiences without causing undue distress or encouraging fetishisation. The increased public health interest and engagement in wellbeing and recovery is evident in recently identified government priorities for arts in areas such as social prescription. There is also a need to consider how praxis can provide greater understanding in intersecting grief, loss and pain to better facilitate dialogical exchange about supporting care in arts activities.

Any surprises?

The research process did have complications, including confronting painful memories, balancing emotional engagement with academic rigour and navigating creative stagnation. These were overcome through long established robust wellbeing methods being in place, a supportive research framework and collaboration within the Addiction Recovery Arts Network.

The emphasis on self-care mechanisms in the creative process cannot be overstated. The paradoxical reflection of ‘get numb to your own story, and don’t ever let yourself get numb to your own ego, but do own your own story’ in the 22 lessons learned above affirms the high value I would increasingly place on maintaining a balance between emotional engagement and detachment from the original source of grief.

I managed my state of self-regulation in not surprising ways, methods that van der Kolk (2015) outlines chapter by chapter: meditation, connection with others, creative practice, exercise, nutrition and strict sleep patterns. Autoethnographic approaches in grief-informed creative practice facilitated necessary balance. It provided me with a structured format for generating narratives, ensuring that the process remained cathartic rather than reopening past wounds.

Knowledge from having undergone AA’s 12-Step program further supported my emotional resilience by reminding me that my reaction to performance situations and responses to my artswork are within my control, while external circumstances are not. This perspective encouraged a sense of agency and acceptance, vital when navigating unpredictable waves of grief.

It wasn’t that sometimes I didn't get emotional when speaking, performing or creating. On the contrary, I did. One delegate at a conference noticed that I was on the verge of crying when relating about my recovery through creativity in my paper and he spoke to me kindly about this afterwards. We then had a long and productive conversation which we both found enriching. As I mentioned in Chapter 5, my artswork is increasingly about encouraging nuanced conversations with my audience and co-creators.

The concept of queer countersentimentalism that I have adapted from Berlant (2011) introduces a lens through which artists can view their grief and loss using what also might initially seem as disjointed, or even inappropriate, this being humour and wryness. While I emphatically and dissonantly claim I do not identify with queerness or gay male cliches in Chapter 4, a common survival technique of gay men bullied in schoolyards is being able to see the funny side of it all. Through the adaption of a queer sensibility of humour, as an artist I can reframe traditional and oppressive narratives. This not only subverts societal expectations but also, I propose, could empower other artists to reclaim their stories on their own terms. Humour becomes a tool for resilience, allowing for a playful yet profound engagement with one's grief. It also stalls the unwittingly patronizing and *outsidering* tone when people tell someone that they are brave for simply living the life that was dealt them.

The findings have practical implications for artists and researchers working with sensitive personal material. They highlight the importance of ethical frameworks that balance vulnerability with self-care. Additionally, this practice research suggests that addiction recovery arts and autoethnography can provide powerful means of effecting

individual and societal change, offering new ways to stimulate dialogue around taboo and underexplored subjects.

And finally

From this practice research I am convinced that autoethnography is a powerful, self-compassionate practice for artists using their difficult lived experiences of grief, loss and pain in creative endeavour.

This method not only facilitates emotional healing and self-understanding, but it also enriches the artistic process by transforming grief, loss and pain into nuanced artswork. The practice at the centre of this research has allowed me to navigate my grief, loss and pain with resilience, creativity and compassion. Ultimately these processes then contributed to a richer and more empathetic discourse and exchange with the audiences that have encountered my artswork. By delving into personal narratives, I have elucidated how this method not only aids in the artistic process when navigating difficult life experiences but it can also assist in overcoming being *undrawn*, avoid *outsidering* and acceptance where before there was *unbelonging*. Through autoethnography and addiction recovery arts, be as Queerdo as you like as all sorts are welcome here.

In conclusion, the multifaceted praxis of autoethnography offers a unique and valuable framework for artists seeking to integrate grief, loss and pain into their artswork. I suggest then that autoethnography can be a compelling integration of the personal with the academic, combining contextualisation and self-compassion for artists to

navigate complex life circumstances while contributing usefully to applications in, and the broader discourse on, creativity and mental health.

Throughout this research, I have developed and utilised self-compassionate autoethnographic techniques to interrogate and transform arduous lived experiences into grief-informed and recovery-engaged artistic outputs. By integrating reflexive practices with iterative creative processes, I have discovered how to navigate individual and societal complexities while ensuring emotional resilience and gaining scholarly insights. These methods demonstrate the potential of compassionate, ethically engaged autoethnography to mediate arduous narratives, offering a framework for artists addressing sensitive and underrepresented themes in their artswork.

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APPENDIX: RECORD OF PRACTICE AND PRESENTATIONS

This section is a complete list of the autoethnographic artswork relating to this practice research. It also includes information on one published peer reviewed audio paper and numerous conference presentations. Contextualisation is given and online links provided where available.

Nan Kids: Practice Research

Alicia, Ieon and Adéle, *Nan Kids*, photograph by Ilmé Vyšniauskaité

Nan Kids involved workshops with families, co-creation of sound-word portraits with 11 other adults raised in kinship care families and audience exchanges via performance installations at three arts festivals, these being:

- Deptford X: performances and radio broadcasts in a church graveyard and pub beer garden, and in the online festival launch, including collaborations with artists Alicia Hardy, Matt Hulse and Piyagarn Odunukwe, June 2021
- SPILL International Festival of Performance: an audio and physical installation including performances in Ipswich Art Gallery and at other sites including a Blitz-themed tea shop and the City Hall building, October 2021
- Wandsworth Arts Fringe: running workshops in four council-run libraries across the London borough, May 2022

Nan Kids at SPILL Festival, photograph by Guido Mencari

The research findings of this project resulted in a BBC1 News feature, a BBC Sounds podcast, a blog for a national charity, involvement in a panel discussion on Caribbean kinship care families and an interview on an arts and mental health podcast series. Here are the links for these:

- BBC1 Look East News (from 23:36 minutes in): https://youtu.be/x9S5xDjp3FY?si=lhHw2xUYYzNBPBof&t=1416
- BBC Sounds podcast: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0b0xd3f
- The Churchill Fellowship blog: https://www.churchillfellowship.org/news-views/blogs/telling-the-stories-of-nan-kids/
- The Two Of Us podcast: https://thetwoofus.libsyn.com/106-leon-clowes-mindset-is-everything
- Reel Rebels Radio Caribbean Kinship Care discussion (begins at 1:31:58) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8bOVbhkaMT4&t=5518s

Nan Kids was a series of performance installations where I developed the *Nanterventions* performance technique scrutinized in Chapter 3. Co-created sound-word portraits about hidden family histories were made with 11 other people raised in kinship care: https://soundcloud.com/leonclowes/nan-kids-waf-2022

Commissioned by SPILL Festival and Wandsworth Arts, funded by Arts Council England via a National Lottery Project Grant, I was also awarded a Deptford X Festival Bursary and Sound and Music Creative Seed Award to realise this project.

A feature about *Nan Kids* was broadcast on BBC1's Friday early evening news potentially reaching thousands of television viewers. As well as featuring *Nan Kids* on his radio show, BBC Radio Suffolk's arts correspondent Jon Wright also made a 10-minute podcast about the project which now lives permanently on the BBC Sounds website: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0b0xd3f

Nan Kids at Deptford X festival, photograph by Andrew Clark

Working with The Churchill Fellowship, UK charity Kinship and Reel Rebels Radio, I blogged about *Nan Kids* and was part of national Kinship Care Week in 2021.

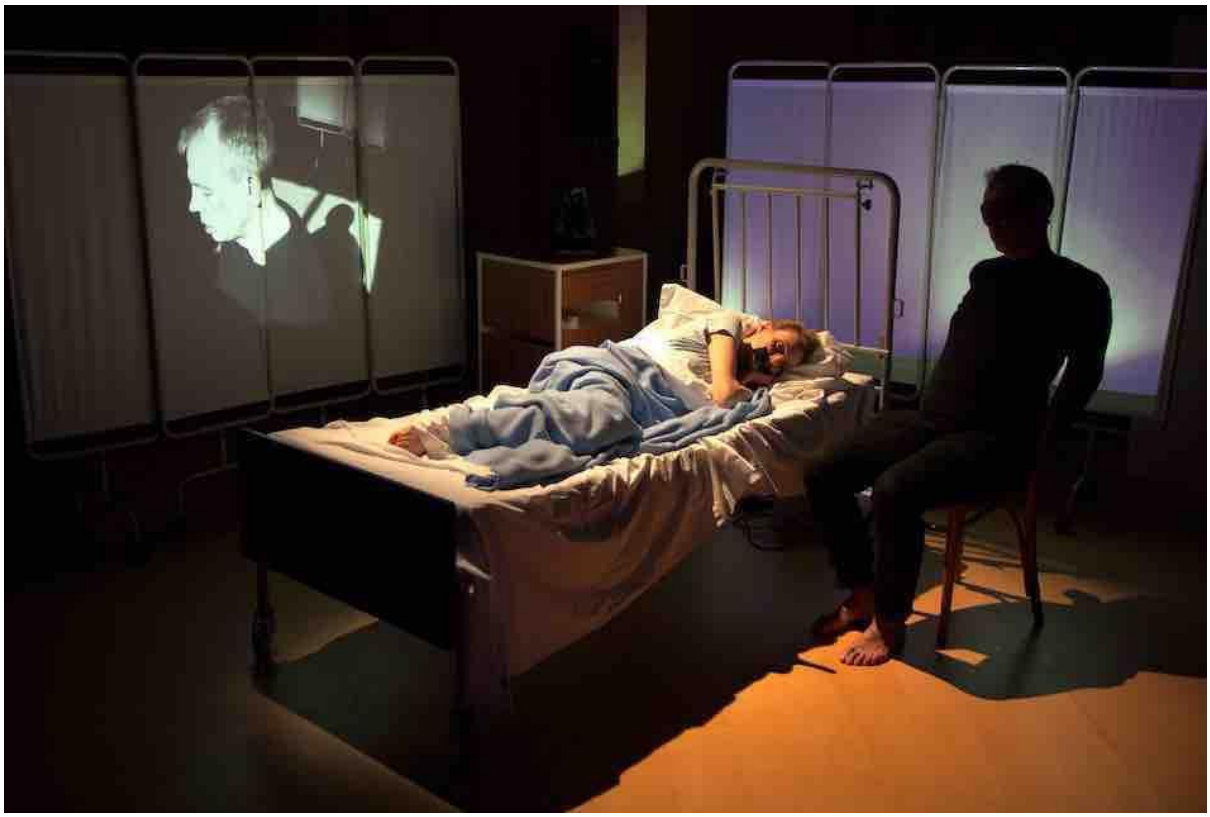
Writing for Ipswich Star, SPILL Artistic Director Robin Deacon said:

‘A highlight for me is leon clowes *NAN KIDS*, a beautiful and moving sound based art work consisting of interviews with people who were raised by their grandmothers. According to leon (a ‘nan kid’ himself) – “there is never a good reason that grandma had to bring up the grandkids – but we’re not sad about that.” I hope you take some time to listen to Leon’s understated, fascinating work.’

The Last Five Days Of Sandra / Peter x 30: Practice Research

Peter x 30 evolved from a multi-media artswork *The Last Five Days of Sandra* that was performed at these venues and events:

- Snape Maltings: Suffolk, February 2022
- Frieze Art Fair: Abbas Zahedi's Open Mic, London, October 2022
- Contact Theatre: Emergency 22 Festival, Manchester, October 2022



The Last Five Days of Sandra at Snape Maltings, photograph by Patrick Young

The findings from these performances were critical in developing self-compassionate autoethnographic techniques.

- The Snape Maltings residency was realised in collaboration with three other artists: Andrea Edwards, Gerry McNee, and Kelly O'Brien. Together we created a multimedia installation on my family story in this well-resourced mainstream high-profile venue. The positive of this was the scale and possibility that this opportunity presented. The negative was the personal pressure and exhaustion I underwent in leading up to, during and after the performance. This emphasised my need to embed self-regulatory procedures to reduce adrenalin release and anxiety levels. Further, while the well-intentioned anonymous feedback contained useful information, reflective group discussion a short time afterwards would have helped better digest this information.

- The Frieze Art Fair performance was exposing and unpleasant, underlining how essential it is for me to have safe parameters and clear boundaries within an artist space. There was a lack of boundaries, support, and aftercare. Sadly, undermining behaviours from other participants took place during my performance. This proved a lesson for me about the need to mindfully consider how, where and why I am choosing to present artswork. Another point of reflection was my decision not to provide feedback to the promoters or to the artist about my negative experience at the event. Going forward I would prefer to take action to address the situation to seek a better resolution.

Peter x 30 in Emergency 22 @ Contact Theatre, Zoom broadcast screengrab

- The Contact Theatre performance of *Peter x 30* built upon and responded to negative aspects of the two performances described above. I removed myself entirely from the live audience. In this performance context, my two-hour durational piece was broadcast via Zoom into the festival. I had no post-event feedback, nor do I know if anyone witnessed the piece. The teaching from this performance informed my thesis on how such situations can become detached and disassociated for the artist. Together with the other two experiences mentioned earlier, it prompted me to critically examine the motivators and barriers behind sharing challenging lived materials in artswork.

Alky Whole Moon Lick / Queer Mats / The Alcoholic's Tarot: Practice Research

Interactive one-to-one and small group performances and presentations of this iterative action research arts project took place at the following academic and arts conferences, festivals and gallery exhibitions:

- *Recovery: the shadows & light*: an art exhibition jointly held and organised with Emma Bettine Hewitt, SET Lewisham Gallery, March 2022
- Addiction Recovery Arts Futures Conference: Liverpool Hope University, May 2023
- UWL Doctoral Conference: University of West London, July 2023
- Theatre and Performance Research Association conference: University of Leeds, August-September 2023
- Equal Arts Conference: Newcastle, October 2023
- Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance Conference: Barnsley, October 2023
- ACI Postgraduate Practice Research Conference: University of East London, April 2024
- *The 11-Hour Technicolour Dream*: addiction recovery artists event at Brighton Fringe Festival, May 2024
- Five Fold's *Elevenses*: group exhibition at Ugly Duck Gallery, Bermondsey, London, May-June 2024
- SUPERNORMAL Festival: Oxfordshire, August 2024
- Collisions Festival: Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, September 2024

I was awarded bursaries to make *Queer Mats* with attendees at the Culture Health and Wellbeing Alliance and Equal Arts conferences in October 2023. These events were attended by artists and health workers from mainstream, social care and community arts groups.

Queer Mats was awarded the first prize from 18 poster presentations at University of West London's 2023 Doctoral Conference. The judges commended my project's innovative and engaging methodology.

The Alcoholic's Tarot was commissioned by SUPERNORMAL Festival. The full 22-card set of *The Alcoholic's Tarot* is pictured on the following pages.


VIII
INTENSE
VI
THE SMOTHERS
VII
THE RAGING HARLOT
IX
THE SHIRKER
X
THE REAL of MISFORTUNE


XIII
FEEL LIKE DEATH
XIV
INTEMPERATE
XV
THE DEMON DRINKER
XI
INJUSTICE
XII
THE HANGING MAN
XVI
THE SHIT SHOWER


XXI
THE WHIRL
XVII
THE SCAR
XX
SELF-JUDGEMENT
XIX
THE SHUN
XVIII
THE MOONIE
COHO

Secrets Keep Us Sick, But Pop Music Brings Us Closer: Peer-Reviewed Audio Paper

This peer-reviewed paper was selected for online audio journal Seismograf.org, 2023, #29. The link to the paper is here: https://doi.org/10.48233/SEISMOGRAF2906

Photograph of leon by Amber Franks for her *Dead Memories* exhibition

Seismograf is an independent Danish web magazine that focuses on the latest developments in the art of sound. This peer-reviewed audio performance paper was selected through a competitive open call process, inviting submissions that responded to the overarching theme of 'Grief'.

Photograph of leon’s family album by Amber Franks for *Dead Memories* exhibition

The paper adopts what Lauren Berlant (2011) might describe as a countersentimentalist direction of academic writing. By facing the taboos surrounding the history of my biological parentage, I use autoethnographic techniques to explore the motivators and barriers that contributed to decades of family secrecy about my father's identity. A central premise of this thesis argues that reframing trauma as grief enables these memories to be more manageably situated within the past. I demonstrate this by connecting my mother to the popular music she introduced to me during my childhood.

Through this audio paper, I establish the autoethnographic model that informs the video papers and performance lectures prepared and delivered during this practice research.

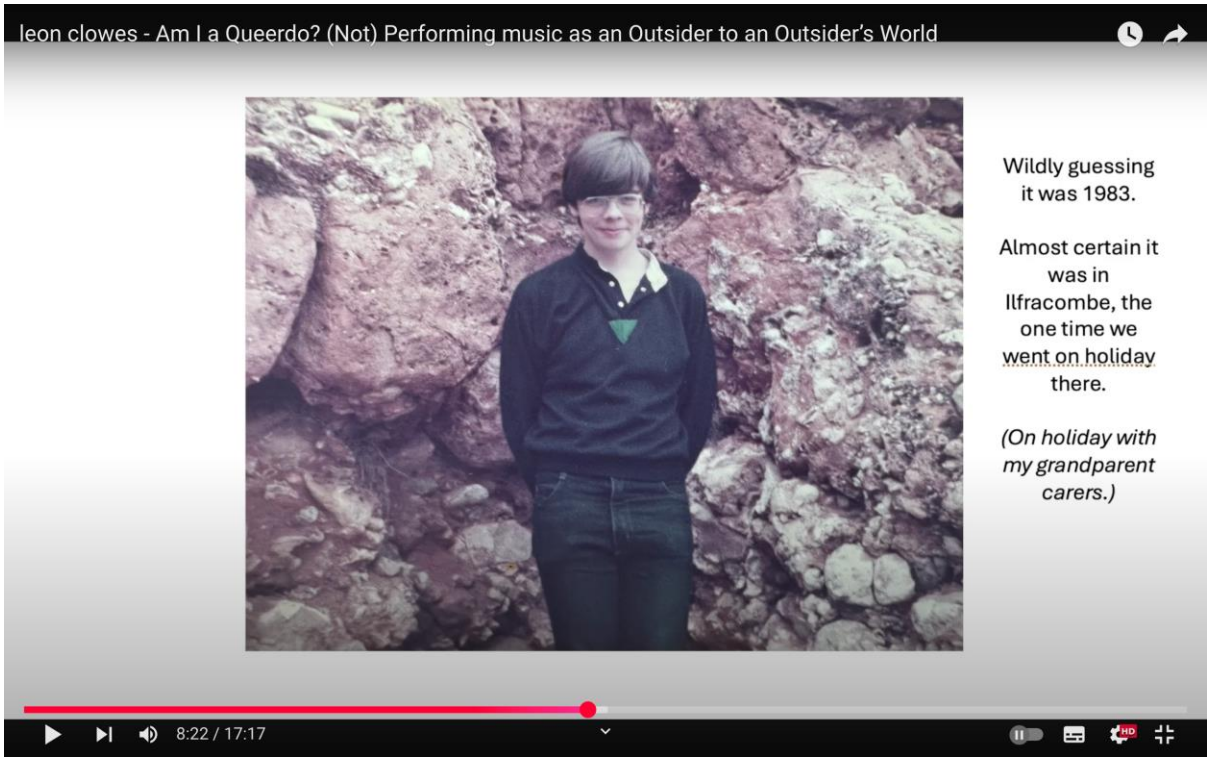
Video Conference Papers

I created these autoethnographic video papers for academic conferences:

- *Nanterventions: navigating co-creation and representation in participatory praxis with people with lived experience of kinship care.* (LINK: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWCuHke1ZVk) This was for the UK's Theatre and Performance Research Association conference, September 2022, University of Essex.

- *leon clowes: Can you teach an old gay new tricks* (LINK: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CdUw8ALAjoE) This was written and created for the 21st Century Music Practice Research Network conference, May 2023, London College of Music, University of West London.

- *Am I a Queerdo? (Not) Performing music as an Outsider to an Outsider's World* (LINK: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vz6gFiSrZo). This was shown in a panel at Place, Perspective and Popular Music, IASPM UK and Ireland Branch Conference, September 2024, Newcastle University, UK. It was originally created for a panel ('Auto Constructive Art: The potentiality of Pete Townshend's CEMI collection for artists in recovery') which I initiated and organised for the second Diversity & Access section of the Pete Townshend Studio C21MP CEMI conference, September 2024, London College of Music, University of West London.



Screengrab of *Am I a Queerdo? (Not) Performing music as an Outsider to an Outsider's World*

- *Greg Smith Veterans' Music Pilot Project* (LINK: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_gMiDDQ31g) This was created for a panel ('Auto Constructive Art: The potentiality of Pete Townshend's CEMI collection for artists in recovery') which I initiated and organised for the second Diversity & Access section of the Pete Townshend Studio C21MP CEMI conference, September 2024, London College of Music, University of West London.

Since starting my PhD in 2022, I have employed various autoethnographic techniques to create films and live performance papers. This has allowed me to present insights in innovative ways and to encourage scholarly feedback on my practice and thesis.

My video paper *Am I a Queerdo? (Not) Performing Music as an Outsider to an Outsider's World* was praised by Professor Samantha Bennett who is based at The

Australian National University and is also the Chair of the global IASPM. Although I was unable to attend the panel due to illness, we met soon afterwards, and she shared that my video paper had sparked considerable positive discussion. Attendees commended my methodological integration of autoethnography as both a technique and a framework for examining grief and emotion within an academic context.

Following this, Professor Bennett has since invited me to submit an abstract for her forthcoming edited volume on the vintage 1980s Fairlight CMI synthesizer drawing from research in this thesis. This offers a potential publication opportunity arising out of the failure of the creative practice that I analysed in Chapter 4.

Performance Lectures

Six performance lectures took place at these academic conferences:

- *Catching Thoughts*: Contemporary Ambient Research Symposium, November 2024, University for the Creative Arts, Farnham

- *Lived Experience Reflections*: Recovery in Practice UK conference, October 2024, University of Derby

- *There's a Ghost In My House: Foregrounding field recordings in a queer DIY paranoiac practice*: In the Field 2 CRiSAP Research Centre conference, July 2024, London College of Communication

- *Am I a Queerdo? (Not) Performing music as an Outsider to an Outsider's World*: UWL Doctoral Conference, July 2024, University of West London

- *Four Days*: Performance Studies International 29th conference, June 2024, organised by the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama and London International Festival Theatre, Senate House, London

- *Nanterventions: navigating co-creation and representation in participatory praxis with people with lived experience of kinship care*: UWL Doctoral Conference, July 2022, University of West London

This music installation and the several spoken word performances that I delivered at various conferences have served as platforms for sharing autoethnographic reflections on my kinship care family of origin, my living with mental health obstacles and the recovery processes I have enhanced through creative practices. Presented at prominent sound arts, theatre and postgraduate research conferences, these performance lectures have sparked imaginative and interdisciplinary feedback from academic attendees, significantly contributing to the quality of my research outputs.

The feedback I received – ranging from a Ukrainian theatre maker displaced by the current conflict to a sound artist and composer documenting her journey through cancer treatment – highlights the diverse and global reach of these events. By presenting at such forums, I have not only extended the visibility and impact of my research but also increased greater awareness of addiction recovery arts practices within new academic contexts.

Addiction Recovery Arts (ARA) Network / Performing Recovery Magazine: Articles And Knowledge Exchange Events

In my co-founder and Editorial Board role at the Addiction Recovery Arts (ARA) Network, I have written eight articles on addiction recovery arts praxis for *Performing Recovery* magazine, these being:

- Re-create, Re-cord, Re-cover. 2024, issue 8, pp. 14-17 (LINK: https://recovery-arts.org/pr-magazine/issue-8/)
- Creative, Connect, Live: Cultural Citizenship in Recovery. 2024, issue 8, pp. 32-34 (LINK: https://recovery-arts.org/pr-magazine/issue-8/)
- Spotlight on... Cathy Sloan. 2024, issue 7, pp. 5-7 (LINK: https://recovery-arts.org/pr-magazine/issue-8/)
- Fact and Fiction. 2024, issue 7, pp. 14-15 (LINK: https://recovery-arts.org/pr-magazine/issue-7/)
- Spotlight on… Harold Offeh. 2023, issue 6, pp. 5-6 (LINK: https://recovery-arts.org/pr-magazine/issue-6/)
- Spotlight on… Surfing Sofas. 2023, issue 4, pp. 6-7 (LINK: https://recovery-arts.org/pr-magazine/issue-4/)
- Righting through Writing. 2023, issue 2, pp. 8-9 (LINK: https://recovery-arts.org/pr-magazine/issue-2/)
- Staying Safe on the Fringe. 2023, issue 1, pp. 6-9 (LINK: https://recovery-arts.org/pr-magazine/issue-1/)

I have also co-organised and co-curated, raised funds for, administered and been a host for three Knowledge Exchange events at London College of Music, University of London. These were:

- Veterans Arts Knowledge Arts Knowledge Exchange, July 2024, 70 attendees
- Dr Cathy Sloan's *Messy Connections: Creating Atmospheres of Addiction Recovery Through Performance Practice* Routledge book launch, May 2024, 20 attendees
- The Addiction Recovery Arts Knowledge Exchange, September 2022, 100 attendees

Please see this video about the Addiction Recovery Arts launch event at University of West London in September 2022:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UMG6UWeKfw0

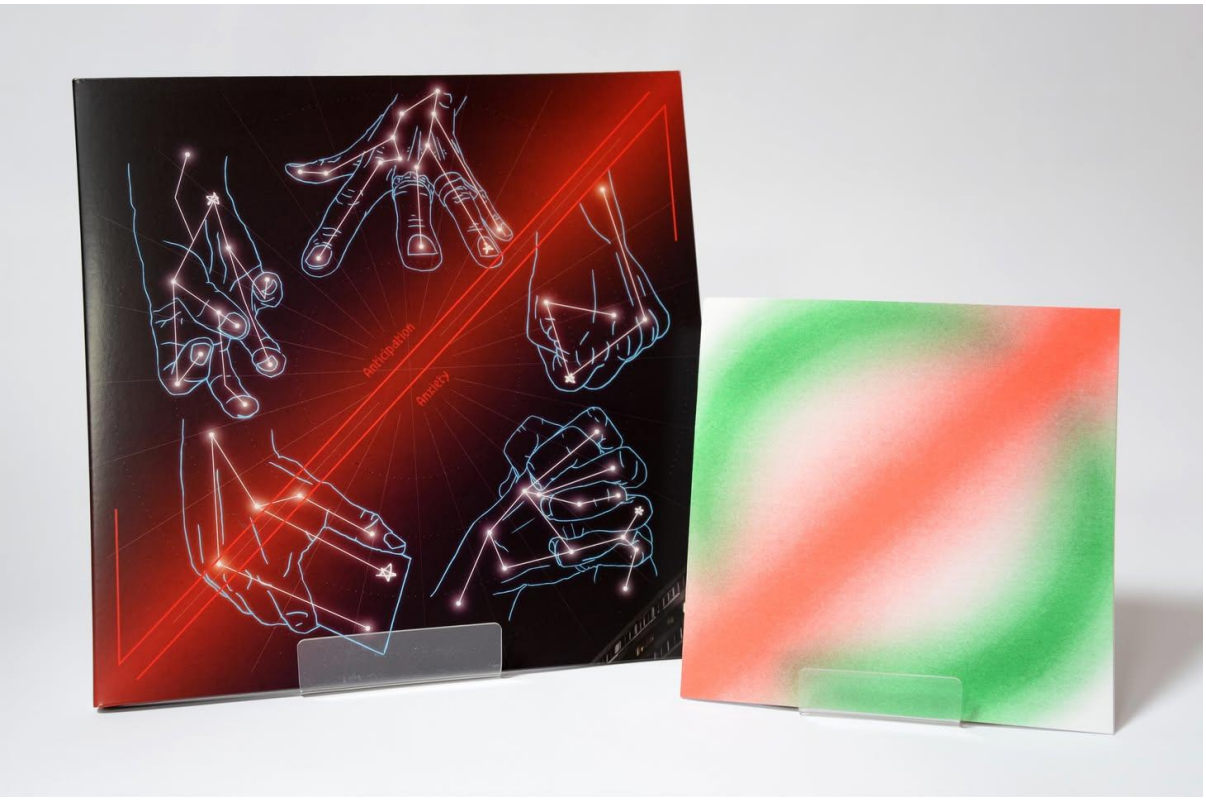
As a direct result of the ARA Network's events and magazine, The Baring Foundation has commissioned and published a report (LINK: https://baringfoundation.org.uk/resource/creatively-minded-and-in-recovery/) and consequently, they partnered with ARA Network on an October 2024 online event.

Another example of the ARA Network's impact – mentioned earlier in Chapter 5 – is the long-term partnership now established between the Royal Ballet and two addiction recovery arts organisations – Fallen Angels Dance Theatre and New Note Orchestra. Following their performances at the first ARA Network event which was attended by Royal Ballet Director Kevin O'Hare OBE among 100 others, the companies have

performed twice together at the Royal Opera House in London, forging a significant collaboration with this prestigious arts institution.

Performing Recovery magazine continues to gain international recognition, particularly among practitioners in the United States. Through our research and advocacy efforts, we have helped forge new partnerships and alliances between artists within this growing field.

The interview I conducted with artist Harold Offeh for Issue 6 of *Performing Recovery* was printed in the sleeve notes of the resulting 12” vinyl EP from his *Let’s Talk About Chemsex* project, a collaboration with Manchester Art Gallery, Brighter Sounds and Portraits of Recovery. This project was also selected for the 2024 Manchester Art Fair.



Harold Offeh’s *Let’s Talk About Chemsex* 12” vinyl EP