WRITING 'DARK FICTION': AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC REFLECTION

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ABSTRACT

An earlier version of this paper was presented at a multidisciplinary conference on 'dark heritage' in 2019. It describes and reflects on my experience of writing a short story for submission to a commercial 'dark fiction' anthology and discusses the social, personal, and linguistic factors which contribute to the production of a popular literary text. In particular, it examines to what extent negative connotations of 'darkness' as well as stereotypical representations of the monstrous can be avoided or subverted, while at the same time adhering to the genre requirements of a commercial publisher's brief and writing to a deadline. The approach I take is broadly autoethnographic: my 'data' includes 'field notes' that I kept throughout the writing process and daily captures of the story as it progressed toward completion. The paper also reflects on the occasion of the conference, which enabled a rich opportunity for cross-disciplinary dialogue. Heritage studies, literary studies, and genre fiction have a shared history and ongoing investment in the dark. By bringing to light the process through which a dark text is produced, I offer a means for thinking about the deployment and interpretation of tropes of darkness in scholarly and imaginative writing. It is hoped that the autoethnographic methods I employ could be suitably adapted for use in creative writing studies as a means of developing students' and teachers' writerly self-awareness.

KEYWORDS

Autoethnography, creative writing, dark fiction, heritage

All of us, readers and writers, are bereft when criticism remains too polite or too fearful to notice the disrupting darkness before its eyes.

Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*

INTRODUCTION

This paper by a former fiction editor and a practising author of dark fiction provides a personal reflection on the experience of writing a short story in response to an open call for submissions to a commercial dark fiction anthology. My aim is to analyse how I engaged with the concept of darkness creatively and ideologically during the several phases of writing an imaginative work for a specific, time-constrained, real-world objective.

The approach I take is broadly autoethnographic, using 'personal experience to describe the processes that contribute to the production of popular culture texts' (Manning and Adams, 2015, 202). The focus is on cognitive rather than social processes, although the two interpenetrate, as studies of creativity have shown (Czikszentmihalyi, [2000] 2014). My research "data" includes daily captures of the story in progress and notes kept during the entire period of writing. I will argue that in a work of dark fiction 'dark' is figured through the interplay of a multiplicity of often conflicting influences and impulses, among which are linguistic structures, genre conventions, stylistic ideals, and the author's socio-political convictions and unconscious desires. I believe that my findings have implications for how we respond to and interpret figurations of the dark both in fictional and nonfictional texts.

The potential of autoethnography in creative writing studies is receiving growing recognition. Gilbert and Macleroy (2021) argue that autoethnographic methods can help creative writers to gain insights into their own writing process within specific social, historical and psychological contexts. My research provides support for the use of autoethnography in creative writing teaching and research. It also extends the existing scholarship. By taking as its case study the writing of a work of genre fiction for publication, it shows how the writing process can be influenced by commercial considerations, thus potentially providing useful insights and lines of inquiry for those wanting to make the transition from recreational to professional creative writing.

The paper was prepared for a multidisciplinary conference on the theme of dark heritage. It soon led me to see the potential for cross-disciplinary dialogue between my own academic field of literary studies and that of heritage studies. For example, literary traditions (genre conventions, intertextuality etc.) might be conceptualised as a form of intangible heritage.

And heritage sites – among which, locations associated with famous authors and settings from famous works of literature feature prominently – might lend themselves to analysis in terms of the literary genres (horror, crime, romance etc.) drawn on to promote them. It could well be argued that 'dark tourism' as a concept owes its very articulation to literary texts. The 1996 themed issue of the *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, which sought to define the emerging concept of dark tourism, carried an editorial entitled 'Heart of Darkness' which is surely a conscious reference to Joseph Conrad's novella of the same name. In the same issue, A.V. Seaton (1996) begins his still influential article with an anecdote by Thomas De Quincey about Samuel Taylor Coleridge and literary London and later discusses dark tourism or thanatourism's origins with reference to substantially literary movements, such as the Gothic and Back Romanticism. The use of the trope 'dark' as a label for a type of both literature and heritage that challenges conventional notions of pleasure suggests a shared problematic in literary studies and heritage studies which might be usefully explored.

POLITICS OF THE DARK

Dark fiction and dark tourism (less commonly 'dark heritage') are ambiguous and contested terms in their respective fields. Dark fiction is sometimes used to demarcate a literary genre and can be practically synonymous with horror (Young, 2011; Reader, 2018). Dani Cavallaro (2002, 15), in contrast, expands dark fiction into 'dark textuality', a type of writing which 'eludes the keenest attempts to ghettoize its themes by enclosing them within academic genres and, indeed, consistently overspills the structures it [genre criticism] adopts.' Works as diverse as Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* can be read as dark fiction, in so far as they are concerned with the 'murkier facets' of human existence, foreground moral ambivalence, and impart a sense of unease (Cavallaro, 2002, 1-2). Correspondingly, in a comprehensive review of two decades of academic research into dark tourism and thanatourism, Duncan Light (2017) finds that the scope, validity and usefulness of the term has been hotly debated since its first appearance. Dark tourism serves at best as an 'umbrella term for any form of tourism that is somehow related to death, suffering, atrocity, tragedy or crime' (Light, 2017, 277).

While authors eagerly exploit the trope dark for its range of mostly negative connotations, it is rare in studies of dark fiction and rarer still in studies of dark tourism for there to be any critical discussion of this linguistic practice. One notable exception is Bowman and Pezzullo (2010) who acknowledge the 'negative valence of the term [dark] in western culture' (188) and argue that what gets labelled as dark tourism 'seems to be a complicated matter of perspective and privilege' (191). More typical is an unreflective acceptance of the prevailing meanings of dark with no discussion of their history or the relations of power in which these meanings circulate.

That the label dark should be attached to a certain type of writing or heritage is not as self-evident or inevitable as widespread practice may lead us to assume. Labelling requires the action of a decision-making agent. Cavallaro (2002), for example, switches back and forth between 'dark textuality' and 'gothic vision', in a manner which suggests either term would suffice; and, as already noted, in genre publishing, horror and dark fiction are frequently used interchangeably, perhaps with the impact on intended readers in mind. In heritage studies, the range of alternatives to dark is extensive. At the historical moment when the concept of dark tourism was being formulated, Seaton (1996) proposed it should be redefined 'thanatourism'.

Since then, as Light (2017, 282) shows, 'morbid tourism', 'trauma tourism', 'grief tourism', 'difficult heritage', 'heritage that hurts' and 'sensitive heritage' amongst other terms have also emerged as contenders. One reason for the sticking power of the label dark is, paradoxically, its very lack of precision, its power to evoke a horde of 'unpleasant' (282) associations and at the same time obscure important differences between them.

It requires only a short conceptual step to move from dark to black. Indeed 'black tourism' (*le tourism noir* and *schwarzer Tourismus* respectively) is the standard French and German translation of dark tourism. In English-language constructions such as 'black fiction' and 'black heritage', the adjective black is problematically ambiguous in this context and more likely to denote an ethnic demographic than evoke a sense the frightening or the unpleasant. However, black does feature in the title of a recent dark fiction anthology *The New Black: A Neo-Noir Anthology*, which states in its Foreword, employing the diluting mediation of French, 'neo noir simply means dark fiction' (Barron, 2014, 3). Chris Rojek's (1993) notion of 'black spots' tourism was in many ways a forerunner of dark tourism. And Richard Sharpley ([2007] 2010), in his typology of dark tourism, places 'black tourism' at the end of the spectrum as the purest form of dark tourism.

Black is a word that has perplexed and fascinated linguists. As Alan James (1981) has shown, the word appears to be peculiar to the English language and without obvious relatives in the Germanic or Romance languages of Europe. It derives from the Old English word *blaec*, but it resembles closely the Old English word *blãc*, which means white (the source of the modern English words *bleak* and *bleach*). This uncanny resemblance has led to ongoing consideration that these two words with opposite meanings have the same origin (Abel, 1884, 41; Gloy, 2019, 197-8;). The limited evidence available suggests that black was originally used as a neutral descriptive word for dark colours and only later gained the negative connotations of dirt, impurity and evil through the influence of the religious writings of the medieval Christian Church (James, 1981). Querying the negative connotations of black is part of Cavallaro's (2002) project:

> Questioning the blackness of darkness is a means of interrogating a whole collection of stereotypes. If darkness alludes to menace and fear, it must be stressed that the images are not inevitably black. At the same time, blackness cannot be universally assumed to connote evil since much that is threatening is evoked by its very opposite (22).

I have drawn attention to some commonalties in the deployment of dark and black in literary studies and heritage studies and suggested there is scope for productive cross-disciplinary research. I have argued, too, these evocative tropes should be deployed self-reflectively, with an eye to their history and their politics. This preamble is also intended to provide some critical and personal context to my endeavour to analyse the process of writing a piece of dark fiction.

Significantly, research in the field of creative writing also relies on conventional tropes of darkness. Gilbert and Macleroy's (2021) article, cited in the introduction, bears the title 'Different Ways of Descending into the Crypt: Methodologies and Methods for Researching Creative Writing' and yokes together 'darkness' and the gothic. The crypt is a metaphor for the creative writing process, hidden away beneath the light of day and somewhat daunting to approach: to research is to go down into the 'dark', personally or vicariously, with or without

a torch. It is a troubling metaphor but one so intimately derived from Enlightenment notions of knowledge production that it is near impossible to avoid when discussing research. I can only hope that by making the concept of darkness as such one of the objects of this study I have gone some way in deconstructing this dominant metaphor.

WHY I WRITE

My conscious intention was to write a story which met the publisher's requirement to be frightening and feature darkness as a theme. At the same time, I wanted to deploy the repertoire of horror stereotypes and tropes in a way that was at least minimally critical and potentially subversive. While there are certainly exceptions, I think it is fair to say that a great number of works of dark fiction, especially those that might be more narrowly defined as horror, rely on the unreflective construction of various types otherness to achieve their effect. This practice of othering is made most apparent in the figure of the monster, which for some commentators is a defining feature of the horror genre. Noël Carroll ([1999] 2003) is one such commentator and proposes that a monster is something that elicits feelings of fear and revulsion due to its 'violation, transgression, subversion, or simple jamming of our standing cultural categories, norms, and conceptual schemes' (246). A glance at some of Hollywood's best known monsters, such as King Kong, Frankenstein, Norman Bates, Carrie, Michael Myers and Freddy Krueger, is sufficient to reveal the exploitation by film makers of traits stereotypically associated with cultural/racial others, unusual bodies, the hybrid, the mentally ill, and the sexually nonconforming. Angela M. Smith (2011, 2) makes explicit the influence of racial hygiene on these monstrous representations, arguing compellingly that 'eugenicist assumptions […] were vital to the formation of classic horror's visual and narrative conventions.' I was determined to resist drawing from this ideologically suspect *liber monstrorum*.

It could be objected these conscious intentions made the process of my writing overly self-aware and artificial, and therefore invalid as an object of research. I would counter that whenever I write dark fiction I always have one eye on getting published and wrestle with my conscience over representing otherness. I'm not sure there is a natural, objective or detached way to write fiction. As Dirk Van Hulle (2004, 6) maintains, each act of writing has its own 'contingencies and unique features'. None is less valid as a consequence.

APPROACH

I tried to keep my data collection as inobtrusive as possible to limit its interference with the writing process. The data collected consisted of two types:

- A5 notebook: Notes made during (and occasionally before and after) periods of writing, drawing in part on the 'think-aloud' technique (Hevey, 2012), which has a long history in research into the writing process (e.g., Patrick, 1935; Selfe, 1985). My thinking aloud involved jotting down the loudest thoughts in my head without striving for continuity, coherence or comprehensiveness.

- Captures of work in progress: Word documents saved and dated after each writing "day" (approximately 35 days in total between 14 October and 31 December 2018). The purpose of this data was to allow an investigation of the 'complex process of

revision and development' of characters, themes, plot elements and language, as practised in genetic criticism (Kinderman, 2009, 9).

There are obvious limitations to this approach. Even by the standards of autoethnography, the production and evaluation of the data is highly subjective due to the 'closeness of the author to the phenomenon under investigation' (Méndez, 2013, p. 284). Especially, the act of writing about my own writing may be considered variously 'self-indulgent, narcissistic, introspective and individualised' (283). I would suggest my data has an evidentiary status similar to a writer's diary, such as the one kept by Franz Kafka, and those extended reflections by writers on the evolution of individual literary works, such as Edgar Allan Poe's *The Philosophy of Composition*, and Paul Valéry's 'Au sujet du Cimetière Marin' ('Concerning "the Cemetery by the Sea"').

FINDINGS

I worked on the story intermittently, sometimes for whole days, other times for less than an hour. It progressed through 4 stages between 14 October 2018 and 31 December 2018 and had two working titles before a final title was selected (see Table 1).

Table 1: The progress of the story.

Start date	*End date*	*Working title*	*Final Length*
14 October	14 October	Unnamed initial idea	Short paragraph
03 November	06 November	Mr Chester	c. 1200 words
07 November	11 December	Dark House/Dark Home	c. 2500 words
12 December	31 December	Dark Home	c. 4000 words

The notes filled approximately 100 pages of the A5 notebook. More than half the content of the notes records reworkings of the story text and memos to self, rather than direct reflections on the writing process. The following three broad themes emerged:

- Genre imperative – be scary!
- Creating the monster
- Materiality of language

For this paper, I have truncated the discussion under each theme to focus on the ways my writing was influenced and shaped. I have quoted short extracts from the notebook, keeping as closely as possible to the original wording, even including typos and solecisms. I have inserted comments in square bracket where clarification is necessary. I have anonymised individuals and organisations where appropriate.

Genre imperative – be scary!

As already mentioned, an essential requirement for dark fiction is that it is scary or at least unsettling. The call for submissions explicitly asked for stories that would leave the reader too afraid to turn out the light. W. H. Auden is on record as saying a work can be judged to be pornography by the physical response it generates in the male reader (Levy, 1971). Something analogous to this behaviourist test seems to be assumed in the evaluation of dark fiction. Horror stems etymologically from the verb 'to bristle'. In my notebook, I express the anxiety that my story is not scary or disturbing enough:

> Also thinking about the idea horror needs to be nasty. (03/11/18)

> Received rejection from XXX [publisher]. [They] Liked the psychological suspense but not the more philosophical/political element. Feel the pressure to push toward the sensational, the entertaining, the reader expectations of the genre – create fear . . . (04/11/18)

Nearing the deadline and trying to write the ending of 'Dark Home', I am still anxious that my story is insufficiently scary and I need to remind myself to suppress the desire to introduce a political or philosophical perspective:

> Don't over intellectualise – keep it as a horror story. (30/12/18)

Conversely, the genre imperative to be scary produced a sense of resistance. What ultimately is the social benefit of scaring readers?

> Pervasive sense that writing horror is a dilettantish activity in a world in which horror is visibly part of everyday politics . . . (04/11/18)

> Feel eager to address the contemporary political situation instead – populism, nationalism, the yellow vests. Writing horror feels like a waste of time, a regressive, indulgent activity. (02/12/18)

To write the story requires me to negotiate what I experience as a tension between the imperative to scare readers and to produce a work I consider intellectually and politically meaningful. I think the choice of the final title 'Dark Home' (about which I will say more under 'Materiality of language') can be understood as part of this process of negotiation. I am trying, with more or less success, to use the 'haunted house' trope to undermine the Self-Other dichotomy apparent in nationalistic and xenophobic thinking that represents home with metaphors of light, goodness and security, and projects darkness, evil and danger onto the constructed figure of the alien and alien cultures. Dark is still negatively valanced but its locus has shifted from the strange to the familiar.

Creating the monster

As already stated, I was determined to resist creating a monster which would exploit traits attributed to stereotyped others. At the same time, I wanted the monster to be explicitly associated with the dark, as darkness was the theme of the anthology and I hoped to maximise my story's chances of being selected. What kind of monster emerged and how? To

show something of this process, I shall examine the opening lines and relevant extracts of each of the 4 stages of the story.

1. 14 Oct – Unnamed initial idea

   All children are afraid of the dark but Matthew was different [—the darkness was afraid of him].

This sentence, which came to me spontaneously after a period of 'preparation' and 'incubation' (Sadler-Smith, 2015), marked the beginning of the writing proper. The words hovering inside square brackets represent a potential continuation of the sentence which stubbornly suggested itself to me, but for some reason never felt quite right. The child Matthew is marked as 'different' and is potentially the object of fear – the monster. It is implied he has a perverse relation to the dark, indicative perhaps of a psychic or spiritual disturbance. Children, it should be acknowledged, are a staple of horror fiction, whether as victims or perpetrators. In a history of the 'golden age of horror' Grady Hendrix (2017) devotes a whole chapter to 'Creepy Kids'; and Cavallaro's (2002) claim that children derive their paradoxical cultural status from their 'association with darkness, specifically prenatal darkness' (167) is especially relevant here. My determined attempt to avoid stereotypes of one sort has led me to invoke another.

The tentative sentence inside square brackets registers, I think, my desire to treat darkness differently. Darkness is on the way to being personified. It can feel fear and so has the potential to elicit the sympathy of readers. It is aligned with those misunderstood figures of horror, such as Frankenstein's monster and King Kong.

The structure of the sentence is revealing for what it anticipates about the evolution of both the monster and the story. I can hear the echo of what I remember to be the opening line of Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*: 'All happy families are alike: each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.' As suggested by the final title 'Dark Home', an unhappy domestic setting will be a central aspect of the finished story.

The shape of my sentence resembles what in rhetoric is called chiasmus. Chiasmus denotes a two-part structure in which the relationship between the two main elements on each side of the structure is one of inversion, in this case: *child* (fear) *darkness*: *darkness* (fear) *child*. Chiasmus can appear at all linguistic levels, from the letter level (e.g., the letter *X* from which it takes its name) to the narrative level (Norrman, 1986). Friedrich Nietzsche's famous aphorism about monsters and the abyss offers a pertinent example of a chiastic structure and mode of thinking:

   Whoever fights with monsters should see to it that he does not become one himself. And when you stare for a long time into an abyss, the abyss stares back into you. (Nietzsche, [1886] 2002, 69)

Chiasmus might be thought of as an efficient structural manifestation of my intention to subvert horror conventions, to stand them on their head, so to speak.

2. 04 Nov to 06 Nov – 'Mr Chester'

   The sun was going down which meant Mr Chester would soon appear. I moved away from the window and paced about my study. I was not afraid for myself, but for

> Sylwia, the young woman who cleaned for me and did my ironing. Mr Chester was a severe man who came from another time.

Like Matthew, Mr Chester has an association with the dark (he appears after the sun goes down), otherwise there seems to be little connection between the two emergent monsters – a child and a grown man. However, I think a concern with childhood experience, initiated by the figure of Matthew, is developed in relation to Mr Chester: he represents the returning past and he functions in a male-female-male triad infused with sexual threat and (perhaps) with Oedipal undertones.

3. 07 Nov to 11 Dec – 'Dark House'/'Dark Home'

> 'As he entered the house he recalled the words of his brother Jay: *You're not still afraid of the dark, are you?* He stopped in the hall at the foot of the stairs. Jay liked to tease him – it was just his way of showing affection.'

The themes of childhood and fear of the dark have returned. Further on in the story, this general fear of the dark becomes attached to a monster that inhabits the dark.

> His brother could be an ass sometimes. Jay tried to help but usually made things worse with his teasing humour. As kids it had been about the Goat Man, a figure of their imagination, about whom they told each other stories – well, not exactly stories, rather the same story. The Goat Man lurked in the dark to ambush you if you left your bed.

The Goat Man would qualify as one of Carroll's hybrid types. It is also a gendered monster and through associations with the mythological satyr and the slang term 'old goat', carries over the sexual threat hinted at by the figure of Mr Chester.

4. 12 Dec to 31 Dec – 'Dark Home' (4K words)

The monster which appears in the submitted version of the story draws on all the previous elements.

> He awoke in the night and knew he would have to get up and pee. He faced the same ordeal every night: wet his bed or brave the dark. His mother and stepfather restricted how much he drank, and after dinner not a drop of liquid was allowed to pass his lips; yet he always woke up with a stinging bladder, like some awful curse.'

Once again we have a child afraid of dark and the suggestion of an Oedipal triangle. The stepfather embodies aspects of the threatening male figures of Mr Chester and the Goat Man.

The narrative also plays on the undecidability of whether the threat is the darkness itself or what the darkness contains.

> 'The darkness turned crueller. It played with Stepfather a whole week long, tripping him, slamming his head against the walls, and then it bounced him down the stairs. When they switched on the light, he had a grin on his lips from the darkness living inside him.'

At the end of the story, the light is switched on and the truth (the monster) is revealed.

'By the [light] switch at the top of the stairs stood a boy who looked like him. He was even dressed in the same dirty pyjamas and his feet were also bare. The most appalling thing about him was the neediness in his eyes. It began small, a glimmer, but quickly repelled you with its searching vastness.'

The final monster (the double of the child protagonist) is a development of the initial idea of a potentially menacing child, Matthew. The mirroring, the splitting, the crossing back and forth, between monster and protagonist, self and other, need and repulsion, which feature in this final scene recuperate the chiastic structure and disposition of the first opening sentence I wrote.

To sum up, the monster evolved through the (re)iteration and (re)interpretation of core ideas and themes, some of them quite personal. Guiding its evolution is a vaguely intuited chiastic intention. In the attempt to avoid one set of stereotypes I have availed myself of others. Yet by locating darkness in the self (with its constitutive lack) and drawing attention to the role of projection, I have questioned certain of the norms and the conceptual schema on which horror (an indeed nationalistic ideology) traditionally relies.

Materiality of language

One of the more unexpected findings was the extent to which the inner logic of language (the rules of grammar and syntax) and the arbitrariness of signifier determined the development of the story. I was not aiming to write a poem, but I could appreciate Stéphane Mallarmé's quip that 'poetry is not written with ideas but with words' (Valéry, [1928] 1972, 324).

Basic linguistic considerations took up considerable time and energy.

How to describe emptiness, absence . . . A dreadful day of struggling to write simple descriptive sentences which should also convey a sense of strangeness – too many stative verbs. (25/11/2018)

Real problems with tense. Too many present perfects. Too many *its*. Finding words to describe light and dark. (26/11/18)

The notebook was also used for rewriting sentences and paragraphs when I was away from the computer and contains many crossings-out. I had a strong sense that the words on the page were placeholders waiting for better choices to turn up:

Anxiety about finishing by the deadline. Not doing the language justice. (24/12/18)

Need more time to allow ideas to percolate. I receive these small retroactive inspirations which guide word choice and increase certainty. (25/12/18)

Paragraphs I would usually spend a day developing have to be written and completed at speed. Does that make them necessarily any worse?' (26/12/18)

. . . one day before the deadline. No time to fall out of love and work through a new relation. (30/12/18)

One of my conscious intentions was to deploy strategically such loaded words as *black* and *white*, and *dark* and *light*, with the aim of subverting dominant meanings and associations.

> Spoke with A. about the idea of light being the first shock or trauma [emergence from the womb]. Also how a naturalistic fear of dark is insufficient [explanation] as there are as good naturalistic grounds to be afraid of the light – see it as a dialectical relationship. (18/10/18)
>
> Fear I will spend more time thinking than writing – *fear of the white page*. (03/11/18)
>
> [*The Haunting of*] *Hill House* uses the idea of light as frightening. (05/11/18)
>
> He climbed into the gloom/darkness . . . not related to gloaming – murky, obscurity . . . all such loaded terms. (26/11/18)

In practice, word choice was less often about nuances of signification and subversive intent than finding a word to fit the shape and rhythm of a sentence or paragraph and to avoid or exploit repetition. The two extracts below, taken respectively from the first and final version of 'Dark Home', illustrate how in the editing process, to achieve a certain stylistic effect, the text has contracted around the root words 'dark' and 'black' and 'dim':

> Stepfather always tuned off the lights because he came from a dark place – a house only spoken about and whispered about, where children were sent up ladders in winter. His stepfather was a servant of the darkness and seemed to carry it with him even in the light, to always cast a shadow, even as he supped his beer before the TV and sometimes tried to laugh or furrowed his brow and chewed his pen as he worked on the accounts [. . .] always checking the lights were off, terrified at the thought of money being spent, of money being burnt, as he called it. (Capture 12/12/18)
>
> Stepfather made everybody switch off the lights because he came from a dark place, a place where children were forced up ladders and got sent to bed hungry if they cried. Stepfather was a servant of the darkness. He carried the darkness within him and it dimmed his view and blackened his words. (Final draft)

Language, as well as putting up resistance, enabled serendipitous creativity. For me, the most instructive example of the role played by the materiality of language was in the change of the story's title from 'Dark House' to 'Dark Home'. The breakthrough was the result of an accidental discovery. While writing a paragraph, I needed to find a synonym for 'house' to avoid repetition and chose 'home' without paying attention to the difference in meaning. It was only later, on rereading the paragraph and seeing 'dark home' already written, that I was struck by its appositeness as a title because of its potential subversive stance toward the ideology of the family and by extension nationhood. It is as if the text revealed within its weave what at that moment I was ready to see. Or, to phrase it differently, it is in the face of the signifier that we confront what we aim to say.

CONCLUSION

This piece of autoethnographic research has examined the creative writing process under real world commercial pressures. In doing so, it considered the politics of language and representation and how the words 'dark' and black' and their cognates come to be figured in texts. It has shown that the language in a work of dark fiction emerges through the interplay of a multiplicity of often conflicting influences and impulses, among which are linguistic structures, genre conventions, stylistic ideals, and the author's socio-political convictions and

unconscious desires. I believe that my findings have implications for how we respond to and interpret figurations of the dark both in fictional and nonfictional texts.

This short unscientific experiment in recording and analysing my own experience of writing a dark fiction story for publication confirmed for me what numerous authors and literary scholars have claimed, namely, that the delivered text is 'less of a finished product than it may seem' (Van Hulle, 2004, 4). Paul Valéry' is an eloquent spokesperson for this ontology of incompleteness:

> [A] work is never completed except by some accident such as weariness, satisfaction, the need to deliver, or death: for, in relation to who or what is making it, it can only be one stage in a series of inner transformations. (Valéry [1939] 1971, xvi-xvii)

The words arrested on the page vibrate with their erased predecessors and gesture toward what they might have become. They are products of intention, certainly, but also of chance, and formal and practical constraints – such as those imposed by linguistic rules, stylistic demands, writing schedules, and deadlines.

From my experience, it strikes me that very little in the way we deploy tropes of darkness is either natural or inevitable. Yet it does not follow that their deployment is a free and/or conscious decision. Having "good intentions" proves insufficient for a writer to escape from stereotypical thinking. Perhaps it is to the reader-critic we need to turn our attention? By approaching texts, whether fiction or nonfiction, as works in progress and with an appreciation of how words get written, we may see more deeply into the dark.

The autoethnographic methods I employed in this research might usefully be adopted in creative writing studies as a means of deepening students' and teachers' understanding of how works of fiction get produced in specific contexts. The capture and analysis of a work in progress reveals, among other things, the unpredictable process through which themes and characters emerge and evolve. A productive line for future research could be the development of a theory of such intermediary text (which typically far exceeds in number of words the final product) and a more systematic method for its analysis. Keeping a notebook during the writing process encourages the externalising of self-dialogue and allows otherwise fleeting thoughts, feelings, and insights to be preserved for later examination. Such a notebook provides an excellent resource for learning about the self as it engages with the aesthetic and ethical decision making that writing entails. Published ethnographic research into the writing process under different conditions and by different types of author could make a valuable contribution to classroom activities and discussions.

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