A Narrative of the Imagined Future:

How Art-Making Displaced a Narrative of Suicidality.

An Autoethnographic Inquiry into

Suicidality, Spirituality and Narrating an Imagined Future

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Declaration of Originality

I, Debra Joan Phillips hereby declare that the thesis here presented is the outcome of the research project undertaken during my candidacy, that I am the sole author unless otherwise indicated, and that I have fully documented the source of ideas, references, quotations and paraphrases attributable to other authors.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT 1

KEY TERMS 2

INTRODUCTION: A narrative of the imagined future

A narrative of disquiet 3

Aims, research questions and broader objectives 5

Significance of the project 6

The broader significance of these findings, and the project more broadly, may be understood as follows:

The need for first-person perspectives from “invisible women” 7

The importance of spirituality in managing suicidality 8

The role narratives of the imagined future play in resisting suicidality 9

The courage required to live with suicidality, an act as if the imagined has become real 10

Conceptual approach 11

Methodology

Autoethnography 14

Autoethnography and ethics 16

The multiple roles served by art-making in this project 17

The project’s relationship to art therapy 19

Outsider art 21
1. **PART A: De-structuring: depression and suicidity**

   A guide to what follows
   
   A narrative of suicidal psyche
   
   Researching my experiences of depression and suicidity
   
   Analysing “De-structuring” in my artwork
   
   Setting the stage
   
   Eyes, hands, mouths and heart
   
   Mouths and maps
   
   Hands, mouths and red
   
   Interiors
   
   The imaginary landscape
   
   Comparisons with the work of other Outsider artists
   
   To conclude

2. **PART B: Re-structuring: radical courage from the rupture**

   A map for what follows

   A narrative of radical courage: how the narrative of suicidality was ruptured that June evening in a London bathroom

   Research and Reflection

   “Re-structuring”: Making sense of the rupture and its creative aftermath

   Conceptualising radical courage

   Collage as autoethnographic research and a form of re-structuring
Rupture between self and past  
God and the world  
God’s prophetic call  
Radical courage  
Forays into the imaginary realm  
To conclude  

3. **PART C: Constructing: A narrative of the imagined future**

A map to what follows  
A narrative constructed from within the imaginary realm  
A short overview of narrative studies  
My relationship to narrativity: the importance of “unnatural narrative” and its challenge to accepted truths  
My personal experience as an “unnatural narrative” or fairy tale  
How do narratives of an imagined future relate to narrative therapy?  

Revelations: Visual narratives of an imagined future  
The traveller’s tale: A narrative of choice  
Courage, I hand to you: A narrative of possibility  
The River of Life: A narrative of wise knowing  
Thou must prophesy before peoples and nations: A narrative to stake-hold my future  

How else would God speak to me: A narrative of courage  

Saule Mate, the Latvian sun goddess and the threads of the future: a narrative of a future-in-the-making  
To conclude
4. CONCLUSION

Art-making and creative processes 127
Autoethnographic techniques 129
Into the future 130

5. APPENDICES

List of Paintings 131
Paintings, PART A 134
Paintings, PART B 142
Paintings, PART C 148
Radical Courage exhibition McGlade Gallery, posters 151
Radical Courage exhibition McGlade Gallery, PART A 153
Radical Courage exhibition McGlade Gallery, PART B 154
Radical Courage exhibition McGlade Gallery, PART C 155
Additional Revelations exhibition at the TAP Gallery, December 2017 159

6. BIBLIOGRAPHY 162
TITLE


ABSTRACT

This interdisciplinary and autoethnographic PhD by creative project examines the experience of halted suicide on the part of the researcher, an “invisible woman” raised to set aside her wants to satisfy others’ needs. The inquiry examines the researcher’s engagement with art-making in order to manage her ongoing suicidality and analyses some of her resulting artworks, which might be described as examples of “Outsider art”.

Drawing on perspectives from philosophy, theology, psychology, art therapy and the interdisciplinary field of narrative studies, the project identifies three key factors pertinent to the researcher’s experience of halted suicide and subsequently managing suicidality. The first is the role of spirituality and the experience of epiphany or “prophetic call”. The second is a “narrative of the imagined future”. This refers to the need for people experiencing suicidality to make use of the imaginative resources generated by their depression to create a new story about their future self and life. The third factor is “radical courage”, a term adapted from the philosopher Jonathan Lear’s notion of “radical hope”. This refers to a steadfast, resolute determination to choose life over death, and to move towards the realisation of an alternative future in concrete, moment-by-moment ways.

Art-making serves a number of roles in this doctoral project. In the first place, the researcher uses a series of artworks as autoethnographic sources. These chiefly take the form of watercolours and collages, most produced in visual diaries with the aim of recording states of mind and being over time. Those works produced before the doctoral project began have been subjected to close analysis in order to provide details of the researcher’s subjective experience, and thus evidence of her autoethnographic findings. The researcher has also produced a body of work during this project as a form of autoethnographic inquiry in its own right. In this case, she has consciously explored concepts in visual form and subjected the resulting images to techniques of visual analysis with the aim of deepening her autoethnographic insights.
In addition to this art-making, the researcher has produced a body of paintings exhibited to the public. The purpose here has been to communicate her findings in visual form, supplementing and providing an alternative to the discussion in this thesis. The exhibited paintings also provide a reflexive demonstration of the process of imagining a new, future-oriented self-narrative and then exercising the courage required to bring it into life whilst also explaining how the three key factors mentioned above are layered together in the works.

The value of this doctoral project lies firstly in demonstrating the value of first-person and autoethnographic accounts for understanding suicidality, particularly those from “invisible women” whose perspectives remain under-represented in sociological and psychological literature. The project draws attention to another under-researched topic: the relationship between spirituality and the ability to halt a suicide. The project emphasises the power of imagining a new future-oriented self-narrative, and the courageous process involved in bringing that imagined narrative into being through small, incremental actions in the present. Art-making practices are also explored, particularly those by people with no formal art training who produce “Outsider art”. Finally, in using artwork and techniques of visual analysis in multiple ways, the project has value for those interested in the multi-faceted and unconventional methods associated with art-based ethnographic inquiry.

**Key terms:** autoethnography, narratives of imagined future, suicidality, psychache, imaginary realm, spirituality, mysticism, prophetic call, courage, art-making, arts-based inquiry
INTRODUCTION: A narrative of the imagined future

A narrative of disquiet

Like Mary Poppins, I took the east wind from Sydney into London to work as a teacher for the twelve months of 2010. London was a place where the imagined and real intersected for me. Since childhood days of fairy tales and the Mary Poppins film, through adolescence and knowledge of the Bloomsbury set and the Pre-Raphaelites, I had yeamed to go to London and see its galleries, museums, theatres and historical places. I was pleased that the long months of planning would become an actuality. What I had not imagined was that the secondary boys’ school where I was employed to teach geography was in the midst of major cultural upheavals and pedagogic shifts. In the beginning, I thought I could cope by wilfully forcing myself to manage and to make something positive out of the situation. But I did not manage and was overwhelmed. In a short space of time, my sense of self was disturbed, and my sense of being-in-the-world collapsed.

In May 2010, a London doctor told me to return to Sydney as soon as possible because I was experiencing a physical and emotional crisis. I refused. I was determined to live in London. That was the plan, and I was someone who made and stuck to plans. The doctor probably suspected I was in a state of psychological and spiritual turmoil but did not ask about it. I was in the midst of psychache, a term coined by the psychiatrist Edwin Schneidman to refer to the intolerable, intense psychological pain felt by people experiencing suicidality, which they believe will only be relieved by death.¹ I had entered and inhabited what I now regard as a “de-structuring” zone in which my self-narrative as a teacher was disintegrating and being washed away. Believing I had failed as a teacher and that I had nothing left to lose, my partially formed intention to conduct a suicide became a resolve over the following weeks.

Yet something stayed my hand. I did not follow through with the final act.

For a long time, I feared people would say I was mad to speak of the interruption as a spiritual experience. My research and the art produced during the course of this auto-ethnographic doctoral project has allowed me to own the experience as a “prophetic call” — a call from God and from my future — that ruptured my plan. My decision to halt the suicide, ³

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¹ Edwin Schneidman, Suicide as Psychache: A Clinical Approach to Self-Destructive Behaviour (Maryland, USA: Jason Aronson, 1995).
to turn from the comfort of extinguishing psychache and to live, knowing each day would be as awful as the next one, required a courage I had not believed possible: a radical courage, as I define it in this thesis.

God’s call was both a prompt to imagine my future as an artist, and to reclaim a childhood desire: that of becoming an artist. My mother had died when I was eleven years of age and my father had shepherded me towards a teaching career instead, believing it would guarantee my future. Despite his good intentions in discouraging my ambition, his actions silenced my longings. This continued to be the case until after my halted suicide attempt, when I finally resolved to reclaim and pursue my desires.

It was not enough just to imagine I would become an artist. I needed an actual self-narrative that would dislodge and displace a narrative of suicidality with a preferred, future-oriented narrative that could be lived as though it had really happened. I imagined myself as an eighty-year-old artist, how it would feel in my body, in my behaviours, emotions and thinking. Then with my preferred self-narrative as an artist – the narrative that my mother had once fostered, and I still yearned to hold – I set out to make the imagined a reality. Over the next months, I resolved to live as though I had already become an artist. I began art-making in my daily diaries, producing sketches and collages, and attending art exhibitions, galleries and museums at every opportunity. Through this process, I began to slough off the socio-cultural fetters of a typical white, mature-aged, middle-class, “invisible” Australian woman: one raised to set aside her wants to satisfy others’ needs.

Returning to Sydney in December 2010, I continued to teach from the beginning of the following year. Then, in early May 2014, I experienced concussion resulting from an accident, followed by post-concussion trauma which triggered another intense episode of suicidal depression. This incident pushed me to begin reading across the disciplines of philosophy, theology, psychology and the interdisciplinary field of narrative studies to help me make sense of my experience, manage my suicidality, and live to pursue my goals. I also read about autoethnography and continued to produce and immerse myself in art before embarking on this PhD by creative project in 2016.

**Aims, research questions and broader objectives**
The overarching aim of this project is to use interdisciplinary perspectives and autoethnographic techniques to identify and theorise the key factors that allowed me to resist the seductive appeal of suicidality. I began this inquiry with a series of questions, the first of which was:

- What light do autoethnographic techniques shed on my ability to halt a suicide attempt and subsequently live with ongoing suicidality? What are the key relevant factors these techniques allow me to identify – and what is the best way to conceptualise them in the context of relevant interdisciplinary research?

A number of broader objectives underpin this question. The most significant is that the findings arising out of my autoethnographic research will produce insights of value to others: whether individuals experiencing suicidality; practitioners or carers supporting or treating people experiencing suicidality; or those more generally interested in the relationship between mental health and spirituality, and in the relationship that variously exists between mental health, imagination, the production of new self-narratives, art-making and creativity.

Since art-making manifestly played a crucial role in my experience of living with suicidality, the following question has also driven this inquiry:

- What role can art-making and creative practices play in the experience of living through depression and suicidality?

In the course of investigating this last question, I have sought to reflect on how my art relates to the work of other artists, to art therapy and "Outsider art" created by people with no formal art training like myself and who often struggle with similar issues around mental health and/or suicide. Again, my objective was and remains to offer possible insights to others.

My research is contextualised and qualified by the fact that it comes from the perspective of a white, middle-class, mature-aged, Catholic woman. I do not aim to speak for all other women experiencing suicidal depression in this thesis, and still less all suicidal people at large. I hope nonetheless that some other people living with suicidality will find insights from this research. My hope is also that the project will contribute to a greater willingness on the part of people living with suicidality from a range of backgrounds and contexts to speak
about their experiences – particularly those who have been conditioned to defer to more authoritative opinions and to put others needs before their own. My objective is also that these perspectives might receive more attention in scholarly and clinical research and reflection on mental health, spirituality, art-making, creativity and narratives of self.

In fleshing out how I have pursued these aims and objectives in the following pages, I provide an overview of the key thinkers and perspectives informing its approach. I have embedded a more detailed review of relevant literature in the ensuing chapters rather than summarising this in a separate section.

**Significance of the project**

My research has allowed me to pinpoint three key factors that made it possible for me to halt a suicide attempt and subsequently live with suicidality:

- Firstly, the acute suicidality I experienced in 2010 ruptured my everyday life and sense of self, and this in turn opened the possibility of a different future. As a Christian within the Catholic tradition, I have interpreted the rupture as what the theologian Norman Habel terms a “prophetic call” from God.² Experienced as a sudden realisation requiring a radical change of life direction, this moment of rupture has similarities with the spiritual epiphanies described by medieval female mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen, Marjorie Kemp, Teresa of Avila, and Joan of Arc.³

Secondly, it was crucial for me to imagine and narrate an alternate future. In my case, this involved retrieving childhood’s suppressed desire to become an artist, drawing from the past in order to imagine a new future.

- Thirdly, it was necessary for me to exercise what I have come to call radical courage in order to choose to live rather than die – and to go on making that choice, on a daily and sometimes even moment-by-moment basis. I summarise the reasons why I have decided to use the term “radical courage” below. For the moment, I note that it refers to a potent, steadfast sense of resolve to keep living, and to attempt to

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translate my imagined future into reality. Part of what was involved in this resolve was the acceptance that I was never going to “recover” from suicidality. I would never find myself wholly free from depression and suicidal urges, but I could decide to live with them by exerting “radical courage”.

The broader significance of these findings, and the project more broadly, may be understood as follows:

1. The need for first-person perspectives from “invisible women”

In 1989, the psychologist David Lester wrote an article challenging researchers to attend to under-researched aspects of suicidality. Lester recognised that most research on suicidality had been conducted by male researchers examining mostly men’s completed suicides. He wanted more female scholars to conduct research on suicide. Lester also wanted more research on women’s first-hand experiences of, and perspectives on, suicidality. Since women were more likely to attempt but not complete suicide, paying more attention to their experiences would shed light on the phenomena of halted and incomplete suicides.

Lester was convinced that a focus on “invisible women”, a demographic under-represented in the psychological literature, could challenge scholarship and taken-for-granted assumptions about suicidality. Lester was intimating here that “ordinary” women were women without a public profile; women who had been overlooked by researchers, and were reluctant to, or advised not to disclose their experience of a thwarted suicide attempt. Additionally, Lester’s identification of invisible women highlighted that previous research had treated men’s experiences as paradigmatic.

The cultural geographer Olivia Stevenson has made a suggestion similar to Lester’s more recently. She argues that attending to women’s accounts challenges the psycho-medical discourses that regulate knowledge about suicidality. She also argues that too much research to date has focused on the pathology of completed suicides. The concentration on completed suicides has influenced how the community interprets suicidality and adversely

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affects how people who are trying to manage suicidality are cared for within the community.\(^6\)

Like Lester, Stevenson is convinced that future research examining previously undisclosed, first-person accounts of attempted suicide will change understandings of suicidality. Such research may offer better understandings of factors that interrupt a suicide attempt, likely resulting in changes to suicide prevention strategies and better management of psychache.\(^7\)

In addition, Stevenson shares Lester’s view that paying more attention to first-person accounts of “invisible women” will provide more insight into the specifically gendered ways in which women manage their experiences of suicidality.\(^8\) It might also disclose gendered social-cultural factors that may kindle women’s suicidal depression.

Research into the sociocultural influences on women’s experiences of suicidality has located a range of factors, most notably dysfunctional relationships, lack of stable accommodation, lack of control of finances, and poverty.\(^9\) The significance of this thesis does not lie in advancing knowledge of these factors, however, but rather in building knowledge of halted or incomplete suicide from a particular “invisible woman’s” perspective, and more generally in highlighting the need for research on suicidality to give credence to “outlier” perspectives.\(^10\)

2. The importance of spirituality in managing suicidality

Quite apart from the insights it sheds into the experience of epiphany or “prophetic call”, this project broadly foregrounds the importance of considering the relationship between spirituality and suicidality. Spirituality – by which I mean a deep life-force that “generates,


meaning, purpose and transcendence” in human experience – is a factor that may help to transform ways of researching and managing suicidality. In saying this, I build on the work of a small number of other doctoral researchers such as Michael Eales, Elizabeth Ryan Hall and David Webb who identify a spiritual dimension to suicidality and the ability to resist its force. Lester’s work is also relevant here. Like the suicidologists Rekha Wagani and Erminia Colucci and other researchers such as Marek Kopacz et al, Lester has concluded that religiosity and spirituality may be protective factors for some personality types. My research goes further than this through its interdisciplinary approach, drawing on the work of theologians such as Rowan Williams to highlight the spiritual aspect of acute psychic pain. I also draw on the work of the art philosopher Robert Henri who argues for the existence of an “art spirit” or creative life-force that connects individuals to a sense of self and the future.

Williams says that the collapse of understandings of self which accompanies acute spiritual-emotional anguish can create a space in which another way of being can be constructed. This claim corresponds with a core concept developed by the philosopher Julia Kristeva: namely, that the experience of depression can generate new imaginary possibilities.

3. The role narratives of the imagined future play in resisting suicidality

16 Williams, “Open to Judgement,” 95-6.
At a general level, this project highlights the ways in which individuals frame accounts of their selves as stories, drawing on literary techniques in the process. In addition, my research draws attention to the value of self-narrative for “invisible women” experiencing suicidality. By placing themselves at the centre of a story of lived experience, women can render themselves visible. Telling a public narrative about a halted suicide is a particularly powerful way for invisible women dealing with suicidality to re-shape their suicidal experience, turning it into an act and story of resistance.

As key scholars in narrative studies have noted, the creative practice of storytelling is a tool to break through and “transcend the known”. Narratives allow individuals to explore different timescapes and landscapes, to uncover lost things and imagine and experiment with alternative ways of being. Just as Lester has called for more qualitative research into the impact of “cultural scripts” that trigger suicidality, this project highlights the value of self-narrative scripts as a strategy for individuals to halt and dislodge narratives of suicide. My experience suggested that the most powerful self-narrative scripts in this regard are those focused on an imagined and alternative future in which a preferred self has been realised. Whilst this will be explored throughout this thesis, Part C specifically examines “narrative studies” and the way in which the subversive potential of the “unnatural narrative” as coined by Alber et al., may be a useful way of analysing my own capacity to develop a narrative of an imagined future.

4. The courage required to live with suicidality, an act as if the imagined has become real

Simply imagining an alternative future is not enough. Someone seeking to dislodge a narrative of suicide with a new future-oriented self-narrative must act as if the imagined future can, and indeed has already been achieved. To do this requires disciplined daily practices designed to will the desired future into being, underpinning by a resolve to behave as if that which is imagined is real. Making efforts to perform the future in the present –

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adjust one’s body and mind in order to “feel” that the imagined future is already a reality – is crucial to the therapeutic role that conscious self-narratives and narratives of imagined futures can play.

It takes immense courage for a person experiencing suicidality to choose to tap into the life force or “art spirit”, to produce a narrative of an alternative future, and begin acting as if it were already real. I refer to this courage as radical after being drawn to the philosopher Jonathan Lear’s concept of “radical hope”, but also out of a desire to highlight the strength that this courage requires. My aim here is to emphasise that the courage involved in deciding not to commit suicide is more arduous and worthy of celebration than the courage it takes to go through with a suicide. My aim is also to highlight the power that comes from a determination to believe that one’s desired future can and will be summoned into being, and by choosing to act as if it has already become real – even while knowing that this is not in fact yet the case.

Radical courage can be actioned through art-making. In my own case, radical courage allowed me to tap into the “art spirit”, seeking to transcend what chaplain Rachel Ettun calls the diversion and distraction that accompanies trauma, and experience a prophetic “connection to the sublime”. My experience was that spirituality generates radical courage which can then be employed in managing suicidality through the development of creative practice.

**Conceptual approach**

My project is interdisciplinary, informed by theologians, philosophers and psychologists as well as theorists and contributors to narrative studies. I have also drawn from scholars and practitioners involved in autoethnography and/or interested in art therapy and “Outsider art” in ways outlined below. At the core of my approach are the ideas of the theologian Jürgen Moltmann and three key philosophers: Elizabeth Grosz, Ernst Bloch, and Julia Kristeva.

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Moltmann’s work is significant because he proposes a theology that emphasises a desire for the future and conceives of it as an ongoing process realised through action as well as imagination.\textsuperscript{24} Grosz’s work is significant because she emphasises an ontology of becoming from a feminist perspective. This idea resonates with my interest in the intrusive call from the future to the present self. The concept of becoming is also at the heart of radical courage, a courage to transform the present self by actively responding to a prophetic call.\textsuperscript{25} Bloch led me to see the relationship between radical courage, creative expressions and the imagined future. His work \textit{The Principle of Hope} explores how utopia – an image of an imagined future – may be found in a variety of cultural expressions.\textsuperscript{26} For Bloch, as for the philosopher Jonathan Lear, the function of hope is to imagine a better future which can prompt, then motivate individuals to believe that this future can be realised.\textsuperscript{27}

Kristeva’s work is significant to my approach in this thesis for multiple reasons. In the first place, she theorises about the potential of producing new ways of expression (thinking and feeling) that can emerge out of depression. This resonates with my experience as Kristeva links depression to imagination, exploring the link between depression and the lost mother-relationship, and identifies mystical spirituality as an experience of special significance to female subjectivities. In addition, Kristeva argues that the process of writing and speaking from within melancholia (a term she uses to cover both depression and suicidality) warrants analysis. She notes that depression is difficult to describe. The experience is so unnameable, chaotic and without boundaries that language (for Kristeva, language is the “symbolic ordering” or rationalising of intuition and raw emotional expression) seems absurd and powerless in the face of it. Kristeva argues that struggling to overcome this unnameability produces new creative possibilities as it avoids being pinned down to a specific meaning.


through naming. In attempting to express the truth of this experience, a depressed person can create a different expression, unique to their self and circumstance.28

In *Black Sun*, Kristeva sought to valorise the incoherence, aligning it with the “pre-symbolic” ordering (pre-language) that lies at the heart of melancholia and, in particular, feminine experiences of melancholia. This insistence on the positive potential inherent in depressive incoherence has been valuable for my approach to suicidality and halted suicide. In particular, Kristeva’s belief that creative activities are a way for the individual to make visible the inarticulate “lost thing” has influenced my approach to the relationship between suicidal depression and art-making.29

Kristeva further emphasises female mysticism in her work. She approaches mystical experience as a phenomenon that collapsed the boundaries between the body, subjectivity and life’s meaning, offering a “sacred resistance to the symbolic order”.30 Kristeva’s idea that women are able to experience mystic experiences most intensely because their bodies are intersections of the material and non-material world – of physicality, of past and future, and of storytelling – appealed to my interest in producing and valorising an “invisible woman’s” understanding of spirituality, radical courage and halted suicide.31

Together, these aspects of Kristeva’s theorising have helped me to understand the intimate relationship between my spirituality, halting a suicide attempt, the call to become an artist and my mother’s death. Although my attendance at church had become irregular during the last two years of my mother’s life, it became impossible after she died due to my father’s prohibitions. Through the course of this doctoral project, and to a great extent because of Kristeva’s insights, I have come to realise that there is a connection between the death of my mother, my repressed desire to be an artist, and my yearning for the Church’s spiritual consolation. This was reinforced for me by the feminist theologian Christina Lledo Gomez who, in *The Church as Woman and Mother*, examined how the Church has used the Mother as metaphor for its pastoral and spiritual nurturing role. I now understand how Sunday

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church rituals during my later adolescence offered “comfort and promise in a context of devastation and despair, and [of] rebuilding” amid my grief for my own mother.32

My return to church in late adolescence was a rebuttal of my father’s atheism, a return to the rituals that enabled spiritual communion, and a remembrance of experiences shared with my mother. Reflecting on this during this project has allowed me to clarify why I view the mystical experience of the prophetic call as a generative, nurturing force, and why it had such a profound impact on me. I now also understand how the narrative threads of being Mary Poppins-esque, living in London and becoming an artist, are woven into my relationship with my mother. The prophetic call reactivated what she taught me, inspiring me to revive artistic desires first encouraged by her, and so work towards a new and preferred future.

**Methodology**

**Autoethnography**

Autoethnography is both the method and the product of the research conducted for this thesis.33 Autoethnography is a form of “insider ethnography” in which the researcher and their lived experience are the “experimental subject”.34 Autoethnography has some similarities to autobiography, but as Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams and Arthur Bochner point out, its goals are much broader. An autoethnographer is interested in analysing the relationship of their personal experience with their sociocultural context. In addition, autoethnographers use personal data and experiences to advance knowledge of a specific field or fields of research, and by doing so, challenge or problematise existing knowledge. Like other researchers, autoethnographers consciously observe guidelines for ethical research.35

Examples of autoethnography aimed at simultaneously advancing knowledge and destabilising “objective” academic perspectives include work by the disability researcher

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Rose Richards. She uses her own experiences to challenge academic and public perceptions of people with disabilities. Another example is the dissertation research on transgenderism from the health and social health worker Julie Peters. Her dissertation offers unique perspectives on transgender identity by drawing on her personal experiences. However, examples of autoethnographies examining suicidality are more directly relevant to this project. So too are examples in which feminist researchers and “invisible women” have used autoethnography to destabilise and shift traditional academic perspectives. In observations highlighting the value of autoethnography, the sociologist Elizabeth Ettore points out that it creates a space for female and feminist researchers to connect the personal to the scholarly as well as the political. Autoethnography allows such researchers to produce new forms of research as well as to transform socio-cultural and political realities.

The reflexivity of autoethnographic research is another reason I was drawn to it as the method for this project. The autoethnographic process itself transforms the researcher’s ontological and epistemological stance, because it causes them to engage reflexively with new knowledge, understandings and interpretations of their experience of the world. This facet of autoethnographic research highlights the ontology of becoming in which this project is grounded. It underlines the fact that one’s subjectivity is “always on the move” as it is continuously invented, constructed or re-structured as a response to traumatic experiences.

I was further drawn to autoethnography because of its experimental quality. This quality springs from the fact that autoethnography is a relatively new and self-consciously innovative method without fixed protocols, often involving creative assemblages of


The final reason for choosing autoethnography for this project is that it allows for a multi-disciplinary approach, encouraging non-traditional, more imaginative ways of incorporating and presenting research. Researchers aim to engage with the end-users in more innovative ways rather than relying on a purely cognitive understanding of the data. This was certainly so in my case. Autoethnography enabled me to use art-making in numerous ways for this project. While details of this appear shortly below, I note for the moment that the experimental nature of autoethnographic research emboldened me to create an exhibition that (among other things) would communicate my research in visual form. I was also inspired by discussions of the experimental and provocative nature of arts-based research, aimed at inciting an audience to ask questions about the issue being investigated. Neither autoethnographic nor arts-based research delivers stock answers. Rather, they expose oppressive practices and reveal the in-between spaces where social transformation can begin.\footnote{Gioia Chilton and Patricia Leavy, “Arts-Based Research Practice: Merging Social Research and the Creative Arts,” in The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research, ed. Patricia Leavy (New York: Guilford Press, 2014), 422.}

**Autoethnography and ethics**

Autoethnographic research is an ethical response to social justice calls for change.\footnote{Judith C. Lapadat, “Ethics in Autoethnography and Collaborative Autoethnography,” Qualitative Inquiry 23, no. 8 (2017): 592.} It relies on the integrity of the researcher to provide an authentic account of the lived experience, but in doing so raises some issues relating to research ethics. The first issue concerns the principle of “Do No Harm”, both to the self as the experimental subject, and to others who may be mentioned in the text. The sociologist Judith Lapadat says that the researcher has an
ethical responsibility to seek consent from others who may be detrimentally impacted from published autoethnographies. Researchers must be judicious in their choice of what data is used. By employing “relational ethics”, they must use only aspects of their lived experience that will not damage current and future relationships. For this reason, I have avoided anecdotes about my childhood in this thesis where possible, conscious that my deceased parents cannot challenge, refute or agree with my interpretations.

Due to the ethical considerations involved, the social scientists Laurel Richardson and Elizabeth Adams St Pierre recommend that autoethnographers adopt literary devices or other forms of creative analytical practice to maintain anonymity of people, places and events wherever this is necessary to protect living individuals who might otherwise be identified through published research. This is as necessary for autoethnographic researchers as the importance of being alert to information that may rekindle trauma and establish procedures to mitigate its impact. Researchers involved in autoethnography also need to approach their topic in a way that prevents their work simply becoming a confessional or personal psychoanalysis laced with voyeuristic material.

The last point is another reason why I make limited reference to my mother in this PhD. I am aware that her long illness, hospitalisation and death permeate my subjectivity, my spirituality and my relationship with suicidality, but the story of our relationship and the grief and desolation that accompanies her death is not the subject of this thesis. Researching and writing about my experience of suicidality and attempted suicide has been excruciatingly harrowing. I made the decision not to probe into the impact of my mother’s death at greater length even at a scholarly level, because to do so would compound my vulnerability, breaching the researcher’s ethical stance of “Do no harm to either participant or researcher.”

The multiple roles served by art-making in this project

The art I discuss in this thesis broadly falls into two categories. In the first instance, I discuss a series of discrete works on paper and some pieces from my visual diaries produced during

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and after 2010, which I regard as autoethnographic sources. These works are reproduced and analysed in the first two chapters. The visual motifs in these works and the artistic sources on which I have drawn provide evidence of and insights into my changing state of mind and being over time. Subjecting these works to close visual analysis has yielded surprising insights into that changing state of mind. I was prompted to reflect on why I had repeated certain motifs in these works. Most notable are the open mouths and clutching hands, and my preference for certain fairy tale characters such as Red Riding Hood. By further reflecting on my choice of medium, the use of maps or the unconscious or conscious artistic influences I drew on at the time, I was better able to interpret my past experience.

While the majority of the visual sources that I discuss in chapters one and two were produced during or shortly after 2010, a smaller number were produced either shortly before or after I embarked on this doctoral project as a form of autoethnographic research in their own right. I was inspired to do this by literature on arts-based research or “visual autoethnography”, engaging in a form of what Heather Stuckey and Jeremy Nobel call “embodied knowledge production”.

What this meant was that I consciously explored concepts in visual form and then subjected the resulting images to techniques of visual analysis with the aim of deepening my autoethnographic insights.

The second key way in which art figured in this project was as a means of presenting my autoethnographic findings in visual form. To this end, I produced a series of fifteen works of gouache on MDF (multi-density fibreboard) that were exhibited first at TAP Gallery in Darlinghurst, Sydney, in December 2017, and later at InsideOut Gallery at Sydney’s Macquarie Hospital in 2018. Called Revelations: Narratives of an Imagined Future, this exhibition comprised the creative project at the heart of this doctoral project. Rather than working as autoethnographic sources, the Revelations paintings provided a visual narrative of the process through which I imagined an alternative future to that of suicide and brought it into being. There was a reflexivity in this part of the project in that the creation of these paintings formed part of the means through which I was translating my imagined narrative into reality, allowing me to engage in a process of becoming an artist.

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Artwork and other visual sources are not often used in autoethnography. Most autoethnographers rely primarily on textual sources, although the use of non-textual mediums as a source of research data or as a method to communicate findings is slowly gaining currency. As the *Oxford* and *SAGE Handbooks of Qualitative Research* point out, there are now precedents for non-traditional modes of presenting and conducting ethnographic research such as performance autoethnography or a variety of “creative analytical practice (CAP) ethnographies” intended as forms of “embodied inquiry”.

Likewise, projects described as visual autoethnographies or arts-based autoethnographies are becoming more frequent. One might thus say that this is a further significance of this doctoral project, adding to those I summarised earlier. While it was not one of the core objectives I set for my research at the outset, this project contributes to a growing interest in how art-making might be used as a form of scholarly inquiry and of communicating research.

Though only mentioned briefly later in this thesis, two other exhibitions of my work were put together during this doctoral project. The first, *Radical Courage*, was a collection of fifty paintings. It appeared at Macquarie Hospital’s InsideOut Gallery between October 2016 and April 2017. The second, also called *Radical Courage*, was a comprehensive overview of my art-making since 2010 at Australian Catholic University’s McGlade Gallery, Strathfield, in May 2019. This exhibition included discrete watercolours, collaged mixed media works on paper and pieces from my 2010 visual diaries, amounting to seventy works on paper, and also ten of the *Revelations* paintings. The most significant works on paper are discussed in chapters one and two of this thesis, while the most significant of the *Revelations* works are discussed in chapter three.

**The project’s relationship to art therapy**

In addition to the many other roles it has fulfilled in my life since 2010, art-making has served a therapeutic purpose. Art-making has been one of the ways in which I expressed my

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state of mind during unsettled emotional times. It has also been instrumental in bolstering my ability to withstand suicidality. Drawing, sketching, painting and collaging has had (and continues to have) a calming effect on me. This bears out clinical research that links creative and other diversionary activities with reduced stress levels. Art-making has further given me an opportunity to create multiple visual representations of different self-narratives. The therapeutic benefit of this is that it has allowed me to scrutinise the plurality of who I understood myself to be and who I wanted to become, in keeping with my intention of constructing a different self-narrative.

While my art-making is therapeutic, to describe it as “art therapy” is too reductive. Emerging in the late nineteenth century and later used to assist soldiers traumatised in the two world wars, art therapy is a technique used by psychotherapists to treat people experiencing difficulties expressing their feelings due to developmental, cognitive or traumatic circumstances. Art therapy is conducted under the supervision of a certified counsellor, therapist or psychologist who guides the participant to discuss the symbolism of the colours, shapes, patterns and motifs that are used. While I have analysed the motifs and symbolism in my works on paper for their personal insights, I have sought to do so for a wider autoethnographic purpose. My art-making is also the principal means by which I fulfill the call from my future and commune with God.

For each of these reasons, I resist the classification of my art-making as art therapy. While there are parallels with the work of, and research into, art therapy, I needed to engage with a much wider range of literature to examine the conceptual approaches and disciplines already outlined. The mixed media works on paper analysed in my first two chapters were created solely for myself and without a psychologist’s supervision. I did not create them with the intention that others would view or discuss them, or with the intention of using them to help me tolerate the triggers and symptoms of suicidality. I remain reticent about these

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specific pieces being viewed and even more reluctant to talk about them. Rather than operating as a healing vehicle, in fact, when these works were exhibited in May 2019, they triggered an unexpected and quite powerful episode of clinical anxiety and depression.

The first time I viewed the pieces on my own, I walked away, “hearing” my father screaming at me: “This exhibition is proof that you are as mad as your mother!” Not only had I experienced the madness of suicidality and a spiritual call, created strange, brutal artworks about both experiences, dared to believe I could become an artist, pretended I was my future-self and then told a story about it, but I had also disobeyed my father and mortified him by exposing all my mad, illusory fabrications to the world. I wanted to tear the watercolours and collages from the wall. I wanted to rip them to shreds so I could mix them with water and mush them into oblivion, so no one would ever see the cruelties that my mind wreaks upon me. I walked away knowing I was slipping back into psychache’s chasm. But radical courage kicked in. Although my father died decades ago when I was in my mid-twenties, I told him that this exhibition was a public repudiation of the psychopathology of the stereotypical mad-woman-in-the-attic so prevalent in nineteenth and twentieth century literature. By refusing the tag of madness he ascribed to me, my determination to exhibit my art and to announce it as a result of a mystical experience became a form of what Kristeva might call “sacred resistance to the symbolic order”.  

**Outsider art**

Though I am wary of the reductive effects of labels, the products of my artistic practice are better understood as “Outsider art” than art therapy. Outsider art, a term first used by the psychiatrist and artist Jean Dubuffet in the mid twentieth century, and then employed by the art collector Roger Cardinal in the 1970s, is sometimes called “Raw Art” or “Art Brut”. The term “Outsider art” applies to art made by those who have little or no formal training and are not immersed in the academic traditions or factions within the discipline of art. Such people are often disenfranchised in the context of their times. The art of children falls into this category; also many of those who make art who disregard established conventions or social norms.

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56 Bradley, “‘Mystic Atheism’,” 284.
More often, though, Outsider Art refers to work by people who are in some way marginalised. Much of the Outsider Art that has attracted attention over time has been work produced by individuals enduring trauma or mental illness. This is partly because of the understanding of mental illness in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a derangement that can lead to ecstatic states of heightened passion that might reveal the hidden truth of the unconscious. Certainly, narratives of mental illness proliferated from the writings of Freud and others, yet the heightened states that linked hysteria to a higher consciousness were sources of fascination for the avant-garde artists. Artists such as Max Ernst and Paul Klee amassed large collections of art by disabled artists and those with mental illness.  

Ernst and Klee were influenced in this view by the German psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn, a collector of artwork from artists diagnosed with a mental illness, including women such as Elsa Blankenhorst (1873–1920) and Gudrun Bierski (1925–2006). Prinzhorn’s work *Artistry of the Mentally Ill* (1922) sought to demonstrate that artwork from psychiatric patients had aesthetic value and was a legitimate expression of psychological turmoil, rather than solely material to be inspected for symptoms of insanity. Prinzhorn’s work influenced Roger Cardinal and others to build collections in Switzerland’s Art Brut Museum in Lausanne, London’s Guttman-McClay Collection in the Bethlehem Royal Hospital, London’s Wellcome Collection and the Cunningham Dax Collection in Melbourne. The latter exhibits artwork by artists clinically diagnosed with mental ill health, and by individuals who use art to express their personal experience of trauma and mental ill health. The aim of the Cunningham Dax Centre is to be a space for people to share their work and their stories with the broader community.

As art produced on the margins of society, Outsider art tends to be “off-kilter and eccentric”, expressing what the art journalist James Gibbon calls “mental states that most of us will

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60 Beveridge, “A disquieting feeling,” 596.
never inhabit”.62 This reference to imaginative and experimental states of mind and being hints at similarities between Outsider art and my own art-making. So does the fact that the Outsider art draws attention to the contributions of under-researched, under-recognised, and forgotten female artists – the “invisible women” of the art world.63

While artists such as Séraphine Louis de Senlis (1864–1942) may also seem relevant to my work, there are four key female “Outsider artists” whose art has particularly resonated with me.64 The most significant is Madge Gill (1882–1961), an English spiritualist, medium and prophet whose artwork was collected by Roger Cardinal. Gill’s work incorporated yarn or fibre, pre-empting the social and political activism of women using fibre (cloth, yarn etc.) and traditional domestic techniques of embroidery, knitting and weaving in the late twentieth century. While I am interested in Gill’s use of fibre craft to construct artwork because of my yarn-based community projects with women, I am most interested in the hundreds of ink drawings on postcards, paper sheets and metres-long calico cloth containing repetitive motifs produced under the direction of her spirit-guide, “Myrinerest”.65 Surrounded by patterned backgrounds, her drawings of female figures appear to reflect the trauma of childhood abandonment, the death of her daughter and “attempts to stabilise her own fragile being”.66

Joan Wisdom (dates unknown) and Bobby Baker (1950–) are also significant for my own art practice. The former’s self-portraits were produced in England’s Netherne Mental Hospital from 1963 to 1967. The latter’s sketchbook-diary, Bobby Baker’s Diary Drawings: Mental

63 For example, the curators Ingrid Brugger and Hannah Rieger have used the 2019 exhibition, Flying High: Women Artists of Brut to draw attention to the invisibility of female artists because of traditional gendered perspectives of art-making: Ingrid Brugger and Hannah Rieger, “Flying High: Women Artists of Brut: 15.02 - 23.06.2019”, Kunstforum Wien, https://www.kunstforumwien.at/en/exhibition/kunstforum/275/flying-high-women-artists-of-brut.
66 Cardinal, “Madge Gill”.

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illness and me 1997–2008, was also created when she was in institutional care. Of further relevance is the Outsider artist Charlotte Salomon (1917–1943). Her graphic diary, Leben? Oder Theater (Life? Or Theatre?) was produced in Nazi-occupied Germany prior to her detention in a concentration camp. The illustrated diary is not about living in Nazi Germany. Rather, it is a self-reflective narrative concerned with trying to find out why three of her female relatives died by suicide. Examining the inter-generational trauma caused by sexual abuse perpetrated by her grandfather, Salomon’s diary, with its many multi-layered mixed media and gouache paint images, reveals that she was able to resist the pull of suicidality. Her diary is pertinent to my work and experience because it offers insights into an artist engaged in an intellectual analysis and assessment of traumatic lived experience through expressive brushstrokes and collage. Leben? Oder Theater? also contains features found in life-writing narratives. The title itself gestures at a story embedded within Salomon’s works of art.

Reflecting on the work and life stories of these female Outsider artists has enriched my understanding of artistic practice and the creative, spiritual and therapeutic roles of art-making. In particular, their work has informed my understanding that art-making is both a means to express the incoherence of melancholia or psychache and a voice for silenced, “invisible” women. However, as in the case of art therapy, I am reluctant to analyse my work solely through the lens of Outsider art. The key purpose of this is rather to consider the call of the imagined future as a way of living through and resisting suicidality.

Thesis Structure: De-, Re-, Con-
This thesis has a three-part structure addressing, in turn, trauma, creativity and the imagined future. The three concepts show my trajectory from suicidal depression to identifying radical courage and working to become an artist. The three sections reflect a specific art-making style: watercolour, collage, and painting on MDF board. I begin each section with a personal discussion of traumatic lived experience, followed by a discussion of interdisciplinary research and theoretical thinking relating to that experience, and then an analysis of my relevant artworks to demonstrate the influences of my research and the intersection of experience and research.

My project demonstrates how creative practices and outputs can have a multi-dimensional role in autoethnographic research. As I have already indicated, two types of source material are used for my autoethnographic research in chapters one and two: my 2010 diaries and watercolours and collages dated between 2010 and 2017. The inclusion of these as data provides a representative topography of my interior states of being, offering insights into spiritual as well as psychological, cognitive and emotional states over time. The data also becomes an opportunity for reflexive engagement and inter-connection with the scholarly literature and a potential contribution to public debate in the area of health policy.\(^{71}\)

I have called the first chapter **De-structuring**. This term refers to the de-structuring impact of suicidal depression in my life. **De-structuring** also gestures to the structurelessness of the “imaginary realm”. In chapter one, I discuss watercolour works on paper. Some were created during 2010 when I experienced suicidality and halted a suicide attempt, and others were produced after the 2014 episode of suicidality. To start, my auto-ethnographic vignette of suicidal depression symptoms illustrates how my life began to de-structure. I then explore the intersection of my experience and research, followed by an analysis of watercolour works produced between 2013 and 2018.

My discussion here dwells on the description of, and reasons for, the incorporation of re-occurring motifs of interiors, talon-fingered hands and screeching mouths in my work. I also discuss my favourite technique of overlaying text and map scraps onto watercolour washes to emphasise the bleeding, dissolving, dream-like quality of de-structuring. I acknowledge influences from Helen Allingham’s domestic interiors on my watercolours and refer to the

\(^{71}\) Chilton and Leavy, “Arts-Based Research Practice,” 22.
use of hands and mouths as a motif of trauma in Kathé Kollowitz’s pen and ink sketches, to the theme of sorrow in Julia Margaret Cameron’s photographs, and to the impressions of my immediate world in the diaries of Charlotte Salomon and Bobby Baker. I explore my interest in creating imaginary maps and how subject matter is framed in a cartographic landscape.

The second chapter explores the role of creativity in my life which I call **Re-structuring**. I use this term because it refers to how things (concepts or matter) are ordered and structured by modifying, adjusting or transforming existing structures. My re-structuring account tells of my experience of a prophetic call and how this ruptured my narrative of suicidality, prompted me to exercise radical courage, and led to imagining a different self-narrative. In this chapter, I discuss a series of collages produced between 2014 and 2018, some of which serve a double purpose as both autoethnographic data and as a contribution to my research process. These works were produced as a creative means to express, refine and synthesise the nature and method of my research inquiry.

My **Re-structuring** discussion draws on spirituality, mysticism and courage, and these concepts are illuminated in my analysis. I refer to the Outsider artwork of Hilma Af Klint and Madge Gill because both claim their work was a result of a spiritual epiphany. Together with an increasing emphasis on gold, the symbol of spiritual transformation, those artworks with spiritual and religious themes presented over the three chapters of this exegesis point to the fact that my art-making has a spiritually transformative aspect.

The **Re-structuring** images also reveal my interest in cartography and geography. I frequently use salvaged surveyor maps. Whether they are placed as backgrounds or as highlights, the maps are integral to the collages’ subject matter. They reference my interpretation of the imaginary realm as a fecund site and a space in which communion with God can occur. My analysis in **Re-structuring** further reveals my interest in domestic interiors, Christian iconography, biblical narratives, hagiography, female mysticism and topographic maps and how they mark a transformed spiritual understanding of myself and the world. I further discuss in this chapter how my **Revelations** paintings drew on the mystical experiences of Hildegard of Bingen, on the art she produced in an attempt to communicate them, and to the collages of Hannah Hoch and Annegret Soltau and the fabric art of Kathy Nida.

The third chapter focuses on narratives of an imagined future and is called **Con-structing**. The key processes I elaborate upon here are building, fabricating, assembling, contriving,
erecting and creating. The key concept discussed is the imagined future, largely through the lens of narrative studies and in particular the subversive potential of the “unnatural narrative” which is a fruitful way of considering my own work. *Con-structing* explains how and why I developed an imagined, future-oriented self-narrative and the importance of representing my imagined future as a visual narrative. Created by layering gouache paint on multi-density fibreboard, the works I discuss in this chapter are more durable than watercolours or collages on paper.

The works discussed in *Con-structing* also differ from those in *De-structuring* and *Re-structuring* in that they were created for public display. I produced them as part of the series of sixteen paintings I mentioned earlier, exhibited under the title *Revelations* at the Darlinghurst’s TAP Gallery and Macquarie Hospital’s InsideOut Gallery in 2017–18. Intending them to demonstrate and communicate the key findings from my autoethnographic research, I created these paintings as a visual narrative of the process through which I imagined an alternative future after experiencing a prophetic call from God; also attempting to show in an artistic format how radical courage underwrote my ability to live with suicidality.

In analysing the six most significant works from my *Revelations* series, I discuss the influence of imaginative stories and spiritual autobiographies. I also reflect on my use of the motif of Little Red Riding Hood and Joan of Arc to symbolise narrative agency. In addition to noting and discussing resonances between my work and those of the Outsider artist Charlotte Salomon and the fantasy visual-narratives of Lorna Carrington and Heather Nevay, I meditate on the visual motif of the chasm that appears in many of the *Revelations* works. This chasm symbolises the experience of rupture that I described at the beginning of this introduction, and on which this whole doctoral project is predicated. The rupture caused by profound depression and suicidality is a destructive and traumatic phenomenon. This project is an illustration of, and a significant extension of Julia Kristeva’s insights, demonstrating that an emotional rupture can also lead to new and constructive possibilities.
PART A: De-structuring: depression and suicidality

A guide to what follows

Referred to throughout as Part A, this chapter opens with an account of the “de-structuring” and traumatic effects of my experience of suicidality. I then survey the research I undertook to make sense of this experience, referring to relevant psychological and philosophical literature, narrative studies and Outsider art. The remainder of the chapter analyses sixteen artworks I produced between 2010 and 2017 while experiencing or reflecting on the “de-structuring” stage of my suicidality. The chapter identifies recurrent images and metaphors in these works and reflects on their use of watercolour to shed light on my experience of and management of suicidality.

The key insight to emerge from the visual analysis in this chapter was that art-making served two important functions for me in the aftermath of my halted suicide attempt. First, it had allowed me to express the inarticulate anguish of psychache. In some ways, it was unsettling to discover how vividly my art-making revealed the “de-structuring” impact of suicidal trauma. My work did this primarily through its use of the fluid medium of watercolour to repeatedly portray traumatised bodies trying to protect themselves from dissolution: some with weeping eyes, some with open, screaming mouths, others with rupturing heads. In the second place, art-making assisted me to tap into what Julia Kristeva describes as the imaginative and generative possibilities inherent in suicidal “melancholia” that I referred to in the Introduction. This insight was similarly more overtly apparent in my artworks than I could have realised at the time, particularly those using maps and landscapes to experiment with the idea of new futures or alternative worlds.

This chapter argues that these observations about my art-making have implications for others living with suicidality or trauma. I say this in part because of the striking resonances between my watercolours and those of female Outsider artists such as Bobby Baker and Madge Gill who have similarly endured trauma. Kristeva’s arguments about the creative possibilities generated by depression further suggest that my experiences will have a broader resonance. Apart from anything else, her arguments underline the value of art-making produced by individuals experiencing suicidal depression for others keen to better understand the phenomenon. Coherent, logical discussions or studies of psychache cannot capture the comprehensive awfulness of what it feels like. Researchers and the public
wanting to know more about the experience of suicidal depression should thus turn to chaotic creative works by those who have experienced it firsthand – works precisely such as those analysed in this section.

A narrative of suicidal psychache

When I arrived in the south London secondary boy’s school to teach in 2010, I joined a staff trying to cope with the rapid dismantling of their educational culture. I sensed but could not articulate their unease. My caution during conversations with them quickly became muteness.

A diary entry I wrote during a bout of insomnia in the early hours of 4 February 2010 captures my mental and emotional state:


Other diary entries further reveal my determination to manage despite increasing despair. A month later on 7 March 2010, I wrote:

I want to be a good teacher. I want to do a good job... I will continue to fight against my own dread, the apathy and indifference of the school and create my own space, my own world. It will be so... Never Give Up Never Surrender.

My deliberate refusal to acknowledge that I was not coping was a form of scotomising; a psychological term used by philosopher Elizabeth Grosz to refer to the human ability to erase, negate or reject an undesirable or traumatic reality which threatens a person’s subjectivity.72 This scotomising prevented me from considering other options. That I felt trapped because of my inability to allow myself to imagine or pursue other options is clear from another diary entry. On 5 April 2010, I wrote “I really do not like teaching anymore”.

also wrote that I was “desperately wanting to get out, but captive because of a desire to be in London”.

The back-story to my self-narrative as a teacher was Walt Disney’s 1964 Mary Poppins character; a twentieth-century version of a magically-skilled wise woman or godmother from fairy tales. She had been my childhood role model: the epitome of a teacher who exhibited the creativity my mother had encouraged in me. Financially independent, educated, living on her own terms and yet devoted to making beneficent magic, Mary Poppins was the character I once imagined I could become. When I realised I could never replicate her competence as a successful educator, my sense of being and the structures framing it collapsed.

As my self-narrative disintegrated, I slipped into what I now call a de-structuring in-between-ness. On one level, I knew that I was still in this world’s time and space, but at the same time I believed that “I” was absent from the world. I experienced depression as a slide into an other-ness, a seismic rift and a rupture in my sense of knowing the world. In that space, I experienced a sense of “non-being”: aware and alive but without substance or matter.  

I did not speak to anyone about my intensifying distress at the time, because I did not want them to know I was unravelling. Nor did I want people to know I was planning a suicide for fear that I would be stopped and institutionalised. I did not have the language to express my shame, fear and suicidal resolve, for the only language available to me was that of doctors or psychologists; one that I feared would portray me as mad and unemployable. What parent wants their child taught by an adult who is planning to suicide?

Against medical advice to go home to Sydney immediately, I returned to school at the end of May 2010, only to be informed that my contract would be terminated at the end of July. I had failed. The dream of living and working in London, the place Mary Poppins had convinced me as being where the imagined and real world intersected, was now torn apart. It was at this point that suicidality seemed to offer the most appropriate plan for the future. As I wrote on 30 May:

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My head still feels it is imploding. And it is a great worry. It is as though the brain cells are snapping and dying in small clusters, bit by bit in sudden sharp bursts.

Although I kept a detailed account of my life in London and illustrated my diary with collage, pen sketches and watercolour washes, I avoided writing anything direct about my intention to suicide. I did not want to leave evidence that I thought could be used to commit me to an institution should I botch the attempt. I refused to leave London because I did not want to return to Sydney as a failure with nothing to offer anyone in future. With this belief in mind, I imagined my future – that of suicide – and began to make detailed plans to this end. As I wrote in my diary on 5 June 2010:

[I] am resigned now to the inevitability of the situation... although I want it [the teaching situation] to succeed, there is no way it will succeed...

On the following day, my diary entry states: “[I want] – to lie down and sleep, […] to surrender”. Ten days later, I wrote:

Do I cease to be, cease to exist because no one remembers me, nor acknowledges my existence. To become invisible in the world... Simply stop “being” within a community, within the world.

Believing I was already dead in a manner of speaking, invisible to the world and concealed from God, I was satisfied that suicide was the correct choice. Going through with the final action would bring closure to my narrative of suicidality, and as author of that narrative, I controlled the where, when and how of the suicide plan. My belief that I was completely in control of the narrative was actually an illusion. As the philosopher Louis Althusser argues, no one exerts full control of their personal scripts\(^74\) – but the mistaken belief that this was the case made me vulnerable to the psychological force of my “de-structuring” storyline. Suicide was my plan until I experienced a revelatory, prophetic moment. This moment ruptured my narrative of suicidality, and in the chasm that opened up as a result I not only constructed a different self-narrative but deliberately changed course and mapped out

another future. As a result of this experience, I could author a different future and my suicidality would simply be a chapter in – not the end of – my life story.

**Researching my experiences of depression and suicidality**

In my initial research to understand why I had developed a narrative of suicidality, I identified particular psychological and social factors that often increase an individual’s vulnerability to depression and suicidality. In 2010 I experienced all of these factors: a sense of failure and uselessness; a belief that I had become a burden to others; a loss of life’s meaning and purpose; and an annihilation of my sense of self. I was vulnerable to these factors because I had already experienced early maternal loss; a lack of a close and confidential adult relationship outside the family; a family household of more than three children under fourteen years; prior knowledge or experience of suicidality or depression; and isolation from family and community networks.⁷⁵

In further reading, I learnt that “introjective” personalities are particularly vulnerable to suicidality. I recognised myself in the psychological descriptions of these types. Introjective personalities have a tendency to perfectionism which inclines them, first, to intense self-criticism and then to suicidality. The tendency of introjective-personality individuals to set goals, imagine a “flash-forward”, and create a goal-oriented narrative further disposes them to suicidal plans.⁷⁶ Although most psychological literature asserts that suicidal depression is

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an enervating state-of-being which reduces the ability to imagine a future, to make choices and to act, some psychologists have a different perspective.\textsuperscript{77} Their view is that some people experiencing suicidality maintain an ability to imagine and engage in creative pursuits, and that when these people use that ability to begin imagining and telling themselves a story about conducting a suicide, they are comforted by having a solution to an immediate-future problem.\textsuperscript{78} This was very much my experience.

Although the psychological literature just summarised was useful in helping me to comprehend what I had experienced, it only went so far. Some other psychological scholarship was more useful. Notable here were accounts of studies showing that inchoate articulation as a result of altered cognitive and affective processing is a commonly diagnosed symptom of depression and suicidality.\textsuperscript{79} Both psychological studies and first-person accounts refer to individuals feeling unable to speak coherently or even being rendered mute by acute psychache.\textsuperscript{80} This was what had happened to me. I had constantly felt as if I tried to describe to others what I was experiencing, I would end up blurring unintelligible babble.\textsuperscript{81} Even more than these studies or accounts, however, Kristeva’s philosophical work helped to illuminate my experience.

In \textit{Black Sun}, Kristeva discussed the profound inability to express oneself that lies at the heart of depression or melancholia, as she called it. She described the abjection or sense of self-dissolution that melancholic subjects experience as well as the “pervasive display” of their loss of capacity with language. Kristeva shed even more light on my experience,
however, when she argued that melancholia is capable of igniting the imagination and producing “new languages – strange concatenations, idiolects, poetics”\(^8^2\) precisely because of its resistance to ordinary forms of logic and expression. Kristeva also argued that creative activities offered individuals experiencing melancholia (particularly women) a resource through which to express these new and strange languages and poetics – or to at least strive to do so.\(^8^3\) This argument helped me to appreciate that suicidal depression could be an imaginative space capable of generating new understandings and possibilities.\(^8^4\)

Kristeva’s understanding of melancholia as an imaginary realm overlaps with Ernst Bloch’s insistence that spaces of the imagination are zones of possibility capable of producing fervent yearning for new states of being.\(^8^5\) It also aligns with the narratologist Rosemary Jackson’s conceptualisation of the realm of the imagination as a space of infinite, un-named possible selves through which one might generate new ways of being.\(^8^6\) Taken together, these thinkers have allowed me to recognise that the de-structuring experience of suicidal depression makes it possible either to awaken previously sidelined or suppressed self-narratives or to create new preferred ones.\(^8^7\)

Kristeva’s work has also increased my interest in art-making. Her emphasis on creativity informed my decision to create the *Revelations* paintings I discuss in Part C. More pertinently, Kristeva’s ideas on abjection or self-dissolution helped me to interpret the works I discuss later in this chapter: namely, a series of watercolours created during and after my episode of suicidality in 2010. Her insights further highlight the value of creative forms of writing, artwork and performance as means to better understand suicidal depression.\(^8^8\)

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\(^8^2\) Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 42.


First-person or creative expressions of suicidality have sometimes been critiqued as confused and chaotic. Kristeva’s work shows that these criticisms miss the point, because the kind of linear, coherent and sanitised discussions of suicidal psychache usually found in traditional scholarly discourse are unable to generate a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Researchers and the general public alike can learn more about the complexity of suicidality from idiosyncratic and personal accounts, even if – and perhaps because – they are “evasive, uncertain, deficient, [and] quasi-mutistic” in character.

People experiencing suicidal depression may, in fact, find it comforting to see examples of inchoate expression in the accounts of others who have had a similar experience. I became braver in managing my experience because I encountered literary and artistic representations similar to my experience of suicidal depression in the works of others. The most salient for me were the writers Virginia Woolf, William Styron and Elizabeth Buchan, the playwright Nicolai Erdman, clergyman Charles Haddon Spurgeon, poet Sylvia Plath and artist Jeanne Hébuterne. While analysing the watercolours I produced during and after 2010 for clues to my state of mind, I sought out other artists to help me understand that suicidality’s incoherence does not annihilate creative potential. Though an experience of suicidal depression will curtail the creativity of some artistic people, my interest was sparked by Outsider artists who might be considered “invisible women” experiencing psychache: most notably, Charlotte Salomon, Bobby Baker and Madge Gill, all of whom produced artwork during episodes of mental ill health.

Like some literary or autobiographical accounts of melancholia, the works of Outsider artists (especially those who are female) have often been dismissed due to their incoherence. Their work has been criticised as “mere mechanical productions, characterised by crowded and repetitive images, psychotic symbols, delusional visions, and primitive technique”. This critique of Outsider art privileges and reinforces “insider-led” accounts of psychache. Instead, Outsider art is well placed to give voice to marginalised experience and shift

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perspectives of what it means to be human: engaging with a more relational, processual ontology in which humans are seen as becoming rather than as fixed beings.93 The work of Outsider artists who have experienced suicidality provides a more engaging and possibly revelatory means through which to comprehend the phenomenon, evoked through personal references, symbols and metaphors, than the dry precision of psycho-medical discourse.

**Analysing “De-structuring” in my artwork**

My thinking about psychache has been informed by my 2010 diaries, artwork created during 2010 and further works created during later periods of troubling reflection and suicidality between 2013 and 2014. The 2010 canvas and acrylic artworks point to a deliberate attempt to control the psychache and other aspects of my social-cultural world. Although I was tempted to discard them at the end of 2010 because of their grimness, I kept them as evidence that I was an artist living in London. In comparison, my artwork from 2013 shows an increased willingness to experiment with materials and techniques, and to take risks with themes of despair and confinement. This happened because I felt safe at home in Sydney, had developed a more complex understanding of suicidality, and was determined to become an artist before I died.

The narrative themes discussed so far relate to psychache, loss and dislocation, and the challenge of incoherence. When I turn to the watercolour works just mentioned, I am struck by two key visual themes. The first relates to anguished bodies trying to protect themselves from dissolution: weeping eyes, rupturing heads, over-sized, talon-like hands, elongated arms and legs, covered faces, open or screaming mouths, and figures curled into a foetal position. The second theme relates to the often claustrophobic physical environment or landscape, whether it be the interiors of cluttered rooms, doorways and corridors, or topographic maps. Both themes and their associated motifs are metaphors for my experience of psychache.94

**Setting the stage**

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94 Phil Barker, “Working With the Metaphor of Life and Death,” *Journal of Medical Ethics: Medical Humanities* 26, no. 6 (2000): 98. Barker notes the value of visual metaphors (citing the Dax collection) in exploring “our construction of the world of others – and ourselves”.
The first watercolour I explore is London’s basement (Figure 1). I begin with this depiction of an interior because interiors are a repeated theme across each of the three bodies of work I discuss under the headings De-, Re-, and Con-structuring. Most of the watercolour interiors I produced in 2010 reveal my attempts to control myself and my environment. This is evident in London’s basement which clearly displays my anxieties in the topsy-turvy confusion of staircases and doorways leading nowhere, yet clearly, they lead somewhere outside the frame of the work. The sombre, sepia-tint colour scheme mimics old photographs of mental institutions, or the tones predominant in the more recent interior photographs of Eastern Europe’s Stasi and KGB buildings.\footnote{Sherry Ott, “Disintegration of the Soul - Stasi Prison,” Ott’s World, 5 June 2012, 4, \url{https://www.ottsworld.com/blogs/stasi-prison-berlin/}, accessed 17 July 2015.}

These visual similarities point to my emerging fear that if I did not maintain control I would be locked away. They also point to my experience of the kind of bleak alienation I had seen captured in the photographs of disused Stasi prison cells. The empty interior of London’s basement also suggests the invisible presence left by trauma and psychache. The sharp, steady vertical and horizontal lines create a sense of order at odds with the feeling of urgent, relentless movement inhabiting the work. These invoke my spirit, which at the time was thwarting my desire to “de-structure” or dissolve.

The doorways in this image are dark holes and the windows are blank. The walls symbolised my desire to exist in a state of non-being, protected from further emotional assault by disconnecting from the outside world. Since the doorway opening into a dark void may be
regarded as a symbol for death, *London’s basement* stands as a powerful record of the place and space I inhabited during 2010.

**Figure 2: A record of my misery** (2015), mixed media on paper, 30 x 20 cm.

*A record of my misery* (Figure 2), includes a photographic image laid over a page of text. The blue watercolour wash and scratching over the image and text emphasise my sorrow as a result of early maternal loss and the accompanying sense of abandonment. The photograph is *Portrait of Annie*, taken in 1864 by the British photographer Julia Margaret Cameron, which she described as her “first success”.96 Cameron’s photograph appeared on a page of a chapter entitled “The Criticism of the Arts” from a rather prim and proper volume called *An English Book of Prose* (1965) which I owned at the time. I felt strongly that it was an ironic commentary on my father’s dismissive criticism of my childhood artwork. The placing of the photograph over the text reveals my thwarted desire to become an artist.

The dominant motif in this piece is the scratched, bleeding and weeping eyes. This builds on the symbolism of the eye, common to many of the works I have produced during states of acute psychache. Eyes are commonly equated with truth-saying, moral certainty, and clairvoyance in the Western artistic imagination. As the art scholar Marc Bensimon notes, they can also depict “fantasies, anxieties, and transcendental occupations” and a “sense of space and, indirectly, time”.97 As symbols, eyes simultaneously offer insight into the inner life and reflect what is observed. An eye surrounded by lines may indicate weeping or an


omniscient and spiritual element. Scratched eyes in particular are a recurring motif in my work. It is significant that the eyes in this image are gouged out and ripped from this image of a young girl. I now recognise that these symbolise the scotomising or deliberate self-blindness in which I engaged in 2010, willing myself not to recognise my psychache.

The sepia tones of this artwork are intended to convey the patina of age and an otherworldliness evocative of a Mater Doloroso or Lady of Sorrows. In this, it references José de Mora’s painted pinewood bust of ca. 1680–1700, *The Virgin of Sorrows*, whose controlled grief had an overwhelming impact on me when I first saw it in 2010. Pedro Roldán’s *Mater Dolorosa* (poplar wood bust, ca. 1670) and José de Ribera’s *Mater Dolorosa* (oil on canvas, 1638), both of which show the Madonna with tears streaming from her eyes, generated a similar feeling of overwhelming mournfulness when I first encountered them.

I experience the same quality of pervasive loneliness and sadness when I view Cameron’s *Portrait of Annie*, a soft-focus image of a young girl with fly-away hair. For me, the melancholy I felt during my mother’s illness and after her death connects *A record of my misery* to Cameron’s original image with the seventeenth century religious artworks. The scratched eyes also reference Psalm 137, “*By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept... How can we sing the Lord’s song while in a foreign land?*” The “foreign” or alien land is the imaginary realm, a place I have inhabited both when experiencing suicidal depression and generating creative ideas.

My selection of Cameron’s photo reveals my interest in the so-called spiritual innocence of childhood. In Victorian times, as the English literary scholar Rebecca Styler argues, the image of the pre-pubescent girl as the “angel in the house” was a metaphor for pure spirituality and an “imagined lost ideal which they nostalgically idolised”. In my work, *Annie*...
represents the end of my childhood dream of becoming an artist and the beginning of “mature realism”, fostered by my father, all the while resisting the annihilation of my art spirit.102

Eyes, hands, mouths and heart

Figure 3: Where is my Lord? (2015), watercolour on paper, 30 x 20 cm.

The blurred sepia tones and weeping eyes are also featured in my 2015 watercolour Where is my Lord? (Figure 3). In this image, Mary of Magdala weeps in distress because the body of Jesus has been removed from the cave tomb. The hands she holds over her forehead may symbolise confusion, but in Christian symbolism a hand on the forehead signifies God’s seal or mark of divine love.103

I emphasised the Christian story in this image by adding three crucifixes in the background and a crown of thorns encircling Mary’s head. The thorn branches form a trail to the ground, weaving through Mary’s fingers and across her eyes, imprisoning these features in a grill or cage. The green growth suggests resurrection and regeneration, but the gesture here also suggests grief, exasperation or a desire to shield oneself against the turmoil of a seemingly disinterested world. Alternatively, the gesture could signify a desire to ease the ache of the chaos within. Käthe Kollwitz used a similar gesture in her etching, Self Portrait, Hand at the Forehead (1910) and later drawing, Woman Thinking (1920), portraying both grief and

confusion.\textsuperscript{104} The same despair pervades an untitled work produced between 1940–42 by Charlotte Salomon. Here a seated woman is slouched forward over a table with her hand over her head. The dominant blue tones and the red outlined figure create a sense of sorrow that is echoed in the “hunkered down” positioning of the woman. The harshness of the strip of red outside the window has been suggested as a symbol of death.\textsuperscript{105} This figure, like that of Kollwitz’s self-portrait, conveys a sense of helplessness and emotional fracture with a rawness that written or oral expression is unable to match.

**Figure 4: Blue hat figure (2010), watercolour and ink on paper, 30 x 20 cm.**

![Image of Blue hat figure](image)

Large hands placed over the eyes are another recurring motif in my works on paper. In popular symbolism, hands over the face (eyes, ears, mouth) are a sign of refusal, denial and/or deceit. The famous three monkeys representing “See, Hear and Speak No Evil” are the most obvious example. The placement of hands over the face are equally symbolic of an inability to accept seeing, hearing or speaking of awful events. This meaning is central to how I now interpret my 2010 watercolour and black ink, *Blue hat figure* (Figure 4).

Painted in July 2010, a few weeks after my halted suicide attempt, the face of the figure in this work is covered by long slender-fingered hands. I painted hands over the face after seeing the 2010 exhibition by Marieke de Ridder (1945–2010), who was a member of Belgium’s art circle, the ‘t Palet Kalmthout. Her subject matter at first glance appears to be children’s innocent contentment with life, but a re-viewing of each piece hints at undisclosed


I had been initially drawn to de Ridder’s portrayal of elongated hands and dominant mouths, but then to the swirls of rope-like textured paint in the background of her paintings. These represented for me the camouflaged threats that menace, strangle, then suffocate childhood’s innocence.

In *Blue hat figure* the black ink of the background forms a dense, suffocating fog behind the central blue-hatted figure in this image. The inky fog appears to be encroaching onto and into the child-figure’s personal space. The hands to the face are a repudiating rather than a protective gesture and can be interpreted as my attempts to push away the black fog of suicidality’s seductive realm. I now consider this to be my first representation of radical courage; the quality I describe and theorise in Part B.

Figure 5: *My heart, mind, being all gone* (July 2014), mixed media on paper, 30 x 20 cm.

Figure 6: *Noise in my brain* (September 2016), watercolour and ink on paper, 30 x 20 cm.

Hands over the face appear in the two images to which I now turn: *My heart, mind, being all gone* (Figure 5), and *Noise in my brain* (Figure 6). These works express the sensation of my

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thoughts and brain blasting from my head that I experienced at the peak of my experience of suicidal depression. The hands do not blot out my surroundings but prevent my sense of being from dissolving. Both images contain mouths depicted as broad, horizontal lines, the lips clamped together to stop me from blurring out the strange statements I feared making when in the depths of incoherent depression.

Figure 7: The art of trauma (July 2017), mixed media on paper, 30 x 20 cm.

The art of trauma (Figure 7), is one of many works that use the motif of the open mouth, so common in the history of modern art. The popular symbolism of an open mouth has several meanings related to communication: an expression of emotions, an articulation of knowledge, and an opening to the soul. As a symbol of despair, anger and grief, an open screaming mouth is a recurrent motif in avant-garde art, whether in works by Francis Bacon, Pablo Picasso, Edvard Munch or more recently, the printmaker Wuon Gean-Ho. Here, The art of trauma is an exposition of how I tried to purge myself of the strangeness of psyche while in throes of what Kristeva would call melancholia.

The open mouth of the child-figure in this image is the portal from which, and through which, my experience of intense psyche passed. The child-self portrayed has been abandoned and orphaned. The figure appears on a page from an old numerology text to suggest that my experience of suicidal depression was not just a result of psycho-social circumstances but had an historical and cultural context as well. The mouth from which flows a gush of extreme emotion is an image of both suffering and defiance. Unsilenced, the figure tears into the space filled with words and phrases, making them incoherent. The technique of collage reinforces this, and I will pick up on this idea again in Part B.

Figure 8: Great times of the epoch (July 2017), mixed media on paper, 30 x 20 cm.
The desire to consume and purge inchoate vocabulary is overt in *Great times of the epoch* (Figure 8). To create texture, I tore and pasted fragments from a page of a Chinese language newspaper as background for the image and by doing so, signaled that my native English language had become foreign to me. This watercolour is not just a depiction of psyche’s inability to express itself. More significantly, the work an example of how my research had begun to influence the way I expressed the subject matter, the choice of ephemera, and that I consciously made a reflexive connection between research and art-making.

The foreign matter used in this work refers to Kristeva’s link between melancholia itself, loss of language (incoherence) and melancholic depression’s own realm. There were many moments in which I felt like an alien in a foreign land, unable to understand what was happening around me, and at a loss to explain what had happened to me. I represented the sensation of being scotomised by suicidality as scraps of newsprint rather than as eyes. The fingers of both hands over the cavernous, open mouth intersect to create a caged barrier, reminiscent of a sewerage grille that prevents large pieces of rubbish from entering canals and waterways. As a symbol, the grille-barrier hands filter the way I and others talk about psyche.

Figure 9: *My heart is ripped out. Betrayal* (June 2015), watercolour on paper, 30 x 20 cm.

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107 I used the page from *The Epoch Times* newspaper as a play on the word “epoch”, to emphasise that this experience was memorable and distinctive in my life, even though I could not grasp what was happening to me. The Epoch Times, “About Us,” *The Epoch Times*, https://www.theepochtimes.com/about-us, accessed 5 February 2019.
The hands as a cage are dominant in *My heart is ripped out. Betrayal* (Figure 9). The face of the blue-shaped figure has an open eye and a partially open mouth depicting uncertainty. The large, red, bleeding heart has been ripped from the chest. An overflow of blood from the heart runs into the chest space, indicating its physical tie to the body. This painting illustrates the fact that psychache made me feel as if my heart and sense of being were slipping through my fingers. In portraying the figure clinging to their heart, I now realise I was gesturing at the difficulties I faced after deciding to halt the suicide attempt. Since I was acutely aware that I was losing ground when I created this work, I wanted to convey the desperation I felt that I would lose all of myself if I forgot to keep hold of my heart. The awareness that this was a possibility is seen in the single eye that is focused on the heart and hands. Even after experiencing that call from God and my future, I still felt that my subjectivity and spirituality were slipping away, as if bleeding out of my hands.

**Mouths and maps**

After the first surge of works expressing the chaotic and abject experience of suicidality, maps have increasingly featured in my work. No doubt I felt comfortable using maps because I had trained as a secondary-school geography teacher. On reflection, though, I now consider that maps were a metaphor for my forays into unknown realms, seeking ways out of the suicidal abyss.

*Figure 10: Rage against the dying of the light* (2015), mixed media on paper, 30 x 20 cm.
The title of *Rage against the dying of the light* (Figure 10) refers to a poem by Dylan Thomas. It evokes the notion of a radical courage which pushes back the desire to suicide. The “dying of the light” is an apt description of psyche’s enveloping darkness. In addition to its depiction of the dark cloud of psyche, this mixed media work-on-paper is dominated by a face and hands in watercolour and ink painted onto an old surveyor’s map. The work re-interprets the red lines signifying roads on this map as arteries running through the hand on top of the head. Another blood-line shoots out of the mouth’s gaping hole. The title of the map in this image, “Mortania, a place of death”, is a further sign of distress. So is the huge open mouth symbolising the portal or doorway that closed shut when my family and colleagues ignored my expressions of psyche. A clear plastic “National Trust” sticker represents the shut door: not seen and not heard. I intended this as an ironic word play on “national” and “trust” because there is insufficient national funding for mental health issues, and because there is little trust that the funding would lead to quick recovery.

*Figure 11: Rue the day (2016) mixed media on paper, 30 x 20 cm.*
Mouths and maps are also features of *Rue the day* (Figure 11). The title of this image is a play on words written in purple ink down the side of the image. I separated the lettering of the map’s title, “Oamaru”, a North Island New Zealand town into “OH! MA. RUE!” in order to emphasise the regret, remorse, repentance and mourning associated with the term “rue”.108 I word-associated *rue* into *rye* and then into “a pocketful of rye”, a nursery-rhyme reference to a hardy, utilitarian grain which develops the ergot fungus in damp, warm weather. When ingested, ergot can cause hallucinations. Some scholars indeed believe the consumption of ergot-affected rye-meal may have produced medieval mystics’ visions.109

I also word-associated a *pocketful of rye* to a *pocketful of rocks*, and then linked this phrase to Virginia Woolf who filled her pockets with rocks before wading into and drowning in the Ouse River in 1941. I have come to associate suicide with rivers, floods, canals, bathwater and de-structuring not only because it was a trope popular in Victorian English literature and art, but because the trope influenced my decision. I considered suicide by drowning the only solution because I had become a “fallen woman”, a social and economic pariah.110 The association of rocks and drowning is embedded into the image of the Oamaru River as a wide line running vertically on the map. This river regularly floods, and flooding is a de-structuring geographic process.

*Rue the day* is about the terror of psychache, in this case expressed by the squatting, hunch-shouldered figure with an open, screaming mouth. The scream is not only an attempt to communicate, but a fearful cry from being squished into a small, confining room. The self-imprisonment of psychache is represented by topographic map symbols of a grid system, red road lines and brown contour lines which represent veins and arteries.

The focus of this image is on knotted lines: a brown knot within the open mouth, and the eyes’ red knots which unravel, suggesting bleeding. Both set of knots represent the junction between external and internal fears. The body with its gaping mouth, in a squatting position and bound by invisible rope, is reminiscent of sacrificial Inca mummies. The body, like a mummy, is contained, firstly by the map’s grid lines and secondly by the creation of

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perspective lines that place the figure within a box. The sense of imprisonment suggests the “kartser” torture of wartime punishments.¹¹¹

**Hands, mouths and red**

*Figure 12: The trappings of captivity (2017) watercolour on paper, 30 x 20 cm.*

*Figure 13: Pain: trapped in the crossfire (2017) mixed media on paper, 30 x 20 cm.*

The two watercolours appearing as Figures 12 and 13, *The trappings of captivity* and *Pain: trapped in the crossfire* reveal another aspect of psychache. This is primarily because they were painted in 2017 – some years after the episode of suicidality, and after reflection on a comprehensive range of literature. These images also depict my continued representation of psychache through hands and screaming mouths. In the case of these later works, however, I have identified psychache as a “being”. Both images depict psychache as a wolf biting and maiming the arm of Little Red Riding Hood. In my visual re-telling of the fairy tale, Little Red Riding Hood is rendered powerless because her arm is being severed by the wolf’s trap-like

teeth. The wolf does not just represent suicidality, but also the psycho-social factors leading to it: most significantly, the fact that I had set aside my deep desire to put my hands to use as an artist.

The mouth and hands of the Red Hooded girl in Figure 12 are less anguished than those of Figure 13. Another difference in Figure 13 is that the blood from the arm wound dribbles in a root-like system into the ground indicating that the result from the injury will feed a new life. This depiction of new life from psychic pain points to the fact that reflection, imagination, spiritual succour and the determined exertion of radical courage enabled me to believe that a new life would indeed emerge.

Behind the wolf’s fanged jaw and the screaming mouth of the red-hooded girl, both depicted in a brazen, fiery red colour again signifying the pain of psychache, stands a grandmother on a wolf rug, grasping an axe. This grandmother represents my future-self: the older, wiser woman who confronts and manages suicidality. She is the one who stands valiantly on the skin of her foe, reminding me that in her earlier life she slayed the wolf. Done once, it could be done again. Fairy tale motifs appear throughout my work as a reflection of my interest in narrative, childhood, fantasy and imaginary realms in general. I will return to this more explicitly again in Part C.

**Interiors**

*Figure 14: Spilt and spoilt (November 2010), watercolour and ink on paper, 30 x 20 cm.*
The disintegration of childhood faith in others and the world is a keynote of *Spilt and spoilt* (Figure 14). I painted this immediately after viewing Helen Allingham’s watercolour interiors on display in Thomas Carlyle’s House, London.\(^{112}\) In *Spilt and spoilt*, the dark corners of the interior are hiding places showing the remnants of a joy-filled life: cake and coffee, books and flowers. The vast blue rug is spoilt by a cup of coffee upended by the wind coming through the open balcony doors. This painting was the first time I used the motif of a fluttering curtain to refer to the winds of change and to God’s breath.

My interpretation of a cosy space has similarities with the Outsider artist Bobby Baker’s *Day 470: Week 1 2004 December 29* from her *Bobby Baker’s Diary Drawings: mental illness and me 1997–2008*. Like *Day 470, Spilt and spoilt* features a central floor rug, and a table laden with food ready to be shared.\(^ {113}\) Both works have an area of orange-gold at the back of the room which for me represents an unextinguished life force. (The symbolism of gold in my artwork is explored in the next chapter.) A small figure, crouched in a foetal position, hides in the corner beside a set of steps that lead to unknown, unseen rooms. The theme of doors, corridors and stairways of *Spilt and spoilt* represents my fearful disquiet that God might have abandoned me. These images contrast with Figure 1, *London’s basement*, painted in early 2010, which portrayed my flight from God in the throes of destructuring psychosis.

Previous to 2010 I had worked with gouache paint on MDF board, but because of convenience and accessibility, in early 2010 I began to experiment with ink and watercolour. I had thought that watercolour was a form associated with Victorian ladies’ genteel pastimes and with amateur weekend painters, not with serious artists. This opinion changed in late 2010 when I saw Helen Allingham’s interiors and noted how she was able to bleed, blur and dissolve paint and shadows to create nuances I could not do with oil or gouache paint.

Watercolour interiors were popular during England’s Victorian era. Walter Richard Sickert, Ethel Sands, Harold Gilman and Helen Allingham produced delicate accounts that shifted the boundaries “between psychological and corporeal space”, forcing the viewer to re-assess

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how domestic environments both impact and are impacted by the inhabitants' psychological state. The intention of watercolourists was to create a visual story that exposed the true nature of the resident by using the “symbolic, narrative and expressive conventions associated with the domestic landscape” to an “artfactually literate” audience. The formal dining, parlour and drawing rooms, traditionally regarded as women’s domains, became observations of and about people’s social status.

For me, the rooms are also spaces of imprisonment, containment, and confinement. A sense of social-cultural constraint is certainly evident in Gwen John’s work such as Girl with a Blue Scarf (ca. 1915–1920), The Nun (ca. 1915–1921), The Seated Woman (1910–20), and The Convalescent (1918–19). John’s paintings of young women engaged in passive, socially appropriate activities of reading, writing or resting are reflective of social-cultural factors stifling women’s agency. Her depiction of lone, female figures with their bowed shoulders and partially obscured or shadowed faces, conveys to me a melancholy that emerged from a desire to protect the core sense of self by disengaging with the outside world and retreating into corners. The difference with John’s figures is that they, unlike my Figure 14, have not yet lost all sense of self and curled into a foetal position to hide in a corner.

There is an additional poignancy about Gwen John’s works because I sense that she, as a person and an artist, struggled against social-cultural limitations. Her standing as a painter during her lifetime was overlooked because critics considered her intimate relationship with Auguste Rodin and her brother’s artwork more noteworthy; the latter received more acclaim for his artwork during their lifetimes. It was only later that the artist and Slade Professor of Art, Frederick Brown (1893–1918), came to regard her work as significant. In his 1926 self-

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115 Kinchin, “The Camden Town Group.”
116 Gwen John, Girl with a Blue Scarf, 1915–1920, oil on canvas, 41.1 x 33 cm, MoMA, New York; Gwen John, The Nun, 1915–1921, oil on board, 86.5 x 60 x 7 cm, Tate, London; Gwen John, The Seated Woman, 1910–1920, oil on canvas, 27.7 x 22.5 cm, Ferens Art Gallery, Hull; Gwen John, The Convalescent, 1918-19, oil on canvas, 33.7 x 25.4 cm, Tate, London. Images in: Maria Tamboukou, Nomadic Narratives, Visual Forces: Gwen John's Letters and Paintings (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2010).

My interest in interiors is ambiguous, because they are associated with my experience of suicidality. In 2010 I retreated into my studio space because I felt cocooned and secure within it, but I was also aware that the walls of the building were oppressive, pushing me back into becoming a “little” woman, without income, employment or agency. Suicidality, even while it strangled me, was still a desired state-of-being; a familiar, comforting cocoon. I both longed to escape it and remain within it. This cocoon contrasts with the cartographic landscapes portraying an opening out into the world in many of my “de-structuring” works. The latter indicate my fear of being lost in the world and, therefore, lost to myself.

**The imaginary landscape**

![Figure 15: A Sea of Sorrows (2010), watercolour and ink on paper, 30 x 20 cm.](image)

As a former geography teacher with an interest in the natural world, I have always felt an affinity with maps: perhaps not least also because they promise to provide a direction. I use the cartographic symbolism of red road and blue river lines to create the imagined topographic landscapes of *A Sea of Sorrows* (Figure 17) and *The Influence of Your Country* (Figure 18). Painting imaginary maps makes it possible to create a world that can be scrutinised from a distance allowing the cartographer/artist to see landscape features in relation to each other, and to use this relationship to orient their outlook to their immediate circumstances. In a manner reminiscent of John Bunyan’s *A Pilgrim’s Progress*, my painting of a map of an imaginary realm, *A Sea of Sorrows*, also links landscape features with states of
being. The pertinent features in this case are the Isle of Anguish and Mournful Rivers, both obvious metaphors for my de-stabilised identity at the time.

A map is both a visual narrative and a graphic symbol of the land from a bird’s-eye-view which allows the cartographer to capture significant land features at a specific time and for a specific reason. Playwright Carol Fisher Sorgenfrei believes maps preceded literature and art and are a visible description and illustration of who we are and where we are going.\textsuperscript{119} This notion resonates with me. An imaginary map operates like an internal narrative script in that it collapses time and space, removes the boundaries between interior and exterior landscapes, and indicates how to get from one place to another. The fact that imaginary maps exist outside of real time and space means that they can show the imagined future, suggest how to get to the future, and more importantly, act as a tool to access the imaginary realm.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{map.png}
\caption{The influence of your country (July 2017), mixed media on paper, 30 x 20 cm.}
\end{figure}

\textit{The influence of your country} is an example of how I mapped out a path from a suffocating labyrinth, as depicted in \textit{London’s basement} (Figure 1). Adopting a bird’s eye view, I sketched out a peninsula, then re-structured the land by gluing cut-out strips of lettering from the \textit{Book of Numerology} in a new order to form lines of flight, representing my multiple, possible routes into the future. Numerology is a method of forecasting the future using mathematical calculations of birth date, country and street numbers. The lettering strips form statements such as: \textit{“the vibrations. indicates your general chances for. success. in which you live”}. This

map is a transition between de-structuring and re-structuring because it offers a suggested course from psychache towards an as-yet undefined future.

**Comparisons with the work of other Outsider artists**

While the works just discussed are deeply personal, many bear similarities to art produced by other female Outsider artists who have similarly endured psychic trauma. That this is the case suggests that the insights in this chapter will have broader implications for understanding the experience of suicidal psychache and its relationship to art-making, creativity and imagination. I have already noted particular similarities between examples of my work and others by the Outsider artists Charlotte Salomon and Bobby Baker. Another Outsider artist’s work with obvious parallels to some of my own is a pen-and-ink roomscape by Madge Gill. Gill’s solitary figures are depicted as part of the room’s interior. Her 1920 work *Staircases*, using blue and black ink, exemplifies how the detailed patterning of each figure’s clothes blend into patterning on walls, furnishings and window outlooks.\(^{120}\) The patterns are richly kinetic and suggest potential energy and possibility. At first glance, the patterning of figures and walls blend into each other, making the figures invisible.\(^{121}\) After steady viewing, the intermeshing of figures and room appear to reflect that Gill, so comfortable in her room, has dissolved the boundaries between her physical, emotional and psychological space.

Further striking parallels exist between my work *The art of trauma* (Figure 7) and Joan Rodríguez’ 1991 pastel and gouache on paper, *The Vinegar Woman*, exhibited in the 2018 “Giving Voice” exhibition at the Cunningham Dax Centre.\(^{122}\) Rodríguez’s black background in the latter creates an atmosphere of gloomy confinement around two squatting figures who face each other, the ghostly-white one imprisoned in a scientific bottle. The background is obviously similar to the one I used to conjure the black cloud of psychache in *The art of trauma*. The bottled figure in Rodríguez’s work appears to represent how doctors and therapists inspected and evaluated her childhood trauma, which, remaining unresolved, was

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then packaged and shelved. The transparency of the glass bottle, a metaphor for the psycho-pathologising of trauma, signifies others’ scrutiny of Rodriguez’ distress and later distancing of themselves from her after it became clear that she had not recovered. Rodriguez herself, unable to articulate or interrogate why and what really happened, is caught and held within this psycho-pathology. This image is a powerful representation of psychache – it is manifestly the case that Rodriguez was translating her inchoate experience into new visual techniques and languages, and that her art offers keen insights into the experience.

An untitled 2006 work by the Outsider artist Donna Lawrence exhibited in the Cunningham Dax Centre group exhibition “Speaking Out” in 2008, offers a further illustration of these points. The focus of this image is not (as in many of my works) a pair of hands covering a face, but rather the deliberate fragmenting of the portrait. Lawrence emphasises the impossible task of keeping a mind experiencing acute psychache together by cutting the self-portrait into quadrants and angling one piece so that it is out-of-kilter. The angled piece creates a disturbing unease which is increased by the overlay of text symbolising the loss of self and voice.¹²³ I interpret the fragmenting of the image to be a statement about how Lawrence realises her subjectivity is unfinished and open to change, experimentation and transformation. This in turn leaves room for the possibility of another subjectivity to develop out of the in-between gaps, the cuts and the fragments. Her work illustrates an observation by Ernst Bloch: that what can become possible emerges from what has not yet been “fully assembled”.¹²⁴

To conclude
In the last part of this section, I have employed techniques drawn from art analysis to gather insights into my experience of suicidality. In the process, I have demonstrated the potential of art-making to harness the imaginative and creative potential of psychache. In my case, the drive to find ways to represent the unsayability of psychache took the form of motifs representative of dissolution or loss of the bounded-self associated with what Kristeva calls abjection, and a subsequent fixation on narrow and cloistered places. Like Donna Lawrence’s untitled 2006 work, however, the watercolours I produced at times of extreme distress

contained hints of a desire for ways out of the de-structuring abyss. Analysing these works now from an autoethnographic viewpoint, I can see that these images show signs of the promise of the spiritually-informed “radical courage” that forms the subject of the following Part B.
PART B: Re-structuring: radical courage from the rupture

A map for what follows

Like the last, this section, Part B, begins with a narrative of my experience. The focus here is the rupture or epiphany that allowed me to halt my suicide attempt, and the spiritual dimensions of the process of re-structuring my life in the months and years that followed. I then discuss the research and reflections I conducted to make sense of this re-structuring experience. Key here are perspectives on epiphany or “prophetic call” provided by the philosopher Ernst Bloch, the theologians Jürgen Moltmann and Mark A. McIntosh, and historian of medieval female mysticism, Cheryl Jane Ellsworth Olive. I also discuss the interdisciplinary perspectives that helped me theorise my concept of radical courage.

The body of the chapter includes a commentary on some of my most significant collages. As a medium, collage has played an important role in my artistic practice. Most of the works discussed here utilise maps as part of the creation of new imaginary realms. Some also depict domestic interiors and images from Christian iconography. These artworks provide evidence of the significance of spirituality, radical courage and the imaginary realm in my experience. They are also an integral part of my intellectual inquiry. The act of producing my more recent collages has been particularly useful in helping me to think through the significance of rupture, imagination and radical courage to this project overall. Accordingly, while analysing these collages, I reflect on the medium of collage itself as a metaphor, both for interdisciplinary inquiry and the restructuring process a person experiencing suicidality might engage in after a halted suicide. In doing this, I reference the use of collage as a political tool used by modern and contemporary women artists to say the “un-sayable” and critique the status quo.

A narrative of radical courage: how the narrative of suicidality was ruptured that June evening in a London bathroom

One of the key features of my 2010 experience of suicidality was its spiritual quality. Torn between hiding from and searching for God’s presence, while fearing God had abandoned me, I pleaded for God to give me the “peace that surpasses all understanding” in the form of
my death.¹²⁵ One morning in early June, I attended Confession at St Patrick’s Catholic Church on London’s South Bank. I sought God’s guarantee that death would release my spirit from psychache but received no answers or consolation. The young Polish priest did not understand my incoherent utterings, and I did not mention suicidality. My plans were carefully thought through because I was determined to avoid a botched suicide. My determination came from my fear of being institutionalised and prevented from making another attempt. My plans were thorough and most likely to have led to completion had they not been ruptured by the call from God.

While individuals claiming to experience spiritual epiphanies are sometimes thought to be insane, I remain convinced that it was God who called me and, in so doing, halted my suicide attempt. Before my final action, I asked myself, “Any regrets?” Although I answered with “No. There are no regrets”, another voice interrupted, saying: “Yes. You never took the risk to be an artist”. I did not know what had happened to me, nor how to talk about this moment. I have since read the work of the sociologist Corrine Squire and the theologians Jürgen Moltmann and Norman Habel on what they respectively refer to as “the call from the future”, “the goad of the promised future”, or a “prophetic call”. They have given me the courage to believe and assert that the voice I heard was from God, prompting my future-self to make the response.¹²⁶

The auditory “hallucination” I experienced was accompanied by a fleeting triple-vision of myself, firstly standing in an artist’s studio, then showing exhibited paintings, and thirdly, presenting an art lecture in an auditorium. This vision constituted a fractured narrative of an alternative future that could only be realised if I abandoned my suicide attempt. At that moment, I knew that the probability of becoming an artist was remote, and that to fulfil it I would need to live as long as possible, and to live with ongoing psychache. I understood, because of previous experiences of depression, that this episode would eventually pass, but future episodes were likely to reoccur. At such moments, I would need to return to and

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¹²⁵ Philippians 4: 7 (NIV).
remember this moment of rupture and God’s reassuring promise: “I am with you until the end of time.”

So I drained the bath, tidied the bathroom and slept.

The following morning, I got up and dressed, rather than giving in to psychache’s desire to stay in bed. With a courage I did not know I possessed, I began to plan my life to become an artist, and so fulfil my childhood desire. The courage to confront myself and the world took the form of a determined urge that I term radical courage, and which forms the key subject of this chapter. Radical courage has a spiritual dimension, is future-oriented, intuitive, irrational, illogical and generative. It operates as the in-between of the here-and-now and the not-yet-now.

In the weeks and months that followed, I realised that I had a responsibility to my future-self to fulfil my desire to become an artist. I could not just presume that the desire would somehow be fulfilled. I continued to live with psychache and its attendant narrative of suicidality at the same time as I was fleshing out my new self-narrative as an artist; an ugly relationship of desire and scorn. As I nurtured my creative practices, however, the narrative of suicidality began to abate, overridden by a stronger desire to become an artist. Previously, I had archived this desire to become an artist, first because of my father’s opprobrium and then the demands of teaching and financial security. Now I reclaimed that early longing, and so began to transform my perspective of myself, others and the world.

From July 2010, I sketched everywhere I went, painted in the mornings and evenings, and researched possible exhibition spaces. During my regular visits to the Tate Britain and Tate Modern Galleries, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the National Gallery of London, I examined artworks and had imaginary conversations with artists such as Judith Leyster (1609–1660) and Élisabeth Vigée le Brun (1755–1842). Their interest in my work and my welfare became my social support, and what the human rights activist Anne Deveson calls the “keepers of the dream”, in place of my absent community network.

Deveson and the psychologist Meredith Friedson both suggest that communal, social and familial relationships can bolster the development and implementation of an individual’s

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127 Matthew 28: 20 (NIV).
imagined future. This was my experience. I started planning to return to Sydney with a plausible story to tell colleagues and friends. As I saw it, my artwork would be evidence of this story. I was conscious that my story about living and working in London to become an artist was superficially deceptive, but it cloaked and shielded my experience of suicidality and the prophetic call.

Research and Reflection

“Re-structuring”: Making sense of the rupture and its creative aftermath

Suicidality was a great rupture within my life, but like all ruptures, it had a creative and transformative aspect. Suicidality felt like I had been buried alive. My sense-of-being in the world had become a sense of “not-being”, cocooned within a tomb. Ernst Bloch’s work was significant when I later reflected on this experience and how I been able to construct a new sense of being. He refers to suicide as fleeing into negation, but also as a creative impetus. Bloch proposes that when someone longs to be buried, acknowledging the unfulfilled dreams that their death would extinguish offers them a way back from the cemetery. For Bloch, these unfulfilled desires are the “undischarged future” that exists within any individual’s past.

The belief that I had been abandoned by God, felt as an excruciating absence, was the trigger that ruptured my complacent, taken-for-granted understanding of God. The theologian Mark A. McIntosh has described a state akin to my desperation to know God again when he speaks of “the self all the more out of itself in a hopeless desire for the divine other”. This desperate yearning was a frightening, mysterious experience, but it was also a transformative moment in which another form of relationship with God was revealed. In my case, art-making with my local community has allowed me to experience this new relationship. My experience bears out what McIntosh says about the liberating potential of

131 Mark A. McIntosh, Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology (Canterbury: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 218.
mystical encounters with God. Such encounters call “one out of one’s ‘self’”, he says, “… and into the adventure of incarnation”.

My encounter with God had stripped me of all self-deceit until I was powerless. According to McIntosh, this is the essential criterion for a mystical spiritual experience. Mystical experiences can involve psychic phenomena such as seeing visions, hearing a voice or experiencing intense synaesthesia. The historian Cheryl Jane Ellsworth Olive has identified five stages in the mystical experiences of medieval women such as Margery Kempe and Teresa of Ávila. Each of these was reflected in my experience: first an awakening, then a decision to change, an illumination followed by reflection and contemplation, and lastly, the epiphany that the female mystics experienced as communion with God.

Not all spiritual or mystical awakenings, epiphanies or transformative moments are religious. This is borne out in the accounts of writer David Webb and artist Michael Eales. They describe their transformative spiritual experiences as a sudden, unexpected realisation that triggered a metanoia or a radical change in their lives, but neither interpreted this in a religious sense. Rather, Webb and Eales both felt that their epiphanies called them to act with and for their communities. Whether interpreted as religious or as an encounter with God, an epiphany is a call from the future that creates a temporal in-between-ness; a sense that “the ‘other [is] already with us’”, and that this “other” will make the promised future possible to embrace or achieve. For Corrine Squire, this call from the future is manifested in day-dreams: a conscious realisation of what is hoped for, what is wanted to be found, and

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133 McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 8.
136 Kellenberger, *Religious Epiphanies*.
137 Kellenberger, *Religious Epiphanies*.
for Bloch it is the “what has not-yet-become”\textsuperscript{139}. This experience catalyses the imagination to create what is possible, igniting, multiplying and escalating possibilities.

The concept of the prophetic call and its resultant future-oriented, imagined self-narrative, is rooted in an ontology of becoming. These phenomena rupture or rip up taken-for-granted matter, allowing thoughts, beliefs and actions to be re-structured and something new created.\textsuperscript{140} An ontology of becoming recognises that chance occurrences are disruptive calls from the future that require an active reception.\textsuperscript{141} The capacity to proactively respond to unexpected happenings, paired with the ability to foresee future problems and possibilities, can be considered as an adaptive advantage\textsuperscript{142}. The process of articulating the new possibilities that come with rupture and envisaging a new future is by definition difficult to describe using existing forms of language and modes of thought. These possibilities need a different discourse in order to be expressed.

It is at this point that Kristeva’s ideas discussed in the previous chapter become relevant. She asserts that the only way out of suicidal depression is to harness the creative potential of the incoherence experienced during melancholia to craft a different expression of “language”.\textsuperscript{143} A similar harnessing of the creative potential of incoherence can be seen at work in the lives of medieval female mystics. For example, Julia Kristeva considers that the mystical experiences of Teresa of Ávila could not be comprehensively recorded by written or spoken language. Teresa’s visions were felt as a composite of “words, images and physical sensations” in which her communion with God was understood as being within her sense of self, and not as an external manifestation.\textsuperscript{144} The impossibility of articulating those

\textsuperscript{141} Elizabeth Grosz, ed., \textit{Becomings: Explorations in Time, Memory, and futures} (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999), 5.
experiences induced her to develop an ascetic doctrine for contemplative life and spiritual writings, such as *The Interior Castle* (1588), to describe and guide mystical encounters. As I see it, Teresa’s work not only expanded the genre of female spiritual autobiographies but offered a new user-led discourse for spiritual experiences. By seeking to find new mechanisms to translate experiences both of psychache and epiphany, “liminal” space[s] for possibilities, rather than certainties” are created. This can result in an understanding of the self and the world that goes beyond the limits of psychological knowledge and rational academic protocols.

*Conceptualising radical courage*

All I have said so far raises the question: how do people endure traumatic circumstances while believing that a different future is waiting? Some days after deciding to halt the suicide, I found the answer to that question. I recalled a childhood conversation with my grandfather about his experience of trench warfare, trauma, shrapnel injury and rehabilitation in Bristol during and after the First World War. My grandfather told me that he became convinced that his imagined future of migrating to Australia could only happen if he was prepared to endure the war years. Grandfather also said that, rather than raging against his permanently disabled leg, he blessed God each morning that he had been given an extra day of life. His account centred on a narrative of an imagined future and the exercise of a steadfast, profound courage so that it might be realised.

Other survivor narratives of war, torture, imprisonment and hardship speak of a similar experience to my grandfather’s. There are many accounts of harrowing experiences featuring survivors who have decided to live a meaningful existence even though they had no reason to believe that their circumstances could be endured. The courage to make this

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decision is so arduous and yet so powerful that it makes sense to speak of it as “radical” – all the more so, because its quietly steadfast nature means that it is too often overlooked. Radical courage is different from the courage required to go through with a suicide. The choice to keep enduring psychache – making a deliberate, active choice to live, not just a choice not to die – requires a far more onerous and deep resolve than the one involved in following through with a suicidal plan. It also makes sense to speak of this courageous decision to live as “radical” because it involves heeding an intuitive, spiritual, evolutionary and generative urge at the heart of ontology of becoming. This form of courage is a sacré coeur; the sacred heart of the life-force that radically thwarts the desire for death.

The inspiration that pushed me to explore this idea was the theologian Jonathan Lear’s *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*. Lear uses the term “radical hope” to describe hope that is “directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what [hope] is” believing the future will bring other, unknown possibilities. Radical hope wells up from an incomprehensible “source of goodness” that I perceive to be a non-rational, non-logical, spiritual knowingness. It is a hope that encapsulates a desire for an interdependent, future-oriented ontology of becoming, imbuing the future with “a hope that is beyond the hope of actual outcomes”. To live with radical hope is to occupy a state-of-being that transcends knowing and believing that a good future could happen. Radical hope is a form of what the philosopher Victoria McGee would call “good hope” through which individuals and communities wait and persist, patiently acknowledging imitations “rather than crumpling in the face of their reality”.

Bloch’s insights on hope have also fed into my conceptualisation of radical courage. He says that hope serves a “utopian function”, in that people imagine and anticipate that their future will be different and better. Hope fractures the here-and-now with the desire for more. To hope is a “crucially important human activity” because it means to wish for more,

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149 Lear, *Radical Hope*, 103, 94-98.
150 Lear, *Radical Hope*, 122.
and in the process possesses the capacity to catalyse “aspiration and anticipation”.\textsuperscript{154} But unless wishing leads to action to realise the future, it remains a dream.\textsuperscript{155} This was certainly the case for me. In order to be able to give up the comfort of choosing death, I had to do more than just dream of becoming an artist. I needed to carry out concrete actions in order for my wished-for future to be realised; actions performed in the belief that by deliberately moving toward an unknown future, my subjectivity and spirituality would be transformed.\textsuperscript{156}

Like radical hope, “radical courage” anticipates a future that is not known and relies on an intuitive, spiritual energy.\textsuperscript{157} While hope is “Being-in-possibility”, radical courage converts hope and wishfulness from passive desire to direct action.\textsuperscript{158} Most of the behaviours that demonstrate radical courage are commonplace activities that someone conducts to get through each hour of each day, even though there is no guarantee that the following day will be better or that the current circumstances will soon change. The theologian Sharon D. Welch draws attention to this when she calls for an acknowledgment of the inner strength involved in recognising that in some situations “far too much has been lost and there are no clear means of restitution”.\textsuperscript{159} This acknowledgement involves the realisation that sometimes it is impossible for someone experiencing trauma or loss to “recover”, and yet they must still find a way forward.

As I noted earlier, the steadfastness required to conduct day-to-day actions in traumatic circumstances is rarely acknowledged as a form of courage. In a discussion of suicide, for example, the psychologists Cynthia L. S. Pury et al speak of the “bad” courage required to carry out a suicide. “Good” courage, they say, is a preparedness to die for a cause or while saving another’s life.\textsuperscript{160} Pury and her associates overlook the courage I am calling radical here: the uncelebrated, stalwart form of courage required to halt a suicide attempt. Much the same applies in the novelist and essayist Anna Funder’s discussion of courage. She

\textsuperscript{156} Brown, “Ernst Bloch”.
\textsuperscript{159} Sharon D. Welch, \textit{A Feminist Ethic of Risk} (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1990), 68.
defines it as the ability to retain a desire to live while being ready to die for a cause.\textsuperscript{161} This definition implies a masculine conception of courage, geared towards heroic defend-to-the-death acts that are often extolled as evidence of an admirably masculine strength of character. When courage is understood in these terms, it is little wonder that the courage I have been describing has so often been overlooked.

The psychologist Silvia Canetto and health scientist Ronald Brown both suggest that masculine understandings of courage may explain the \textit{gendered disparity in statistics of completed suicides}.\textsuperscript{162} More men than women complete a suicide attempt, possibly because they see this as a demonstration of “control, strength and bravery”, and that “surviving a suicidal act is ... unmasculine”.\textsuperscript{163} Brown notes that heroic suicide such as dying for a cause or in war is celebrated as a noble, masculine quality, whereas femininity is tainted when women suicide.\textsuperscript{164} Canetto adds that a masculine concept of courage understood as heroic resistance to overwhelming odds and a refusal to admit failure is more likely to push men to complete a suicide attempt.\textsuperscript{165}

I am wary of describing radical courage as feminine because I feel that this risks diminishing its potency. Even so, valorising this form of courage feels like a feminist act. I say this because valorising radical courage means celebrating a resolve that is expressed in less-theredramatic or heroic ways. Because it often expresses itself in the performance of everyday activities, the obdurate determination that someone experiencing psychache must exercise

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{163}] Birte Meissner, Jason Bantjes, and Ashraf Kagee, “I Would Rather Just Go Through With It Than Be Called a Wussy: An Exploration of How a Group of Young South African Men Think and Talk About Suicide,” \textit{American Journal of Men’s Health} 10, no. 4 (2015), 244; Canetto, “She Died for Love,” 11.
\item[\textsuperscript{164}] Brown, \textit{The Art of Suicide}, 15.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
simply to get out of bed in the morning is more readily associated with femininity than masculinity. This is indeed what Sharon D. Welch had in mind when she called for greater recognition of certain forms of inner strength usually downplayed because of an association with femininity.\textsuperscript{166}

In addition to the subversive power of claiming the courage I am describing as “radical”, I conceive of it in spiritual terms. Anyone who exerts this form of steadfast courage in the face of psychache is choosing to tap into the life-force rather than choosing death, facing the fear that the psychache might never dissipate, and pushing on regardless. To exercise radical courage is thus to connect with spirituality and the creativity and imagination associated with it. In my case, radical courage had even more of a spiritual dimension because it was what made it possible for me to respond to God’s call to me from the future. Radical courage was what allowed me to quarantine the narrative of suicidality while helping to construct what narrative therapists Maggie Carey and others call the “preferred, but subjugated self-narrative” of being an artist.\textsuperscript{167}

\textit{Collage as autoethnographic research and a form of re-structuring}

It is telling that collage was my preferred medium when making art during and after 2010. Like the rupture of epiphany, collage involves ripping, cutting, tearing, breaking up and re-assembling the fragments into something new. Collage has been used by artists since the twentieth century as a political tool, to present critiques of culture through the reconfiguration of reality. Collage, in this sense, is an ideal metaphor for the restructuring of an imagined life. The capacity to blend and contain layers of disparate materials is a distinctive feature of collage, allowing it to hold in tension, just as ruptures do, the fluid, in-between-ness of constraint and possibility.\textsuperscript{168}

Collage is also an ideal metaphor for interdisciplinary research and intellectual inquiry. Just as producing a collage involves combining disparate images and materials to produce something new, so interdisciplinary work involves the production of new conceptual

\textsuperscript{166} Welch, \textit{A Feminist Ethic of Risk}, 68.


approaches by patching and layering different perspectives and techniques. In both cases, collage (referred to by the art historian Anna Deuze as assemblage or bricolage) performs a transformative alchemy, acting almost like the magic in fairy tales. The processes of collaging and assembling create gaps. Whether in art-making, self-narrating or imagining the future, these gaps interest me because they are the spaces of unvoiced, unfulfilled possibility. Connecting random ideas also increases the possibility of dismantling established, social and political power relationships. The concept of radical courage is an example of this, because it emerged from linking the pull of the future to spirituality and suicidality.

In what follows, I explore what some of my collages have to say about my re-structuring process. The key themes that run through the works I am about to discuss are: the rupture between self and past; God and the world; God’s prophetic call; radical courage; and forays into the imaginary realm. Overall, the analysis reveals the importance of the motif of the river as a symbol of rebirth, baptism, and changing direction towards the will to live through the exercise of radical courage. Further symbolism may be found in my use of storm clouds to signify spiritual conflict and melancholic suicidality, and gold foil to signify spiritual transformation. Some of my works layer old maps and scraps of text, gesturing at how I found new words and discourses in curious places. The cut-up and re-worked maps are particularly significant. As the process of analysing my art-making has revealed, they represent the importance of the imaginary realm in constructing a preferred self-narrative and future.

**Rupture between self and past**

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**Figure 17: Forget me not: I waited** (July 2016), mixed media on card, 20 x 30 cm.

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170 Deuze, “Assemblage.”
Both *Forget me not: I waited* (Figure 17) and *Do not disturb my webs* (Figure 18) represent the spiritual conflict associated with searching for and hiding from God. In *Forget me not: I waited*, spiritual conflict is symbolised by the “re-structuring” motif of a swirling, purple and black storm, alongside the dominant “de-structuring” motif of screaming mouths and grasping hands. The hands in the background stretch towards a gold patch, representing the moment in Genesis 1: 3-4 in which God speaks the world into being by calling light from darkness. Gold wash, paint and foil are therefore a “restructuring” motif of spiritual transformation. The gold patch is located within black storm clouds. The storm is a reference to suicidality, which can trigger imagination and different expressions of creativity. The chaos and irrationality of the storm captures something of the incoherent “babble” experienced during suicidality. This incoherence parallels the psycho-pathological symptoms of mystical experience, however: like a storm, suicidality also has the capacity to change the spiritual and psychological landscape of those experiencing it.\(^{171}\)

The reproduced religious image appearing in *Forget me not: I waited* emphasises the contradictory natures of light and dark and refers to a mystical experience.\(^{172}\) The demon angels in this image are passive bystanders to my distress, but also represent my sense of being held in the in-between-ness of heaven and hell.\(^{173}\) Underneath these figures is part of a map of Helidon, Queensland, the name a play on “Hell-I-don”. The words “Forget Me Not” placed across the face indicate my desire to be kept in God’s sight. There is an ambiguous postscript, “You promised you’d be there. I waited”. This postscript is the composite voice of

\(^{171}\) Heriot-Maitland, “Mysticism and Madness,” 303.


God, my archived, preferred-self and my future-self-as-artist, reminding me that the “un-sayable” can now be articulated.

**Figure 18: Do not disturb my webs** (March 2018), mixed media on card, 20 x 30 cm.

*Do not disturb my webs* is a collage that explores the “un-sayable” by re-working a reproduction of *Oh, What’s That in the Hollow?* (1893), a watercolour by the Pre-Raphaelite painter, Edward Robert Hughes. A miniature reproduction of this painting has a significant position in *The traveller’s tale*, a gouache on MDF board painting I created in 2018 (Figure 29, Part C). The title of Hughes’ painting comes from Christina Rossetti’s poem, *Amor Mundi*. Although it is not obvious, *Do not disturb my webs* has a geographic, place-based reference. Hughes created a confronting image of death, positioning Rossetti’s protagonist in a hollow or ditch. The image suggests suicide because of its central figure’s waxy facial colour and recumbent pose reminiscent of John Everett Millais’ well-known depiction of Ophelia.

For geographer Olivia Stevenson, the suicide site itself, the “where” factor, could be useful for researchers and psychologists of suicide when they consider the how and why reasoning behind a suicide attempt. Stevenson believes suicide emerges from a relationship between a person’s subjectivity and their onto-epistemology. For Stevenson, being in a good place refers to both a physical site and psychological state. Hughes’ painting shows a figure

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enmeshed in the thorny vine of a briar rose, suggesting the impenetrable rose bush around the female protagonist of the Rapunzel and Sleeping Beauty fairy tales. The rose flower has multiple symbolic meanings because of its geographic and historical context, but my interpretation comes from the symbolism of metamorphosis common in fairy tales. The thorny vines roped around the dead figure symbolise suicidality’s firm grasp, but the roses remind me that suicidality will pass if I bide my time and wait patiently.

To emphasise the temporary nature of suicidal depression, portraying it as the uninvited squatter in a “room” I can pass through, I inserted text between the figure’s hand and mouth in my work. The text says: “I went into another room where the Walls and Ceilings were all hung with Cobwebs, except a narrow Passage for the Artist to go in and out”. The cobwebs were an analogy for the contradictory nature of what suicidality felt like. It was as though I was both constrained by and safely cocooned within an impenetrable, invisible net which forced me to enter my imaginary realm where I conjectured first my death, and then a new future as an artist.

The cobweb is represented by tissue paper, a recurring material discussed in this chapter. I used flimsy, pale blue tissue in this collage to suggest the sticky residue left by a narrative of suicidality. The tissue also represented water and drowning by suicide and formed a transparent yet cage-like layer around the figure’s face, indicative of the disconnect I felt between myself and the world. Do not disturb my webs also refers to the scotomising processes involved in the re-structuring aftermath of a halted suicide, in this case by ripping the eyes from the face and instead gluing them into the tissue paper aura. This re-structured face evokes “les gueules cassées”, a Great War-era term describing cosmetic reconstruction of mutilated soldier faces.

Europe’s geography, nations, and inhabitants’ lives and bodies were re-structured after the Great War. The sketches, photographs, first-person accounts and doctors’ reports of destroyed and re-constructed faces tell of the soldiers’ trauma and difficulty when confronted with their “new” faces, or their “gueules cassées”. Some soldiers suicided,

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unable to accept either the original injury or re-structured mutilation. For the German artist Otto Dix, the mutilated and re-structured faces were emblematic of the war and his etchings such as 1924 Transplantation (from Krieg), show reconstruction as an assemblage of facial pieces.

The theme of les gueules cassées is found in the more recent oil-on-canvas works of the French artist pseudonymously known as René Apllec. These paintings are copies of Apllec’s collaged portraits of French military war heroes.

During the twentieth century, the German artists Hannah Höch and Annegret Soltau produced distinctive collaged portraits as a feminist critique of the social-cultural positioning of women and the times in which they lived. Hannah Höch’s early photo-montages critiqued the mass consumption of products produced by manufacturers aiding Germany’s war effort such as BMW and Hugo Boss. By manipulating ephemera such as the Portrait of Gerhard Hauptmann (1919) and German Girl (1930), Höch criticised war’s impact on ordinary people’s lives and subjectivities.

I have used stitching as a further collage technique in Do not disturb my webs. The stitching in this image recalls cobwebs and refers to suicidality’s ability to capture and bind.

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72
stitching blue thread across the figure’s hands, the text and onto the figure’s closed mouth, I was representing the social-cultural silencing of people experiencing suicidality. I was also referring to my own feeling of being unable to articulate my distress, either being ignored or silenced because all I could utter were inchoate expressions of psychache. Political activists and artists have stitched their mouths closed in protest against domestic violence, illegal detention, asylum policies and social marginalisation. The action carries undertones of the scold’s bridle, a medieval face-cage to punish and silence women who spoke their mind. The stitching of the mouth in this image is thus an admonishment of the silencing of some people in our community.

Soltau used thread and stitching to explore women’s oppression, construction of identity and ageing as a feminist critique of women’s social-cultural position. Soltau crafted two series of photographic self-portraits during the 1970s. The first were photographs of a face tightly wound with thread so as to leave a furrow and imprint, and the second series used the technique of stitching directly onto the photograph which fragments and slices up the surface of the image. Soltau’s stitched photomontages, such as Mutter-Glück-mit Tochter und Sohn (1985) and New York Faces - chirurgische Operationen 21.11.2001 (2002), stitch the faces of the mother and child back together invoking an association with Frankenstein’s monster which makes the image very unsettling. Soltau commented that she manipulates pieces to elicit new meanings and connections to balance the physical and spiritual dimension. Although she claims that her concern is not with the de-structure of images, I find the violence of ripping and cutting of de-structure and the aggressive, wanton stitching of re-structure to be disturbing.

Soltau’s work is a powerful example of how art can say the “un-sayable”. The processes of cutting and stitching are intrusive, invasive and alien. As a consequence, Soltau’s portraits scream, rather than hint, at the silent violence perpetrated by others and by themselves. Her more recent work is a series of collaged, stitched photomontages, personal identity 2003–

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2018 in which she examines the role of documentation in her every-day life. Soltau’s birth certificate (2003) photomontage resonates with me. It is a contemporary interpretation of les gueules cassées and it identifies moments of newness as moments of potential re-structure. Meditating on these links between her work and my Self-portrait as an artist (Figure 23) deepens my understanding both of this work and the restructuring processes to which it refers.

Kathy Nida is a contemporary Outsider artist who uses stitching to create new faces and bodies. Her incorporation of stitched fibre and cloth into her work both reinforces and destabilises taken-for-granted aspects of domesticity and being a woman. Since they involve the piercing and prodding of layers, Nida’s stitching techniques are uncomfortable. As in her textile work, Lost (2005), showing a solitary figure with clasped hands under her chin against a background of different items, Nida’s art is a compilation of fabric shapes representing ordinary objects, motifs and symbols. Because it contrasts with the symmetrical arrangement of the figure’s internal organs, her stitched arrangement implies a dis-association between environment and self. The ordinariness of the object in Lost is transformed, pushing the viewer to conjecture what lies beyond the ordinary, and in the process evoking confusion and loss.

Nida’s work since 2003, particularly And Then There Was None (2016), Womanscape (2018) and Fire and Water (2018) indicates a cosmic awareness of the inter-relationship of spirit and matter. Her work has a spiritual dimension because it seeks to expose the inter-relationship of the mythical and material world. Nida’s artwork might thus be seen as what art critic Rina Arya calls visionary art: art emerging from a fascination with the inter-relationship of community, mythology and ecology. Nida has said that her ideas come to

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her in dreams, suggesting both an understanding and a reticence to speak of the mystical nature to her art-making.190

God and the world

Figure 19: Out of the tomb (August 2016), mixed media on paper, 20 x 30 cm.

My experience of hiding from and searching for God felt like an entombment that was ruptured by God’s prophetic call. Out of the tomb (Figure 19) gestures at this experience by illustrating the rupture that precedes a re-structure. The central image, cut from a calendar illustrated with early medieval Christian icons, is of Christ emerging from the tomb. The reproduction image lays on top of a gold watercolour wash to background the sheen from gold-foil strips that radiate from Christ’s head. The radiating lines symbolise the nimbus or holy light that surrounds a spiritually enlightened person; they are also associated with pagan sun deities.191 To depict the rupture from the tomb I cut and separated a tri-panelled, non-representational, brown-hued landscape of tree trunks. I split this reproduction to signify the ripping of the temple curtain which symbolised God’s heralding of another future.192

Out of the Tomb is one of many paintings I have produced that feature gold paint, colour or foil. Gold symbolises many things: wealth, royalty and virtue; the quest for spiritual growth; spiritual transformations from lived experiences; knowledge and wisdom. It is also

associated with healing and protection.\textsuperscript{193} Gold, as a pure and valuable metal and its associated alchemical properties has been used frequently as a symbol of transformation in Western fairy tale and other narratives.\textsuperscript{194} Gold leaf and gilding were used in medieval Christian iconography and illustrated manuscripts; as it was so expensive, it was thought appropriate to represent the sovereignty of God, the holy family, Jesus and the saints.\textsuperscript{195} Gold was also used to highlight particular parts of a painting, or as the background to refer to God’s mysterious presence.\textsuperscript{196}

\textbf{God’s prophetic call}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{god-call.png}
\caption{God calls (2016), mixed media on paper, 20 x 30 cm.}
\end{figure}

Gold as an intimation of God’s hidden presence is depicted in the twelfth-century image, \textit{Hildegard receiving a vision and dictating to her scribe and secretary}. Conceived by the mystic, Hildegard of Bingen, this miniature image was one of the original illustrations of her visions in her manuscript \textit{Scivias}. The image represents Hildegard’s role as a recipient of God’s visions and was probably copied from a wax tablet she used to record visions as they happened.\textsuperscript{197} The background is a field of gold leaf and God’s voice is a five-tentacled hand-

\textsuperscript{196} Andrew Greeley, \textit{Andrew Greeley’s Chicago} (Chicago: Contemporary, 1989), 4.
shape that touches Hildegard’s face. Since Hildegard’s central position in this image and generous use of gold suggest deep intimacy between herself and God, these visual features have served similar roles in my own work.

My collage *God calls* (Figure 20) incorporates an image taken from old Art Gallery of NSW magazine in which a central female figure (probably Mary of Nazareth) receives a crown from the trinitarian God. This image is laid over two different pieces of textured gold foil to indicate Mary’s spiritual quest. I covered the faces of God in the image with a band of gold-coloured tissue-paper in order to obscure the patriarchal interpretation of God and to highlight Mary’s spiritual ascension. I also incorporated a scrap of text, again from the “The Criticism of the Arts” in *An English Book of Prose* (1965), reading: “And he bid me deny it if I could. I had never been used, I said, to deny the truth; nor would I now”. These words were what I imagined Mary’s would be, or otherwise the words of martyrs, should they be questioned about their loyalty to Jesus.

![Adoration of the Magi (2016) mixed media on paper, 20 x 30 cm.](image)

*Adoration of the Magi* (Figure 21) again deploys the symbolism of gold to explore my fascination with prophesy, particularly surrounding the nativity. The central image is a reproduction of Gentile da Fabriano’s tempera on wood panel, *Adorazione dei Magi (Adoration of the Magi)* (1423). The visit of the Magi is one of the nativity prophesies. The

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others include the angel Gabriel’s announcement of the Incarnation to Mary, a host of angels appearing at night to speak to the shepherds, and God telling the Magi and Joseph to leave Bethlehem by other routes in order to protect the Christ child. Before Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt in order to protect Jesus from the murderous intentions of King Herod, the prophet Anna spoke of the infant Jesus to all who “were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem”.  

The top section of my *Adoration of the Magi* has been worked with gold foil, yellow tissue-paper, black ink and orange texta pen to create the tumult of an electrical storm. I also placed the reproduction of Gentile da Fabriano’s image at the base of a topographic map of New Zealand’s Canterbury region, an area of seismic activity resulting in ongoing earthquakes. The storm is again a metaphor for the powerful emotional, psychological and spiritual transformation as a result of my prophetic call, while the reference to the Canterbury region is a nod to the rupture that the call created in my life. As an additional reference to the relationship between my experience and God’s history of prophetic calls, I attached a string of computer electrical-wire emerging from the storm with its plug attached to vaulting directly above the head of the Christ child.

**Radical courage**

*Figure 22: Day 7 is a Nice day* (September 2016), old map and mixed media on paper, 20 x 30 cm.

*Day 7 is a Nice day* (figure 22) holds within it the ante-narrative or back-story that alerted me to the concept of radical courage. I made this work to explain my grandfather’s radical

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199 Luke 2: 36–38 (NIV)
courage in enduring the war. Since my grandfather’s story helped me to endure heartache in order to realise my imagined future, I locate him among my community of saints: the body of people both living and dead who do good for us. In this role he makes visible the church as Mother, and of Mary of Nazareth as mother of us all, for Mother Church is also the Communion of Saints.\textsuperscript{200}

My work-on-paper is a commentary about the disjunction between personal truths and the pervasive, mythic, public meta-narratives that suppress the truth of the lived experience. The reality of suicidal depression, like that of a war experience, lies in an in-between-ness of personal reality and a social-cultural camouflage of truth. By associating the Gallipoli campaign with \textit{Day 7 is a Nice day}, I point out that my experience of suicidality reflected that of my grandfather’s war experience in that we were both pushed to discount the truth of our experience in favour of a more acceptable narrative that was more politically expedient.\textsuperscript{201}

For the background, I used a topographic map of Bunbury, Western Australia, showing Leschenault Inlet and estuary. This inlet was named to honour Théodore Leschenault de la Tour, a French botanist who visited Australia in early 1800s.\textsuperscript{202} At its base is a tourist-brochure image of French lavender fields as an ironic reference to the World War 1 soldier’s “tour”-of-duty. I used the map’s “Legend and Scale” as a comment about the scale of the ANZAC legend. I swirled black watercolour paint over it to indicate that the legend is not all true. The swirls form a dark storm cloud halo above the soldier’s head, representing the suicidal depression often associated with war veterans’ Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.\textsuperscript{203} The figure in this painting is cut from a reproduction of Australian painter Russell Drysdale’s iconic 1942 painting, \textit{Soldier}.\textsuperscript{204} He painted the isolated and lonely figure waiting on a

\textsuperscript{204} Russell Drysdale, \textit{Soldier}, 1942, oil hardboard, 60.3 x 40.7 cm, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1081750.
platform in the cold darkness for a train to come and take him to the next deployment of service.

The map of Leschenault exemplifies the geographical processes of re-structuring in this work. The estuary’s ongoing sedimentation necessitates harbour dredging, land reclamation and harbour reconstruction.\textsuperscript{205} My interest in this feature is threefold. Sedimentation is analogous to the layering of stories that frame my subjectivity. When aspects of my subjectivity became unsustainable, I engaged in a dredging that allowed me to retrieve a preferred self-narrative, and through this means achieve a new perspective of self and world.

\textbf{Figure 23: Self-portrait as an artist} (2010), mixed media on diary page, 20 x 30 cm.

While deep in the midst of depression’s imaginary realm in February 2010, I visited Hull’s regional art museum, Ferens Gallery, during my school’s mid-term break. After the visit, I created a self-portrait collage in my diary reproduced here as Figure 23. I have included this self-portrait because it shows that my imagination was seeking another possible self-narrative even as suicidal depression was taking hold. The elements that eventually made it possible for me to imagine an alternative self were already present; pre-formed, as it were, in my imagination. Like Annegret Soltau, I changed the tone and purpose of the imagery on the Ferens Gallery brochure for its children’s art class in this collage, replacing a child’s face with a sketch of my own face.\textsuperscript{206} When I created this image, it simply seemed a playful


engagement with available material. Now, however, I recognise it as a stake-hold on my future. I also recognise the insert forecasting stormy weather for Hull on 15 February 2010 in this collage as a reference to spiritual and psychological tumult. In hindsight, it is possible to appreciate the parallel between the visual references to climatic storms and “re-structuring” geographic environments in my collage, and spiritual storms re-structuring my perspectives of self and the future.

Figure 24: *Chosen at random for this drama* (2017), mixed media on paper, 25 x 35 cm.

The following two images examine another thread running through my artwork: that of fairy tales, particularly “Little Red Riding Hood”. I discuss the significance of fairy tales further in the next chapter, but here I reiterate my identification with the courageous red-hooded heroine in “Little Red Riding Hood” in *Chosen at random for this drama* (Figure 24). I have also depicted two other aspects of my imagined self in this image: the wolf of suicidal depression and Grandma who is the “weise Frau”, the crone who knows both death and life, and the transitions between.207

In fairy tales, the *weise Frau* is usually depicted as the fairy godmother whose origins go back to the prophesying sybil. In my image, Grandma not only symbolises my future, she is also my wise, magical ally who has lived into the future and there becomes the narrator of my story. Red tears course down Grandma’s lined face and sparkly green jacket. She cries, not from sorrow or pain but from relief and sadness, because her role as axe-wielding protector

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of Red Riding Hood is diminishing. The grandmother is sad because she understands that her
grand-daughter is ready to leave the safety of home in order to courageously pursue the
quest that God requires of her. I made Little Red Riding Hood the largest of figures to show
that she is managing the wolf of suicidal depression, and that she is managing to protect
herself and her future.

In popular interpretations of the tale of Little Red Riding Hood, the wolf represents a young
girl’s first sexual encounter. The red hooded cape signifies the blood of puberty, loss of
virginity, passion and fertility.\textsuperscript{208} In my image, however, red indicates life, passion, and
growth, while the wolf symbolises the seductive quality of suicidal depression. During the
latter half of 2014, I recognised the similarity between my experience of suicidality and the
charismatic but destructive suitor who woos and seduces, attempting to lead me into death.
The wolf in my image is more aligned to a recurrent motif that literary scholar Sandra Gilbert
identifies in numerous women’s narratives of suicide: that of “the symbolic lover who
promises narcotic or even orgasmic relief from suffering, a ceasing upon the midnight with
no pain”.\textsuperscript{209} The title of the work comes from a piece of text from an old numerology book
appearing over the wolf’s face, reading “Chosen at random for this drama”. I selected this
line as an ironic statement. My wolf did not choose me at random: the deceptive suitor of
depression instead selected me because of my vulnerability.

\textit{Chosen at random for this drama} was directly influenced by an exhibition of the work of
Mirka Mora (1928–2018) at the National Gallery of Victoria which I saw in 2017.\textsuperscript{210} Mora is a
female Outsider artist whose work seems to speak of childhood innocence at first glance,
but at second glance, tells of chaos and lurking dangers. In Mora’s \textit{The Medieval Gathering}
(1987–1992), children have claws rather than feet, a devil sits on the top of a child’s head, a
snake twists along the foreground and disembodied heads float in the air. Like me, Mora was
interested in experimenting with a range of media in her work. Her paintings resound with a

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\textsuperscript{208} For more on this symbolism see Laura Evans, “Little Red Riding Hood Bites Back: A Feminist
Qualitative Examination of Fairy Tales and Women’s Intimate Relational Patterns” (PhD Thesis, Antioch
University, Santa Barbara, 2014), 48-52.

\textsuperscript{209} Sandra M. Gilbert, “The Supple Suitor: Death, Women, Feminism, and (Assisted or Unassisted) Suicide,”
\textit{Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature} 24, no. 2 (Fall 2005): 251.

\textsuperscript{210} An example is Mirka Mora, \textit{The Medieval Gathering}, 1987–1992, oil on canvas, 122 x 214 cm, National
September 2019.
spiritual awareness evidenced by her inclusion of angel-like creatures. I am also drawn to her incorporation of middle-European folk-art motifs which recall the landscapes of fairy tales.

Figure 25: *Creativity and functionality go hand in hand* (2019), mixed media on paper, 25 x 35 cm.

*Creativity and functionality go hand in hand* (Figure 25) is a recent collage that continues the Little Red Riding Hood theme. Red colour dominates, being the background colour of a pattern from a Liberty store brochure. As symbolic of life, red in this collage is a blunt announcement of my state-of-being. The red hands and arms in this image signify an intrusion from the future. I used them to represent the gentle hands of God who guides, calls and directs. The hands also refer to my own hands and their role in my future calling as an artist. Toward the top of the image, a further hand holds the letters, “M” and “Y” (MY) above “FUTURE”. In addition, I placed the words “creativity and functionality go hand in hand” beneath the image of Mary and Jesus from Annibale Caracci’s *The Holy Family with the Infant Saint John the Baptist* (ca. sixteenth century) to emphasise the prophetic call and that radical courage (creativity) is achieved through action (functionality).211 There is an interesting parallel to the artist Charlotte Salomon’s work *Epilogue* (1940–43) here.212 Red arms also appeared prominently in this work featuring seven images of Salomon engaged in painting. For me, because I associate red with life, the red arms signify Salomon’s desire to

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experience the world as an artist. The red bodies and strong-angled arms also convey a sense of determination and resoluteness that I associate with radical courage.

Figure 26: *Courage between the lines* (2017), old map and mixed media on paper, 20 x 30 cm

*Courage between the lines* (Figure 26) features the word “Courage” in bold red lettering. In so doing, it reinforces the association I came to draw between red, life and radical courage. The background of this collage is an aerial map of Victoria’s Murray River region showing a river course transecting the landscape. In the middle of the work appears a travel-brochure image of Venice, a city built on re-claimed marshland, the topography of which has been re-structured in order to allow for human habitation, and whose roads are waterways. The river is a repeated motif both in this collage and the one following, *Courage within* (Figure 27). Suggesting movement and transformation, the river metaphorically refers to Genesis 2: 10: “A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden”. 213 Eden is the river’s source and its spiritual core, and the river is the conduit or canal that carries radical courage. “Courage between the lines” refers to the fact that radical courage lives in, between and beyond the boundaries of possible realities. This text is also a play on the phrase “read between the lines”, referring to my need to “read” the silent gaps between my daily activities to appreciate the radical courage that enabled me to move from one task or action to the next.

213 Genesis 2: 10 (NIV).
The spiritual dimension of radical courage is my focus in *Courage within* (Figure 27). This collage reverses an aerial map to emphasise the gold tones of the Murray River’s meandering path and surrounding floodplains. When rivers flood, they re-structure the landscape because they drop sediment around meanders resulting in a changed river course. This collage hints at the equilibrium that developed after I heeded the prophetic call and retrieved my preferred self-narrative. The collage achieves this through a deliberate placement of colour, texture and line to create balance. This obvious ordering of random elements tells of control, suggesting the beginning of a different narrative made possible by directing radical courage toward achieving my desire to become an artist.

This new narrative is housed within a reproduction of Margaret Olley’s *Interior with Green Lamp*.214 Since Olley’s house was her studio, positioning her image of the interior of that house at the heart of my collage refers to my own anticipation of a future-as-an-artist, with a studio room of my own.215 Olley’s interiors, like those of Vanessa Bell, show a space cluttered with personal items but thick with meditative quiet.216 Both Bell’s and Olley’s studios were in-between, transitional spaces connecting them both to the imaginary realm they experienced within and to the corporeal external world of family and friends.


As mentioned before, the room operates as a metaphor for my spiritual core within many of my artworks. The key inspiration for this is Teresa of Ávila’s description of her communion with God as a staged process, the end of which is the courtyard or most inner sanctum of her being.\textsuperscript{217} Once again, the gold tones in \textit{Courage within} also signify the spiritual transformation that occurred after I started to act out my preferred narrative of self and future. Gold is the dominant colour of Olley’s interior, and the space under the arcing shredded paper. The river as a metaphor for spirituality and radical courage is further emphasised through the waterway running through Olley’s studio interior.

\textbf{Forays into the imaginary realm}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure28.png}
\caption{\textit{I will dwell in the house of God forever} (2016), old map and mixed media on paper, 20 x 30 cm.}
\end{figure}

Before I move to the last section of this thesis, I offer the collage \textit{I will dwell in the house of God forever} (Figure 28) as both the summary of the “re-structuring” processes discussed in this chapter and a bridge to the “constructing” processes discussed in the next. This collage presents a five-tiered, pagoda-styled, ceramic sculpture to symbolise places of worship which in the Christian tradition are churches or “houses of God”. There are two types of script: first, lettering cut from ephemera; and second, a hand-written and re-configured version of Psalm 23, \textit{The Lord is my shepherd}. The lettering, a repeated motif within the works discussed in both my “De-” and “Re-structuring” chapters, represents the words of other people. My orderly handwriting operates as a transition between an incoherent

stream of conscious and the traditional words of Psalm 23. The writing appears over the
topographic map of Queensland’s Great Dividing Ranges, Mount Whitestone and the
Lockyer Valley region, an area of rugged terrain riddled with ridges, sandstone gorges and
valleys. Its topography represents Australia’s stable geology. I also use gold foil and gold-
coloured rice-paper to represent spiritual awakening. The image of St Hildegard of Bingen,
placed at the entrance of the five-tiered mansion (referencing Teresa of Ávila’s seven-
roomed Interior Castle), represents the importance of feminist mysticism in the experiences
and works discussed in this chapter, and continues into the one following.

To conclude
The collages I have discussed in this chapter illustrate the spiritual energy generated by the
exercise of radical courage. These collages also offer insights into the spiritual links that
connect my decision to halt my suicide attempt to God’s intrusion from the future and
subsequent exertion of radical courage. The persistent use of gold running throughout my
artworks gestures at spiritual transformation. In analysing these works as part of my
autoethnographic research for this thesis, I have also been able to appreciate why rivers
have played such a significant role in my collage-making: they are metaphors for change and
re-structuring. As such, the collages operate as a link between the misty watercolours
discussed in my last chapter on “de-structuring” and the robust quality of the “constructing”
processes captured in the MDF board paintings I discuss in the following chapter.
PART C: Constructing: A narrative of the imagined future

A map to what follows

In this final chapter, I discuss two processes. The first is the complex way in which I used my narrative of an imagined future to over-ride my narrative of suicidality. I discuss the mix of deliberate pretence and collusion involved in allowing my present actions to be directed by my imagined future-self – a self who had become a wise fairy godmother-like figure and artist – choosing to act as if she had become the narrator of my life story. The second process I discuss was part of the means through which I sought to live out my narrative of an imagined future as an artist. This process was the creation of my exhibition Revelations, comprising seventeen paintings of gouache on MDF board which appeared at TAP Gallery, Darlinghurst in 2015.

In discussing my choice to live as if in a narrative, I survey the interdisciplinary field of the narrative studies. I pay particular attention to debates within this field relating to personal or life narratives: chiefly, a debate associated with the limitations of narrative as a way of thinking about the self, everyday life, and the many unsayable, disorderly dimensions of personal experience. Evidently, a huge amount of my experience of psycheache lies beyond representation and the meaningful sequencing involved in conventional narratives. Yet the fact remains that imposing a sense of narrative on my life – choosing to construct a sense of meaning and order out of unstoried and ineffable phenomena, and working to harness the sense of multiplicity and creativity associated with storytelling – has been (and remains) essential to my survival.

For this reason, I have used Jan Alber et al’s concept of “unnatural narrative” to think about my own relationship to narrative. I discuss the significance of fairy tales and the extent to which identifying with fairy tale characters has helped me as a woman to lay claim to my own agency. I also note the distinction between my approach to narrative and the one encouraged by narrative therapists. Perhaps more than anything else, my relationship to narrative has allowed me to reject the therapeutic notion that people who experience psycheache need a story of “recovery” to have meaningful lives.

The early part of this chapter builds on the discussion in Parts A and B in providing context for my Revelations paintings. I note again that the style and medium of these works is
different from those discussed earlier in this thesis. Since I developed the *Revelations* paintings with a view to exhibition, they are more carefully constructed and finished than my watercolours or collages, even though a lineage of motifs, symbols and themes from past work is clearly evident in them. The motivation for these works was to convey a visual representation of my experience of radical courage, my narrative of an imagined future, and the profound effect of a prophetic call which halted suicide. I called the show *Revelations* to indicate that the paintings tell a largely spiritual story in which the central figure, a young woman and a repeated version of my younger self, is essentially reborn. Since the medium of paint on board is a traditional approach to painting, it was an obvious choice for my presentation of myself as an exhibiting artist in the *Revelations* works. On the other hand, the paintings’ style and the intimacy of the narrative they told identify them as Outsider art. Formally, too, they resonate with folk art and the depiction of biblical narratives in the medieval Catholic tradition.

Reproductions of all seventeen exhibited *Revelations* paintings appear at the end of this thesis, but in this chapter I provide a close reading of six paintings in order to demonstrate the method, style and meanings I employed. In the process of discussing these works, I also again refer to the relationship between my paintings and the artwork of some women Outsider artists such as Charlotte Salomon, Madge Gill and Bobby Baker, as well as the fantasy narrative artworks of Leonora Carrington and Heather Nevay. Placing my work in the context of this history of female artists is another part of the process through which I realise my future as an artist as the response to my prophetic call. Claiming my place among a community of Outsider artists is also part of the way in which I am laying claim to a woman-centred spirituality and assuming the right to be at the centre of my own life.

**A narrative constructed from within the imaginary realm**

When I experienced my “prophetic call” to become an artist in 2010, I accepted that day-to-day life would be difficult to manage. I turned from the crippling despair that paralysed action, refused to revisit the past, and refused to recount my experience from a different perspective. I did not want the awfulness of my immediate past to contaminate my future. I refused to see myself as “the mad woman in the attic”, and this meant that I had to imagine and develop a different subject position. To this end, I constructed two new subject
positions that I had to maintain simultaneously. The first was that of the future-self-who-is-already-an-artist. I projected myself into this subjectivity by telling myself a narrative about becoming an established artist. I configured three small, discrete but inter-woven stories to align with the mystical vision I had experienced. Each story – working in the studio, exhibiting and speaking publicly about my art – gave me insights into what I needed to do to become an artist. I then pretended that this narrative had already been realised so I could act as though I was already this future artist-self. My here-and-now-self thus engaged in a conscious performance in which she pretended she was the future-self, and actively co-operated to follow that future artist-self’s directions.

Although it was difficult to occupy the subject position of the future-self and present-self simultaneously, I needed both operating in tandem to survive. I relied on my future-self to narrate what had to be done so that my here-and-now self would not resume the narrative of psychache and suicidality. My here-and-now self continued to experience urges to suicide, but I called upon radical courage to quash them and instead focus on my future as an artist. Strengthened by my desire for that future, radical courage pushed me to get out of bed each morning and prompted me each evening to make a “To Do” list of the next day’s events.

Planning short-term, future-oriented, specific activities allowed me to make incremental in-roads into my desired future. There were setbacks along the way, however, for in 2011 I returned to teaching in my previous Sydney school, once again archiving the desire to become an artist to ensure financial security. This continued for three years, until I experienced concussion from an accident, and the post-concussion trauma cast me back into suicidal depression.

I was not aware of it at the time, but people who have made a prior suicide attempt are especially vulnerable to a renewed episode of suicidal depression after experiencing concussion. Mental health researchers have since discovered that this is the case.\(^{218}\) As the narrative of suicide rapidly took hold of me again, however, it triggered the artist narrative at the same time. This was when I realised I was once again being called to become an artist. This conviction was what Jürgen Moltmann has called “the goad of the promised future”.\(^{219}\)


was certain that the artist’s life could become my promised future so long as I summoned the radical courage to construct a new narrative for myself and respond to the call.

A short overview of narrative studies

Like innumerable contributors to the extensive research field of narrative studies, I have made many references to narrative throughout this discussion. Given the range of disciplines contributing to narrative studies – literary studies, cultural and gender studies, philosophy, political science, anthropology/ethnography, sociology, social work, psychology and the medical humanities – it is not surprising that there is no single definition of narrative. Yet, how and why we create stories to tell others and ourselves is what underlies all these fields. My understanding is that, at a minimum, a narrative is, as defined by the narratologist Michael Toolan, a “perceived sequence of non-randomly connected events”.

For obvious reasons, I am more interested in narratives of personal experience or self-narrative rather than narratives of events, a distinction drawn by many narrative researchers. As such, I found it useful to turn to Corinne Squires’ definition of personal narrative as “sequential and meaningful stories of personal experience that people produce”, and that – crucially – “display transformation or change”. Informed by the narratologist Patrick O’Neill, however, I draw a certain distinction between narrative and story. While a story is a meaningful sequence of events, whether arranged chronologically or according to some other logic, theme or dimension, narrative is the story, and its discourse. Discourse refers to the presentation, or the way the story is revealed to an audience – even if that audience is only oneself. To think about narrative is to think about the ordering of events or episodes into a meaningful whole, but also about the medium and mode through which that sequence is presented or told.

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220 For a good summary of the key contributors to studies of narrative and the key disciplines involved, see: Corinne Squire, Molly Andrews, and Maria Tamboukou, “Introduction: What is Narrative Research?”, in Molly Andrews, Corinne Squire and Maria Tamboukou, Doing Narrative Research (London: Sage, 2013), 2–4.


223 Corinne Squire, “From Experience-Centred to Socioculturally-Oriented Approaches to Narrative,” in Andrews et al., Doing Narrative Research, 48-52. Catherine Reissmann also summarises a range of researchers who insist that rupture and transformation are a crucial element of all narratives or stories: Catherine Kohler Reissman, Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2008), 8–9.

Researchers are interested in personal narratives for many different reasons. Psychologists have an interest in narratives because narratives help to illuminate how individuals construct their identities. Scholars and therapists interested in narrative therapy are specifically concerned with how personal narratives function as tools for therapeutic intervention, and as prompts for individuals to adopt new perspectives on their identities or to create more functional scripts for their future lives.

Feminist researchers are also interested in personal narratives. They have often sought to value the so-called “little” stories and details associated with everyday life and personal relationships which are usually associated with femininity and “invisible women”, conscious that the masculine domain of grand narratives relating to big-picture events and processes has more often been celebrated. The second-wave feminist mantra that the “personal is political” insists that large-scale struggle and processes are illuminated through the minutiae of personal experience. Feminist theorists and activists have argued that individuals might spark wide-reaching change by contesting “dominant narratives” and power relationships at a personal level.

Broadly speaking, scholars interested in auto/ethnography and life-stories have similar reasons for regarding personal narrative as valuable and important as that of feminist scholars. Ethnographers interested in personal narrative are similarly convinced that the little stories about personal and everyday life illuminate wider social and cultural processes. These researchers also consider that personal stories reveal how people make sense of “big-picture” claims about society, human nature and relationships. Personal narratives help individuals work out where their own experience fits – and does not fit – in the grand or “meta-narratives” constructed by their culture, and how they might either

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226 See Michael White and David Epstein, Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990). I discuss the distinction between my own approach to personal narrative and those of narrative therapists later in this chapter.


229 Andrews, Squire, and Tamboukou, Doing Narrative Research, 5–8.
reconcile themselves to, resist or seek to transform these cultural scripts.230 As the sociologist Molly Andrews further notes, individuals are constantly using their imagination and creativity in the course of everyday life to conjecture different possibilities, and sometimes these narratives are capable of producing profound personal or societal change.231

**My relationship to narrativity: the importance of “unnatural narrative” and its challenge to accepted truths**

Each of these perspectives has a bearing on my interest in personal narrative and my approach to it throughout this project. Certain debates among researchers of personal narratives have also influenced my approach. In particular, an autoethnographical reflection on my own relationship to personal narrative has allowed me to contribute to the debate in which narrative is key to how individuals construct a sense of themselves and live meaningful lives. The philosopher Galen Strawson has been especially significant. He has challenged the often-heard claims made by narrative researchers that “self is a perpetually rewritten story” that “each of us constructs and lives a narrative” that effectively represents our identity, and that individuals require a coherent, comprehensive life story in order to live their best lives.232

Strawson asserts that no narrative can ever truly express an individual’s understanding of themselves and their experiences. In fact, Strawson states that the more people engage in narrating to, and of their selves, the further they are removed from understanding the truth of who they are.233 Strawson concedes that there are some people who seem profoundly “disposed to experience or conceive of [their] ... life [and] existence in time... in a narrative way, as having the form of a story, or perhaps a collection of stories” [emphasis in original]. He calls these people “Narrative types... with a capital N”. Strawson maintains that

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many people are not Narrative types, however, and for them, the “unstoried life – [is] the only life that matters”.\textsuperscript{234}

Strawson is not the only scholar to challenge the idea that all aspects of personal experience and identity are capable of being captured by narrative, or that all people can “naturally” impose narrativity on their self-conception and lives. Angela Woods makes a similar claim (and summarises the views of others) in her article on the limits of narrative for the medical humanities. Woods draws attention to the range of impulses, feelings, memories, and sensations that are outside of, and unable to be presented as part of an ordered, meaningful sequence of events, or simply lie beyond representation.\textsuperscript{235}

Poststructuralist theorists present further arguments than either Strawson or Woods do, challenging the notion that individuals are incapable of creating a truthful and coherent story about their identity.\textsuperscript{236} These theorists also draw attention to the inability of any traditional Western narrative based on an Aristotelian structure to represent the messiness and multiplicity of history and everyday life. No events or experiences, personal or otherwise, ever follow the format of an Aristotelian narrative: that is, a moral tale comprising ordered, chronological events from beginning to end aimed at showing how a disrupted status quo is restored.\textsuperscript{237}

These debates about the extent to which narrative is able to capture personal experience and identity have obvious implications both for my own experience and thinking for this project. In the first place, my experience of psychache very much illustrates the problems that provocateurs such as Strawson and Woods have identified with some narratologists’ assumptions that people are the stories they tell about themselves. As I discussed in Part A, the incoherence and anguish of psychache cannot be accurately or comprehensively articulated, nor can it be rendered into storied form. Psychache ruptures and fragments any sense of living according to an orderly chronological sequence and diminishes the ability to impose normal logic on oneself and one’s understanding of the world.

\textsuperscript{234} Strawson, “I Am Not a Story”.
\textsuperscript{236} For some poststructuralist approaches to identity and story see: Chris Weedon, \textit{Feminist Practice and Post-Structuralist Theory} (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987).
My experience of the prophetic call and of spirituality is an unstoried component of my life. The need to occupy two temporal and subjective positions at once (both described earlier being that of my present self and of my future-self-as-artist) was resistant to a sense of orderly chronological sequencing. For these reasons, the criticisms of narrative approaches to self from poststructuralist theorists as well as Strawson and Woods have a strong resonance with me.

While my experience of psychache in 2010 was mostly inchoate, I am also aware that the experience was a transforming episode in my life. This awareness means that that episode exercises a narrative role today, framing the stories I tell myself about my future, current and past selves. My experience of suicidality also took a narrative form because it involved images and plans of a sequence of events that would lead to my death.

More significantly, part of my experience of the prophetic call took the form of a rapid-fire trio of images of myself in various artist roles. The vision operated as a visual narrative because it revealed a set of related vignettes as a meaningful sequence of events. This moment confirms that narrative *did* and continues to play an important role in my life. I have always told myself stories about my self and my world.238 And, having always been disposed to make-believe, pretence and storytelling, it seems to me that I am what Strawson has called a “Narrative” type: I am a person who lives, orders and views their life through a narrative lens. My capacity to construct stories about and for myself made it easy for me to imagine and narrate my life from the perspective of my future-self once I had resolved to do so.

My simultaneous awareness of the limitations of narrative and of the importance of narrative to my experience and sense of self, led me to what the narratologist Jan Alber and others call “unnatural narrative”. An unnatural narrative transgresses the conventions and boundaries of conventional narratives. Unnatural narratives are often also framed by strangeness and mystery, destabilising and disrupting taken-for-granted chronologies, social expectations and ways of understanding the world.239 This was certainly my experience of the narrative: one inhabited by spiritual epiphany, vivid flash-forwards and a tangled

resistance to neat chronological ordering. The new “unnatural” self-narrative generated by the prophetic call – that of my imagined future-self-as-artist – also revealed social-cultural gaps and deceits that I had once taken for granted as truth.

The key taken-for-granted truth that my experience allowed me to challenge was a message that I heard continually around me: that people dealing with suicidality needed a recovery narrative in order to get better. By September 2010, I realised that this was not true. I accepted that I would never recover and never again be normal; that my experience of suicidality had changed me irrevocably and had become part of my subjectivity. I also accepted that I would more than likely experience repeat episodes of suicidality and depression, and that I could never go back and undo what was done. This quiet understanding challenged much of the psychological literature and mental health agencies that promote recovery from suicidal depression. It also reinforced my awareness of the need to recognise and celebrate the radical character of the courage involved in managing everyday life in adverse circumstances.

My personal experience as an “unnatural narrative” or fairy tale

Part of what felt “unnatural” about my experience of narrative was the sense of simultaneously occupying the two subject positions mentioned earlier. Whether it was “unnatural” or otherwise, the process of allowing my imagined future-self to direct my current actions so I would become an artist, gave me a more powerful perspective on the world than I had thought possible. My future-self was not a concealed narrator. Rather, she took on an overt authority usually associated with a third-person narrator who tells the story. I conceded her authority, having recognised she had successfully survived psychache and had already become an accomplished artist. My future-self also needed to make sure my here-and-now-self did not suicide in order to bring both herself and the self-as-artist narrative into being.

The process of trusting my future-self to direct my present actions involved a leap of faith as well as of imagination. In a sense, I had to do what any narrator does: establish a set of


agreed rules between themself and their audience, and mix fact with truth and fiction. In this case, however, I was both the narrator and the audience.\textsuperscript{242} Key to this decision to trust my future-self was the acceptance that she was an “unreliable” narrator, who crafted a reality independent of my lived reality.\textsuperscript{243} The poststructuralist argument about the essential fiction involved in any understanding of a coherent self and truthful reality did not need to bother me. I decided that I would concede to the dictates of this imagined self who was not-yet-real because I anticipated that the future she represented would become real.

This act of co-operation and collusion was recursive because the more evidence I had that I was an artist living in London, the easier it was for me to think, plan and imagine as an artist, and so convert the imaginary into reality. A reciprocal, dynamic relationship emerged here. By inhabiting an imagined-future world, I was more likely to stay alive within the real world. Conversely, by staying within the real world, I was more likely to be in a position to inhabit my imagined-future world.

To describe my experience as an “unnatural narrative” is most apt and one strengthened by the fact that I have always been drawn to fairy tales and especially attracted to their depiction of unnatural, mystical or fey events. In the wake of my experience of the prophetic call, fairy tales seemed to bear even more of analogous relevance for my life. Fairy tales allow their protagonists (and by inference their readers) to bear unpalatable realities because it is clear that supernatural agency may change these difficult circumstances at any moment. Their magical occurrences reveal “piercing glimpse[s] of joy, and heart's desire”.\textsuperscript{244} Fairy tales embrace the improbable, and thus increase one’s sense of future possibilities in both the imagined and real world.\textsuperscript{245} Just as I trusted in the story narrated to me by my future-self-as-artist, the narrators of fairy tales also require their audience to collude with them in accepting their magical occurrences as if they were real.

In my case, the narrator role was that of my fairy godmother demonstrating her importance and significance in my imaginative and emotional life. She stands for unexpected and joyful turns of events, and disruptions that occur outside people’s control and understanding. This

\textsuperscript{244} J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories,” presented as the \textit{Andrew Lang Lecture} at the University of St Andrews, Scotland (1939), 4-6, \url{http://brainstorm-services.com/wcu-2005/fairystories-tolkien.html}, accessed 11 December 2013, 14.
was the primary reason I came to associate my imagined future-self with the fairy godmother. She was someone uniquely positioned to guide my new story because she not only promised that a desired future waited for me, she showed me how to bring it into being.246 Imagining my future-self as a fairy godmother also allowed me to invest that self with the wise, older voice of experience who speaks to their younger, more naïve audience about strategies to overcome adversities.247 In so doing, I had positioned myself with the historic female roles of the ancient prophet, oracle-telling sibyl, spiritual mystic, gypsy fortune-teller and the contemporary Mary Poppins.248

With their opening first line “once upon a time”, fairy tales locate their events outside of time.249 The fairy godmother has the capacity to operate outside chronological time, or to jump back and forward within it. Despite traditional fairy tales being criticised for their limited agentive female characters, I found the genre meaningful. It helped to think of my narrative of an imagined future as a fairy tale for several reasons: it resonated with the fey otherness of myself; it shielded me against an unpalatable reality; it had a sense of jumbled temporalities; and it was an additional way to claim myself as the protagonist of my own tale.250

There were feminist implications to my identification with fairy tales and participation in imagining their female characters as wise and/or agentive. The fairy godmother in particular is considered to be the narrative remnant of ancient goddess stories, and so by claiming her as my future-self narrator I was making visible my woman-centred spiritual self.251 Like Angela Carter, who has brought a feminist sensibility to her telling of fairy tales, claiming the fairy tale as my preferred genre allowed me to step into a living, oral literary tradition in

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246 Susanna Barsotti tells us that this is a feature of fairy tales themselves: their fey revelation of how unexpected futures might be brought into being: Barsotti, “The Fairy Tale: Recent Interpretations, Female Characters and Contemporary Rewriting. Considerations about an ‘Irresistible’ Genre,” Journal of Theories and Research in Education 10, no. 2 (2015): 71.

247 That the fairy godmother represents this feminine voice of wisdom and experience is a point made by Marina Warner in her From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers (London: Random House Vintage, 1995), 47–49, 12–25, 19–20.


249 Warner, From the Beast to the Blonde, 48–49.


251 Barsotti explores the narrative genealogy and interconnections of ancient goddess, wise woman, pagan priestess and fairy godmother: “The Fairy Tale,” 74.
which women, once silenced and denigrated as gossips, claimed their autonomy. For me, as for Carter and for Marina Warner, who have sought to reinterpret or rewrite fairy tales so that their female characters have more agency, the process of revising and re-configuring my own “fairy tale” became a subversive act.252

After further reflection on my interest in the fairy godmother, I also realise that she can be construed as emblematic of the fantasised angelic, ethereal mother who remains in relationship with her orphaned daughter.253 The importance I attached to having the fairy godmother as my future-self narrator was demonstrated with the speed and ease she replaced the fairy tale’s imprisoned princess – the character with whom I had identified during my experience of psychache in 2010 and the one who planned a suicide to escape the imprisonment of her anguish. Identifying with the godmother also allowed me to revoke the revered Catholic figure of canonised female mystic or grandmother-saint. No longer did I want to be governed by the position of selflessness and martyrdom so profoundly identified with feminine subjects who live a life of service to others.254 Later, in the analysis of my artwork I discuss other ways in which agentive female characters from fairy tales and history have been explored in my art-making: whether Red Riding Hood, her grandmother, or Joan of Arc. With each character, the aim has been to reclaim myself and make myself visible as the protagonist who is central to my story.

How do narratives of an imagined future relate to narrative therapy?

The experience of creating a different self-narrative based on a preferred subjectivity to achieve a different perspective of the circumstance bears certain similarities with the processes recommended in narrative therapy. Most narrative therapists encourage individuals to recount traumatic experiences from a different perspective.255 These therapists ask an individual to discuss what happened to them, and to consider how their specific perspective shaped their thinking about themselves and their relationships with the world. The individual undergoing the therapy is then invited to assume a different narrative

252 Angela Carter, The Bloody Chamber (London: Gollancz, 1979); Warner, From the Beast to the Blonde, 72-77.
253 Although my thesis does not explore details of my relationship with my mother, I became intrigued that both Kristeva and Purcell refer to the mother/daughter relationship and its significance for imagination and narrative. Purcell notes that the relational identity between mother and daughter is one that is in a sense outside language (and, like the fairy godmother herself, I would add, outside time) because it develops before the daughter acquires language: Elizabeth Purcell, “Narrative Ethics and Vulnerability: Kristeva and Ricoeur on Interdependence,” Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy 21, no. 1 (2013): 43-59.
254 Weedon, Feminist Practice and Post-Structuralist Theory, 92; Warner, From the Beast to the Blonde, 91–92.
255 White and Epstein, Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends.
position from which to examine other possibilities in their life. During the process, the therapist encourages the individual to find their preferred self, and to build a narrative from the perspective of that self.256 There are obvious resonances here with the process I undertook. The key difference was that my preferred self was a *future-self*: one who had already overcome all obstacles in order to achieve her aspirations. From that position of wise godmother knowingness, I directed myself in the here-and-now.

Imagining and pretending to be a future-self as though that imagined future has already come into being is not currently a practice recommended in narrative therapy. That I was self-consciously engaging in a form of pretence or deceit challenges an essential aspect of most therapeutic interventions, in which “adjustment or sanity is matched against the goings-on of the ‘real-world’”.257 My course of action is best understood as a “knowing deception”, in which the narrator chooses to believe in her imagined subjective positioning and in the truth of what is performed.258 My performative, embodying narrative was an engagement of reflexive social action and simultaneous co-existing self-narratives that recursively built the surrounding circumstances to support the pretence, until it went from deception to truth.259 This course of action also bears out that play-acting increases an individual’s capacity to explore another subjectivity, and to challenge restrictive “individual and collective boundaries”.260 It exemplifies an ontology of becoming: namely, that the future is realised because of actions that are different, divergent and self-surpassing – that which is outside and beyond the ordinary, taken-for-granted understanding of the world.261

Another reason that my imagined narrative differed from those recommended by narrative therapists is that it lacked the coherence and competence that most therapists consider essential for treatment and recovery. A further difference relates to the point I made earlier: I knew I had to reject the notion that it was possible for me to recover and become the same

259 Catherine Kohler Reissman, “Narrative Analysis,” in *Narrative, Memory and Everyday Life*, eds. Nancy Kelly, Christine Horrocks, Kate Milnes, Brian Roberts, and David Robinson (Huddersfield: University of Huddersfield, 2005), 5.
as I once was, free from the incoherence and fragmentation caused by psychache. I knew that my new self-narrative was not a triumph over adversity. Rather, it was a steadfast attempt to survive in a time and a place in which I was isolated from family, friends and colleagues. Its strength lay, and continues to lie, in its identification with a future-self and her “on-the-move”, unstable subjectivity. Living with a sense of present incompleteness and yet working towards a future that was not fixed, but full of multiple possibilities, allowed me to transgress my self-imposed “power boundaries and limitations”.

_Revelations: Visual narratives of an imagined future_

My twin awareness of the limitations of narrative and its significance have enhanced my interest in art-making as a medium for narrative expression. Art-making reveals more thickly my experience of psychache, spirituality, and radical courage than I can put into words. My art-making also allowed me to access the moment of transition between conscious and unconscious thinking. Even before I was aware of it, my artwork featured unvoiced desires and possibilities. This is why closely analysing my artworks for this doctoral project has been a powerful and transformative process. The process has revealed aspects about my self and the development of my new self-narrative that I was not aware of at the time.

Most significantly, art-making was the means through which I started to translate my narrative of an imagined future into present reality. For this reason, my art-making involved a reflexive loop or “temporal recursivity”. Through the process of sketching, drafting and painting and later revising what I had produced, I was taking incremental steps towards becoming an artist. What I imagined for the future influenced and changed an understanding of my present. The art-making I produced in the present in turn affected how my future unfolded.

Another way of putting this is that art-making was a means through which I developed the “inner consistency” of my imagined self-narrative. Art-making gave the narrative of self-as-

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262 Woods, “The Limits of Narrative,” 76.


artist greater detail and solidity. It also offered me the means to experience the embodied knowledge and emotions associated with the artist’s life.\textsuperscript{266} Making art meant knowingly deceiving myself as I played the role of being an artist. It was also a way for me to experiment with “future-in-the-making” thinking.\textsuperscript{267} Molly Andrews discusses a similar process in her work on imagination and creativity in everyday life.\textsuperscript{268} My stalwart acts of courage and creative practice in the real world made it possible for me to live out aspects of my imagined one.

The ability of art to represent inchoate experiences has led other autoethnographers to turn to visual media. This was key to my desire to create a visual representation of my “unnatural narrative”. My desire to create the \textit{Revelations} paintings eventually exhibited at the Tap Gallery, Darlinghurst in 2015 sprang further from a longing to heighten the reflexive loop I mentioned earlier. I wanted to use the process of producing this exhibition to help me realise my future self-as-an-artist. In evoking biblical prophecies, the exhibition’s name, \textit{Revelations}, also highlighted the mystical experience at the heart of this project.

In embarking on an exhibition that would visually narrate my experiences, my biggest challenge was trying to represent the anticipatory, dynamic quality of my future through static images. How could I create artworks that captured that sense of fractured and multiple chronologies that I had experienced when I took up the simultaneous subject positions of present- and imagined-future-selves? How, too, could I capture the tension that lies between the real and the not-yet-real and the need to juggle various possibilities in unison? My first forays in trying to achieve this involved experimentation with visual storytelling devices common to medieval paintings and those found in graphic novels. I was particularly interested in that some medieval paintings, and most graphic novels, use “multistable moments” as a narrative device.\textsuperscript{269} Multistable moments are


\textsuperscript{267} This is a term coined by Robert Poli, “Anticipation: A New Thread for the Human and Social Sciences?,” \textit{Cadmus} 2, no. 3 (2014): 31, to describe the actions people conduct in the here-and-now that deliver their anticipated future.

\textsuperscript{268} Andrews, \textit{Narrative Imagination and Everyday Life}, 45

vignettes which can be interpreted either one way or another. When placed together, they offer a multiplicity of valid, plausible narratives because the storyline can change, depending on which vignettes are selected and then grouped together. It is the same with medieval religious paintings which have multiple small scenes.

I was additionally drawn to medieval paintings because they were originally designed to narrate biblical stories to people of medieval Europe. These paintings tapped into a religious tradition that is important to me. For the reasons already discussed, however, I was interested in reflecting a specifically woman-centred spirituality in my work whereby women speak from a position of autonomy, rather than from patriarchal oppression or as mouthpieces for a God. Women who tell of mystical experiences are also valued and given credibility rather than being dismissed as hysterics. Medieval female mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen were valuable for this reason. Hildegard of Bingen’s first-person narratives of the spiritual life, Scivias, and its accompanying images have been significant. Of particular interest is her image The Golden Tent. Hildegard created a narrative flow in The Golden Tent by breaking the page on which she created it into two panels. In a move that anticipated the visual devices of graphic novelists, she split one of these panels further into five images.

The following section is an analysis of six of the seventeen paintings in my Revelations: Narratives of an Imagined Future exhibition. The title of this exhibition references the Book of Revelation in the New Testament, a work of prophecy. The title also gestures towards the mystical nature of my call to the future, while the reference to narrative in the plural indicates that becoming an artist encapsulates multiple, braided, branching narratives because becoming something other than what I am, is an unfinished future-in-the-making. As I noted earlier, the style and medium of these paintings is very different to works previously discussed in the thesis. It was not just that the Revelations works are paintings

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271 The fact that the artwork of female mystics and mediums is dismissed as the product of hysteria is discussed in Colin Rhodes, “Four ‘Outsiders’, Four Women: Surrealism and the Psychic Elsewhere,” in Intersections, ed. Patricia Allmer (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 15.


rather than exploratory experimental works on paper, and deliberately created for exhibition; they have a carefully-constructed quality intended to be a deliberate visual representation of my experience. I regarded these paintings to be a screen upon which I can both present my story to the world, and one that shields and protects me in the process.

The stylised design of the paintings reflects a conscious reference to medieval illuminated manuscripts, especially the banner motif taken from such manuscripts signifying that I visualised God’s prophetic call as a heralding message. I also acknowledged a direct influence from the unknown artist’s Portrait of Sir Henry Unton (ca. 1596) in London’s National Portrait Gallery in laying out the design of the paintings.274 Henry Unton’s narrative portrait intrigued me because its layout fenced in and isolated scenes, creating the spatial and temporal disruption I wanted for my work.275 The individual scenes operate as multistable moments. They can be interpreted and read in any order, affecting the meaning of the story in the process.

Another medieval painting motif signifying spirituality in my Revelations works is the repeated use of the cross-section of a castle or church. This motif serves two functions. I have used it to isolate scenes, and it is also one of my personal symbols. The cross-section of a castle or church directly refers to the popular saying that “my home is my castle”, indicating that my house was the House of God: I belonged to the Church, and my future-in-the-making was the Kingdom of Heaven. The motif is a direct link to Teresa of Ávila’s understanding of spirituality as “The Interior Castle” or “The Mansions”.276 Significantly, the castle/church image symbolises the relational links between God, my mother and the Church. It this makes explicit that my relationship with God is imbued with my idealised, imagined relationship with my mother.277

Throughout the paintings I created for my Revelations exhibition, I drew on commonplace and traditional symbols such as apples, swords, trees and groups of three to deepen the

visual narrative I was presenting to my viewers. By incorporating palm leaves and paint brushes, I also symbolised the prophetic realisation of my imagined future. This blend of known and unknown symbols, coupled with a blend of real and imagined vignettes into “physically or logically impossible scenarios or events”, was to emphasise the uncanny, unnatural nature of my narrative and to build a quirky, unsettling atmosphere.\textsuperscript{278} I wanted my viewers to have a sense of the magnitude of my transformation, so I chose to paint larger scale (60 x 90 cm) than I had done before. In this way, the narrative landscape would wrap around the viewer so they would feel they belonged in the story. Size and scale are both symbolic and important physical aspects of artwork. The sociologist Susan Bell and the visual artist Kate Collie both suggest that the texture and physicality of artworks can unconsciously engage a viewer’s sensuality, invoking a richer reading of the visual narrative.\textsuperscript{279}

Before I begin a close discussion of the six most significant \textit{Revelations} paintings, I want to make clear that even though they offer a visual telling of a first-person account of living and managing a significant life-rupture and episode of suicidal depression, I do not wish for them to be seen as illness narratives. Nor do I want them to be regarded as a “recovery” narrative. I have not recovered. My sense of shame and self-inflicted stigmatising from my “illness” has diminished as I have begun to live out my new self-narrative, but I remain vulnerable to pycschache and suicidality.\textsuperscript{280} Most importantly, I do not want the experience of suicidality expunged from my life narrative. The event was disruptive, but it resulted in a “new condition” that transformed my spirituality and subjectivity and pushed me to consider myself as central to my self-narratives.\textsuperscript{281}

Rather than being interpreted as visual illness narratives or expressions of art therapy, my paintings have more in common with Outsider art. Like the works of some Outsider artists discussed in the following pages, the flat, naïve characterisation of my \textit{Revelations} paintings resist the established categories of the art world. I did not in fact create them just as works...
of art, but also to demonstrate the reflective engagement between my research, theorising and lived experience.

The fact that I intended the Revelations exhibition as a representation of processes of self-construction plays out in the materials I used. I chose multi-density fibreboard (MDF) as this is reconstituted finely-shredded wood pulp mixed with glue to build an absorbent surface. I also wanted a timber-type panel to replicate the timber panels favoured by medieval artists. Since MDF is a durable, solid material, I was able to build up several layers of gouache paint to construct a painting that has decorative detail over flat, rich colour fields. MDF also provided a strong base for gluing gold foil.

The six paintings I selected for analysis as most representative of the themes and aims of Revelations are:

- **The traveller’s tale** (2017)
- **Courage, I hand to you** (2017)
- **The River of Life** (2017)
- **Thou must prophesy before peoples and nations** (2016)
- **How else would God speak to me?** (2017)
- **Saule Mate and the threads of sun-life** (2017)

**The traveller’s tale: A narrative of choice**

![Figure 29: The traveller’s tale (2017), gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.](image)
The traveller’s tale (Figure 29) is a visual reminder “which I offer myself sh[oul]d I again be lost” in order to link the theme of self-construction with the “de-structuring” and “re-structuring” themes discussed in Parts A and B.\(^{282}\) The traveller’s tale shows my continued interest in interiors, waterways and maps. I inserted E. R. Hughes’ painting, The Sleepy Hollow, on the bathroom wall as a deliberate link to the process discussed in the previous chapter, since this image highlights watery death. My inclusion of a street map of Amsterdam provided another visual link, since Amsterdam is associated with waterways and land reclamation. The painting is an imaginary studio space with adjoining bathroom and bedroom. All rooms offer choices. Should I choose a permanent watery-rest or temporary bed-rest? Will I overturn the lounge room’s Christmas tree or seek to nurture the gold-lit one on the window’s ledge? Do I take the green-tendril patterned, blue-carpeted stairs towards an open sky or seek the bare, iron-grey steps into the basement? Should I step outside or burrow myself into a basement maze? I played word association with “socks”, “rocks” and “pockets” by placing the Christmas socks in van Gogh’s bedroom. The sock is a reference to the suicide of Virginia Woolf, reported to have filled her pockets with rocks before wading into the Ouse River.

I wanted to leave clues rather than overt statements about choice in the painting, just as I sense that Charlotte Salomon did in Amadeus Daberlohn, prophet of song, enters to the tune of the Toreador’s Song from Carmen (1940–43).\(^{283}\) This gouache on paper work shows a figure walking up the stairs while two other figures stand outside two closed doors. The doors and stairway speak of unknown and unexplored possibility. The staircase’s red carpet speaks of passion and desire, while the blue carpet and grey-green doors suggest anticipation and expectation. Salomon suffuses the interior with potential by creating a restrained excitement by filling the blue and red colour fields with blue-pen dashes. That the doors are closed invites the viewer to create their own narrative about what will happen after the doors are opened.


Another Salomon painting carrying a sense of potentiality and choice is her *Blue Room Interior* (1940–43). The blue tones of this gouache on paper work have a gentleness that surrounds the sole figure, a woman, who sits on a bed/lounge with a satchel at her feet. The figure’s reflective pose suggests that she is considering whether to go outside or stay in, and also whether to open or stow the bag. The calm and quiet of Salomon’s blue interior is the same quality I have tried to represent in the studio interiors of all my *Revelations* works.

In this painting, I have incorporated a reproduction of Vincent van Gogh’s *Bedroom in Arles* (1888). Van Gogh’s bedroom represents my own imagined bedroom, indicating that I share his view that both bedroom and studio should be spaces to rest body, spirit and imagination. I have located my studio space in the centre of this work, because it is firstly the heart of both my present and future circumstances, and secondly it is the space in which radical courage is found. My studio is the “green room”, suggestive of growth, transformation and unvoiced anticipation about future possibilities.

The dominant positioning of my studio space in *The traveller’s tale* reinforces my experience of domestic interiors as spiritual, mystical and magical sites. I wanted to create a link back to the time of the early Christian church, when meetings in house churches were led by women such as Phoebe and Prisca, considered to have had spiritual authority by their local congregation. I have thus repeated the motif of the cross-section of the castle/church/house throughout my *Revelations* paintings.

To remind myself that I am vulnerable to another episode of suicidality, a cruel-faced “dolly” sits on the lounge in *The traveller’s tale*, holding a black, fog-shaped balloon. She is the demon that mostly waits in the corner but will from time-to-time come into view. To diminish her impact and to emphasise I have choices, this Dolly is at the same level as the gold-lit Christmas tree on the window ledge. Since Dolly represents my incomplete bereavement for my mother, she is at once my childhood demon and a harbinger of the imminent arrival of melancholia.

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As a symbol of new birth, the Christmas tree in this image is a note to self: while I may not feel it, I know that psychache eventually dissolves. According to the psychologist Edwin Schneidman, knowing that psychache will dissipate is crucial to reducing its lethal force.\textsuperscript{287} The pairing of Dolly and the tree in \textit{The traveller’s tale} is thus my reminder that the construction of my self-narrative as an artist is and remains “a hard and bitter agony”, but is also a narrative that my future-self does not want jeopardised.\textsuperscript{288} To reassert the importance of self-care, as suggested by both Teresa of Ávila and Virginia Woolf, I foregrounded a Christmas lunch table and a desk covered in paraphernalia to invite myself into the safe, studio space.

\textit{Courage, I hand to you: A narrative of possibility}

Figure 30: \textit{Courage, I hand to you}, (2017), gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure30}
\end{figure}

\textit{Courage, I hand to you} is based on the prophetic New Testament annunciation narrative.\textsuperscript{289} This image shows my transformed understanding that God is not external to, but is, as Kristeva claims, a relationship integrally embedded within body, subjectivity and

\textsuperscript{287} Thomas Joiner, \textit{Why People Die by Suicide} (New York: Harvard University Press, 2005), 93.
\textsuperscript{289} Revelation 1: 1-3; Luke 1: 26-28 (NIV)
spirituality. Because God calls, either directly in dreams or in visions, or through an intermediaries, I show three facets of myself in an interplay of prophesying angel, future-self, and the art-spirit as a God who demands action. My future-self hands back (to me) my art-spirit, that creative, steadfast, generative and “persistent life force” which is realised through radical courage. The art-spirit is the visible spirituality that transformed my relationship with myself, God and my community. To address my transformed relationship with God I positioned two kneeling figures to replicate the traditional annunciation stance.

The annunciation is the narrative of the second chance and the key message of Hildegard of Bingen’s The Golden Kite. Her painting calls viewers to re-examine their lives and return to the “original Wisdom” which is to re-construct ourselves as a creative force. This bears out that by engaging in imaginative performance about who we want to become, it is possible to transform ourselves and our relationships with others. The idea that we can make ourselves anew through art practice is the subject of Charlotte Salomon’s gouache on paper High on a cliff top grow pepper trees (1940–43). This painting shows a sequence of two kneeling figures, gazing in the same direction, drawing. The dominance of blue and orange and the composition of oblique, horizontal and vertical lines create a tension, a restrained eagerness, similar to the moment before action happens.

Salomon’s painting speaks of potential and possibility, which is summarised by lettering across the top of the painting; the German word NACHWORT, meaning “epilogue”. It operates as a heralding banner because “epilogue” suggests that this story is not yet over. Gloria A. Ssali, another female Outsider artist, also imbues her work with a sense of anticipation. Her ink and acrylic paint on card interpretation of The Annunciation (2016) centrally positions Mary who is framed by flowing, blue-green, palm-leaf style banners. The palm-leaf motif reminded me that Deborah the prophet sat under palm trees, connecting Mary to the long tradition of biblical prophets, ancient truth-saying sibyls and the goddess.

*Courage, I hand to you* is a future-in-the-making statement about prophecy and future. The two figures face each other, both being recipient and gifter of the prophetic call. The pink draped figure’s hand is held to her chest, just as Mary of Nazareth grasped God’s message, and held it to her heart to ponder upon so it could not be forgotten.\(^{295}\) That Mary pondered the message suggests a meditative state leading to a spiritual awakening or awareness. The figure stretches out her second arm and hand to convey benediction, benevolence and power with the capacity to remove hardship.\(^{296}\) The gifting between future and current selves is a feature of Leonora Carrington’s oil on canvas *The Magdalen* (1986).\(^{297}\) Carrington places two long-haired figures – a maiden and a crone – in a stony desert landscape suggesting they could be spiritual hermits, recluses and mystics. Beside these figures is a ghost-like, grey shape formed by a rock arch. The trinity of figures symbolises a feminist spiritual consideration of God as spirit, flesh and potentiality.

The hands of my *Revelations*’ figures are different to the hands of my watercolour and collage figures analysed in the past two chapters. *Revelations*’ hands are engaged in creative, benevolent activities and an expression of spirituality. Hildegard’s depiction of God as *Sophia: Mother Wisdom, Mother Church* shows God with outstretched arms and hands beneath finger like wings.\(^{298}\) Both wings and hands signal abundance, welcome, generosity and support for creative action. I also see this benevolent gesture in Bobby Baker’s *Day 579 (Week 7 February 13th)* drawing.\(^{299}\) Baker suggests the fingers of hands by elongating outstretched-arm figures which rise from Baker’s shoulders to benevolently bless a church-interior cross-section of her self-portrait head.\(^{300}\) It is a powerful image in which Baker reveals that, like me, her cognitive functioning is integrated with her subjectivity, imagination and spirituality.

The two figures of *Courage, I hand to you* sit in the branches of the Garden of Eden’s green-leafed tree of knowledge. The red-apple tree holds my knowledge of the world, symbolised with books, easel, globe and mirror. I reject the traditional symbolising of Eden’s apple,

\(^{295}\) Luke 2: 19 (NIV).
\(^{298}\) Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, 102.
preferring to use apples as a symbol of salvation, the future, and spiritual, intuitive knowledge. Likewise, I reject the traditional symbolism of the serpent, preferring the symbol of transformation which comes from shedding one’s old skin. A serpent twists around the tree trunk, across the landscape into the branches, and then stands upright beside the right-hand side figure. In my painting the snake has multiple roles. It refers to suicidality’s seductive self-deceit, but also to my desire to shield and protect my spiritual self and capacity to shed one narrative skin for another.

My use of the snake to offer alternate symbolic meanings recalls the work of Outsider artist Madge Gill, and in particular the set of untitled drawings in which the heads of her self-portraits are enclosed within a spiral of highly-patterned detail that looks like snake-skin. Although her bodies, covered in ornate detail, appear to slide into the background and make her invisible to the world, it can also be conjectured that the snake-style camouflaging patterned robes may be a skin that Gill takes on to protect herself, rather than one she is shedding. By hiding herself in the background, Gill exemplifies what Kristeva suggests, that the “alien skin [...] conceals a Thing buried alive [...] in order that it not be betrayed”.

I am aware that the impetus to be created anew, the decision to imagine and construct a different self-narrative with a different future came from a significant psychic and spiritual rupture. I make this clear in Courage, I hand to you by depicting a tranquil, mythical landscape dominated by a canopy of branches of an apple tree which partially conceal a crevassing fissure. Despite a chasm appearing, the landscape remains benign because the rupture is a reference to Revelation 21: 1, in which “a new heaven and a new earth,” comes into being.

The River of Life: A narrative of wise knowing

Figure 31: The River of Life (2016), gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.

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The River of Life (Figure 31) is a tripartite representation of myself as maiden, woman and crone, and as a member of the nativity party to reveal my spiritual relationship with Mary as Mother, the church, wisdom and creativity. The three figures of self in differing named barges, Courage, Prophecy and Wisdom, confirm the importance of these concepts in my life. Courage as maiden holds a staff which is used as an oar and banner pole. Prophecy as woman holds the end of the net which gathers in the outcome of prophecy. Lastly, Wisdom is the crone who surveys all that has happened, and with her back to the shore, stares into the future. Wisdom’s eyes are clouded to suggest the trope of blind, truth-saying seers and that wisdom comes from an acknowledgement of self-scotomising. Wisdom searches in her mind’s eye for what the future will bring, and in searching, her line of gaze rests on the nativity trio.

The title The River of Life is taken from Revelation 22: 1-2 and extends the motif of the river which was used consistently in the collages discussed in Part B. It is not surprising that the river is a rich metaphor, particularly in terms of the biblical reference to the River Jordan as well as the classical reference to the River Styx. Both crossings or immersions in these waters are transformations of a type, yet my work draws on the possibility of baptism and rebirth. Although Revelation 22 does not specifically refer to a river in Eden, I have supposed that this is Eden’s River of Life because it springs from a spiritual source, carrying radical courage to nourish the land. Geographically, rivers suggest movement and construction through change. Rivers are also used for cleansing and baptisms. As stated in previous chapters, I use
rivers as a metaphor for transformation, particularly a spiritual transformation. It is not surprising then that this and the remaining paintings analysed here all include an image of the river.

In Leonora Carrington’s Untitled (1949–50) there is no overt statement that the subject matter is the Garden of Eden’s River of Life but I have deduced this from the imagery of animal and plant life, all rich in potential and promise. Carrington’s oil on canvas (61 x 46 cm) features an island and a precipice of land jutting into a body of water. The air, land and water are filled with animal and plant life, indicative of Eden’s first days. Carrington playfully disrupts expectations by placing some animals in unusual situations, such as the monkey using the squid’s body as a boat, and creates a snake from the tail of a cat who sits in the bird-filled tree. I am drawn to Carrington’s artwork because it has a fey quality, imbued with a sense of woman-centred spirituality. My impression is that Carrington delighted in the absurd and, through her affinity with surrealism and the surrealists, developed a visual vocabulary to subvert the rational and depict magic and fantasy as every-day matters. The sense of benign innocence about the world, unaware and unsuspecting of forthcoming disaster that permeates Carrington’s Untitled, is also the quality I have attempted to create in The River of Life. Like Untitled, however, my work leaves a clue that threats are present both within or without. It is through wisdom that I acknowledge there will always be threats that I am unaware of. Carrington depicts the emerging threats within the Garden of Eden by foregrounding an open mouthed, fin-fluttering fish, alarmed by another sharp-toothed, sharp-finned fish. My figure of Wisdom in her barge is my motif for awareness that threats are nearby.

Another female artist whose work has intrigued me is the contemporary Scottish painter Heather Nevay (1965–). Like both Nevay’s and Carrington’s works, mine seek to disrupt, play with, and unsettle viewers’ expectations by challenging the narrative rules of reading a painting. Nevay states that she wants her art to subvert the conventional rules that govern Art, and to use her visual narratives to reveal the inherent duplicity within narratives and fairy tales. Nevay’s paintings at first glance show children at play, but a second glance followed by an engaged reading indicate that she wants adult viewers to

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question their perspective about childhood. She prompts viewers to regard the flow from childhood to adulthood not as seamless, but as a multi-layered, contradictory and disturbing process of acquiring knowledge about the world. Nevay does this by embedding cues in visual narratives so viewers can retrieve the almost-forgotten, fear-inducing narratives of their childhood-self. Her recent work such as *The Hide* (2015), *Beneath the Bed* (2018) and *Inside the Killing Room* (2018) are examples of how viewers can become deeply unsettled by viewing untroubled innocence – such as the time in the Garden of Eden – about to be overtaken by threats that are obvious to the now-wise adult.\(^{306}\)

My now-wise adult-self is depicted in *The River of Life* by the prophet Deborah, who has cast a twelve-orbed net into the ocean. Deborah replaces the disciples of Jesus who, when told by Jesus, took their fishing boats out onto Lake Galilee to throw their nets once again.\(^{307}\) I interpret this biblical narrative to mean that to achieve a successful outcome, one must change direction, perspective and behaviour – and that only by re-casting one’s net with the aim of capturing new opportunities may one activate, encounter or dislodge an unknown threat. While I can prophesy, anticipate and construct a future, wise knowing tells me to be cautious and conscious that threats are outside the known perimeter.

To make clear my personal relationship with God, Mary and Jesus in *The River of Life*, I show myself with Mary, and the infant Jesus in the foreground barge. I see God’s prophetic call as an announcement of change, of being made anew and an invocation of God’s protection. To indicate the sacred sovereignty of Mary as Mother of God, I dress her in a blue robe decorated with a Christian trinity symbol of stylised, small, gold fleur-de-lys. I use the fleur-de-lys for several reasons. Firstly, it is a traditional motif, originating from the bee and the lily and used to symbolise the trinity, Mary, industry and wisdom.\(^{308}\) Additionally, the bee is associated with the Old Testament prophet Deborah and, from the fifteenth century, the fleur-de-lys became the emblem of the French saint, mystic and martyr Joan of Arc.

**Thou must prophesy before peoples and nations: A narrative to stake-hold my future**

![Thou must prophesy before peoples and nations](image)

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Thou must prophesy before peoples and nations (Figure 32) combines elements of an imaginary and a real landscape with stylised buildings of my local area, three depictions of myself and two octopi-style demons. The painting has three self-portraits. The central character dressed in a red robe dominates the painting. She is depicted as the valiant, confident self who in one hand holds the tree of knowledge and in the other hand holds an axe ready to slay the multi-tentacled, sharp-fanged, demon octopi which swirl around the red dress. The translucent wash of paint to depict the octopus is to show that suicidal depression has no discernible body because it is part of the imaginary realm. The second self-portrait appears in the cross-section castle room seated at a table with God and Jesus. This small vignette reveals the relational quality of my spirituality. The third aspect is myself as the older, wise woman who both prophesies and embodies the prophecy. I show this dual nature by depicting the self-portrait holding the palm leaf of prophecy and paint brushes.

The central self-portrait in Thou must prophesy is Little Red Riding Hood as an adult. She appears benign, but nonchalantly holds the axe while standing unafraid within the chasm of a dark abyss. The use of red as a colour of power and life rather than sexuality is a feature of Nevay’s The Mistress Woolfe II.\textsuperscript{309} Given the title of this work and its depiction of a figure with long, black tresses in a red dress, I interpret this work as Nevay’s version of Little Red Riding Hood. Her figure in red even wears a bow that resembles wolf’s ears. By giving the figure an adult face in a child’s red dress, Nevay questions the tale’s events and this allows her to insinuate other suppositions that result in Little Red Riding Hood’s other possible

futures. She asks us as viewers to consider whether Little Red Riding Hood’s actions destroyed her innocence (signified by an overturned lamb), or whether she reverted to the savagery required to survive (signified by her feet as animal claws). Either way, Nevay’s work challenges the idea of childhood as a time of innocence, producing something uneasy and disturbing as a consequence.

The Red Riding Hood figure in this image taps into my earlier observations about fairy tales. My attraction to Little Red Riding Hood and other fairy tales is that they offer a skeleton storyline that can be adapted to suit a range of readers’ circumstances. The rewritings of fairy tales by feminist authors such as Angela Carter are an obvious example of this adaptability.\(^{310}\) Numerous artists exemplify this point. Bristol’s Royal West of England Academy exhibition The Strange Worlds (2016) revealed how the dark, uncanny, gothic content of Carter’s narratives was interpreted and reworked in a variety of art pieces, demonstrating her ability to influence artists such as Heather Nevay and Gina Litherland into transgressing narrative boundaries.\(^{311}\)

In addition to its echo of the multiple meanings that fairy tales contain for me, the Red Riding Hood figure is (like so much of what I discuss in this thesis) associated with my mother. After creating so many works featuring Red Riding Hood, I was intrigued by the insights of the psychologist Susan Taylor. She posits that adults rejected or abandoned by their mothers as children will seek a fairy tale heroine such as Little Red Riding Hood.\(^{312}\) As children, and then as adults, these individuals came to understand the reason for their mother’s absence, then coped with the difficulties and ultimately took over the responsibility of serving and caring for others. They then made their own way in the world while still yearning for unconditional nurturing from their mother or a significant female adult.\(^{313}\) This is very much so in my case. The version of Little Red Riding Hood that has the most meaning for me is also the one my mother used to tell me: a version in which Red Riding Hood slayed the wolf and released Grandma. Although I grieved when my mother died, and was expected to look after my younger siblings, it was her version of Little Red

\(^{310}\) Carter, The Bloody Chamber.


\(^{313}\) Taylor, “Once Upon a Time,” 172-173.
Riding Hood that I have since retrieved as a symbol of how I might make my own way in the world and into my future.

**How else would God speak to me**: A narrative of courage

*Figure 33: How else would God speak to me, if not through my imagination? (2017), gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.*

*How else would God speak to me, if not through my imagination?* (Figure 33) features the river as an explicit symbol of rebirth. The central figure stands naked, cleansed, and with arms outstretched in an almost Christ-like image of transformation. The work is also very personal, making visible my mother’s contribution in developing my interest in imagining the future. Her decision to name me Debra Joan after the prophets Deborah of Ephraim and Joan of Arc ensured I knew their stories and positions in history. In particular, it is Deborah’s story as a leader, judge, ruler and prophet that provided a blueprint for what I could do, and Deborah’s narrative influenced my childhood storytelling and dramas. To reinforce these connections, I used motifs and symbols suggestive of prophecy and foretelling in this work. These variously include apples and mirrors (both redolent of the witch queen of the Snow White story), palm trees associated with Deborah of Ephraim, and green tendrils indicating anticipation and possibilities.

*How else would God speak to me* uses repeated groups of three to represent the trinity. The work also includes a cross-section of church/castles signifying God’s house, the imagined future and my spiritual life. Trees appear in the image, variously representing growth, the tree of life and the tree of knowledge. The motif of cliff faces and a rupturing chasm feature in this and others of my paintings to symbolise the fragmenting and splitting of the self during suicidal depression. In each of the *Revelation* paintings, my self-portrait figures stand
boldly within the abyss, relishing the anticipation of the unknown, and showing bravery, courage and a preparedness to navigate the difficulties.

To show and honour the inter-relationship between courage, imagination, spirituality and prophecy I chose Joan of Arc’s story and entitled this painting from the popular quote attributed to her, “How else would God speak to me, if not through my imagination?” 314

This painting is a visual narrative of my interpretation of Joan of Arc’s story, coupled with an imaginative account of my mother. In addition to the fact that both my mother’s name and my middle name were Joan for Joan of Arc, I also learned about Joan from the stories my mother told me of her and other women who exhibited agency, bravery and courage. When I embedded my mother into my Joan of Arc narrative, I gave my mother radical courage to claim a future, and had she done this and lived into old age, she would have been the harbour I turned to during psychache. Joan is my multiple stranded, interwoven character: radical courage, imagination, spirituality, prophesy, future, my mother and my relationship with the Church.315

While the person of Joan embodies many concepts, I also used a cross-section castle/church/house to show the spiritual inter-relationship between my mother, the Church and my future as an artist. But I chose to reduce the prominence of castle/church in the landscape so I could feature the Joan-ness of the self-portrait figures, and by doing this I assert myself as central character and protagonist in my story, and central to its story-line. Unlike Little Red Riding Hood, Joan of Arc is an historic figure whose reality has been determined by literature rather than by recorded and possibly falsified facts.316 Joan’s life story is a combination of selected anecdotes from contemporaries, political accusations, her possibly corrupted verbal testimony, letters, and mythologised accounts from others who lived after her death. Her contemporaries accused Joan of “authoring a false account of her life”, but her account of herself is as false as anyone else who constructs and lives the narrative of their life in which they are the protagonist. Later biographic accounts were

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315 Gomez, The Church as Woman and Mother, 12.
constructed which gave a greater focus on Joan’s subversive role as a mystic, as a recipient of a prophetic call and as a political activist and warrior.\textsuperscript{317}

I gave Joan of Arc three guises: as a warrior holding her emblem of a crown pierced with a sword; as a grey-gowned mystic and martyr standing in a barge; and as an un-clad, baptising prophet standing in the river, splashing the water of life in all directions.\textsuperscript{318} When I painted this Joan figure, I told myself that this could have been Virginia Woolf’s decision. Instead of wading into the Ouse River with rocks in her pockets she could have thrown the rocks to create a splash. Just as I wanted Woolf to invoke radical courage to counter the pull of suicidality, I wanted that same action from my mother.

There are two Charlotte Salomon beach scenes that contain a similar focus on the purifying nature of water. The first, like many of her 1940–1943 Untitled paintings, is sequenced like a graphic novel with a series of discrete vignettes. This is an example of the way Salomon skilfully designs her pages to position colour, text and vignettes to narrate what is happening. The page layout reveals to me her growing, cumulative understanding of why three female family members suicided. Many pages of her diary show multiple little scenes that might have been about the past, present or future, which encourage the viewer to read the sequencing as they wish. An example of this is Salomon’s Untitled seaside scene. This could just as easily have been read as desire for a holiday, or given her life story, a grim awareness of what might be happening behind the cheerful façade.\textsuperscript{319}

In a curving arc akin to a beach, the sequence of images tells of a sea-side holiday, but the muddy-blue and pale yellow indicate sadness rather than joy. The colours imply a slow pace and an idle quality that I associate with the forced, pretend cheerfulness I used to camouflage my psychosis. In the foreground three couples cavort in the ocean’s waves, suggesting that Salomon was possibly entering a time in which she revisited suicidality, identified radical courage and began to implement her desire to visually tell her story.\textsuperscript{320} Like Salomon’s work, my paintings with their small scenes were designed to be read and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{318} Matthew 3: 13–17 (NIV).
\item \textsuperscript{320} Salomon, Untitled.
\end{itemize}
interpreted in any order. This meant that I needed to ensure the scenes, motifs and symbols held multiple meanings, without any obvious temporal sequence, to achieve the simultaneity of space and time in a “monoscopic” or single visual representation.\textsuperscript{321}

The second Salomon image is Villefranche-sur-Mer, France (1940–43) which shows people swimming in a small river or ocean inlet and people playing on the yellow sand.\textsuperscript{322} There is an unusual sense of freedom and joy in this painting and for this reason I conjecture that this is a narrative of resistance to the despair of suicidality that had crept into Salomon’s life. It suggests a suspension of time and decision-making which offers a chance to locate and galvanise radical courage.\textsuperscript{323} The arcing surge of sea or river brings a sweet sense of being refreshed and made anew in this idyllic landscape, similar to the cleansing of baptism. By making this vignette about baptism, I associate the trinity of Joan/mother/me with the process of cleansing and being made anew. By excluding John and Jesus in my baptism narrative, I not only make Joan’s position as central character overtly visible, I challenge the positioning of women in traditional biblical narratives as either help-mates or secondary to the action. The trinity of Joan/mother/me then becomes a tripartite function of narrator-protagonist-audience of the narrative.

Joan of Arc represents more than my mother. She represents Mary, mother of us all, which is a traditional metaphor for the Church.\textsuperscript{324} I indicate this by showing Joan’s arms pointing to two castle/church/house buildings, housing firstly the infant Jesus, representative of new life, and secondly, the adult Jesus who is the prophecy fulfilled. The figure of Joan signifies the spiritual pivot of the Joan-Mary/mother-church relationship. By giving prominence to Joan of Arc, I recognise that Joan’s political and social activism transformed her subjectivity, and just as Hildegard of Bingen did, she challenged medieval Europe’s expectation of women, of female prophets and mystics.

\textit{Saule Mate, the Latvian sun goddess and the threads of the future: a narrative of a future-in-the-making}


\textsuperscript{324} Gomez, The Church as Woman and Mother, 137-138.
And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars.\footnote{Revelation 12:1 (KJV).}

\emph{Saule Mate and the threads of sun-life} (Figure 34) pairs the “joyful turn” and the “dys-catastrophe” to show the simultaneity of moving away from, and an awareness of the potential return of a narrative of suicidality.\footnote{Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories,” 14.} The painting’s focus is on the joyful tum, that feature of fairy tales which has a similarity with an epiphany or mystical experience.\footnote{Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories,” 14.} In this painting I position myself firstly as Saule Mate, prophet and truth-sayer, as the aged wise woman, and then as a trio: the accomplished artist–academic, Little Red Riding Hood and Mary Poppins. That they narrate my story either individually and/or as a collective signals this is an unnatural narrative because it relies on multiple authors/voices to produce a multi-faceted narrative.

I take on the role of Saule Mate, the powerful, pagan, creation Latvian goddess of the sun and morning star who has a future-oriented spirituality. The thread that loops through the painting represents my current and future connections with my community, my friends and my colleagues. By substituting the pagan goddess, Saule Mate, for Mary, Mother of God as “a woman clothed with the sun”, I disrupt the tradition of according Mary in the role of God’s agent. I placed Mary in the pantheon of agentive goddesses, positioning her (and thus myself) as central protagonist in a spiritual autobiography, and more significantly cast as
Wisdom becoming the broader, social-cultural meta-narrative context. The apocalyptic Mary, cast as Wisdom – she who existed before the world and time began - was a theme of Hildegard’s visionary messages. As creator of the world, Mary-Wisdom has subsumed Saule Mate as goddess of fate, fortune and destiny. Saule Mate’s role is to take the sun’s golden light beams and spin them into amber threads so she can pull the next day – the prophesied future – into being.

When I view Carrington’s *The Giantess* (1950), I see a representation of Mary as the majestic, powerful sun-goddess whose responsibility is to continue the daily processes of creation. In her painting, Carrington explores goddess-centred spirituality. She calls upon both her Catholic and Celtic origins to depict the wise-woman who dwarfs the landscape. The woman’s small head is surrounded by a golden nimbus. She holds a small egg as a representation of spiritual transformation, of a spiritual future-in-the-making. My work uses gold thread to similarly symbolise this future. A common trope of Greek and Roman myths, the thread refers to time and to spinning one’s destiny into being.

The centre figure of *Saule Mate* is my imagined eighty-year-old self who knits the threads of all possible futures from the ball of golden-amber, copper coloured thread. The thread of all possible futures is pulled out of rupture. This painting represents this through depicting Saule Mate pulling the thread from outside the frame, looping it across the foreground forming a copper-coloured ball of “black sun”. Both the ball of thread and the black sun are a reference to depression and positioned to replicate the ball at the feet of Albrecht Dürer’s (1471–1528) engraving of *Melancholia I* (1514). The black sun is also a reference to Julia Kristeva’s work on depression, drawing on Gérard de Nerval’s 1853 sonnet, “El Desdichado”. The black sun has two meanings. It can reference psychache’s capacity to eclipse the life force, stultify creativity and silence the self, but also its capacity to spark imagination.

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Part of my imagined future is the knowledge that there will be repeat episodes of suicidal depression and this is one of many back stories embedded into the Revelation paintings. As such, the paintings may be regarded as a series of illness narratives (a first-person account of their illness to make sense of why, how and what was happening). But the illness is not prioritised nor dominant because neither my paintings or my research were to be defined or categorised as illness narratives.\textsuperscript{333} What I consider important about illness narratives is that they have exposed self-deceptions and social-cultural deceptions, a characteristic noted by Virginia Woolf in her essay, “On Being Ill” (1926).\textsuperscript{334} Whilst my preferred self-narrative of 2010 directed me away from a narrative of suicidality, one of its attractions was that it suppressed a desire to interrogate the factors that contributed to suicidality, and suppressed a growing unease that I had deceived myself about personal and professional aspects of my life.

I understand that any engagement with “the black sun” is a threat to my carefully constructed equilibrium, and one that I must consciously turn from. It has an enchantment, demonstrated in 2010 when it triggered an intensely spiritual experience. This awareness is what I read into Heather Nevay’s\textit{ Cast Out} (2011–2015), a painting in which a figure of an adult, face haloed by two black-hair bunches, wears a child’s black smock, and pulls a wheeled doll’s house.\textsuperscript{335} The bunched hair creates a troubling sense of unease for it looks like a double black sun. As Nevay intends, it is a disquieting image. It suggests to me that even as an adult, the black sun, developed from childhood’s vulnerability factors, will never leave my head, and will forever trail me.

To counter the pull of the black sun, I make prominent the trio of myself as academic–artist, Little Red Riding Hood and Mary Poppins in\textit{ Saule Mate}. Each of these figures is a representation of my desired future and of radical courage during different times of my life. They are inter-related and connected to each other by their desire to bring each other into being, and through their stories of, and to each other.\textsuperscript{336} I position them, so their confident gaze looks out towards me, for I have become their realised future.


\textsuperscript{336} Warner, \textit{From the Beast to the Blonde}, 182.
To conclude

The six paintings just discussed are representative of the body of work I constructed to demonstrate my understanding of how I formed and have since come to understand my narrative of an imagined future. In addition, the paintings reveal how my research about suicidal depression and imagined narratives changed my subjectivity and gave me the courage to claim the central position as protagonist in my life story. By incorporating symbols that have layered meanings, I have demonstrated how my subjectivity and spirituality is multiple and interwoven. The symbols and personal motifs I used throughout the Revelations exhibition were also screening devices enabling me to visually reveal aspects of my story while at the same time feeling protected from scrutiny. The aspects of fairy tales and women’s spiritual autobiographies portrayed in the Revelations works functioned to this end, while the exhibition itself provided evidence for both my current and future-self that my narrative of an imagined future is being realised.
CONCLUSION

Though I initially embarked on the paintings in my Revelations exhibition as a visual narrative intended to communicate the autoethnographic research I conducted for this doctoral project, the exhibition ended up being much more than that. I did not realise until I was well into the work of producing these paintings just how reflexive the process would be. The paintings were meant to represent my female-oriented spirituality, the mystical experience of the prophetic call and the power of radical courage in allowing me to work towards a future-oriented narrative while dealing with psychache. The paintings were also meant to build on the symbolism in my earlier works on paper – chiefly, hands, rivers, maps, chasms, rooms and fairy-tale characters – while also drawing on the technique of collage that played a prominent role in earlier works.

I did not know just how much the process of producing and exhibiting these works would allow me to experience Julia Kristeva’s point that creative enterprises are life-generating processes allowing people with suicidal depression to move beyond some of its incoherence and harness its imaginative potential.337 Nor did I know how powerful it would be to represent myself as the central protagonist of my narrative. I achieved this by featuring myself as Joan of Arc, the Christian martyr-saint, and Saule Mate, the Latvian pagan goddess of the sun and future – also by depicting myself in relationship with the Trinity of God, Mary and Jesus.

There was a further unexpected power in the ways in which my paintings extended and transformed the visual motifs I had included in earlier works. The hands that had appeared as grasping talons in those earlier works now changed in appearance and meaning, symbolising benediction and support. While Little Red Riding Hood appeared in an early watercolour as a child with her hand savaged by the wolf, she now appeared as an adult fighting her demons with a warrior’s axe and tree of knowledge. It was incredibly affirming to see how these motifs had shifted over time, often without a conscious intention on my part.

Using elements of collage both in my earlier works and the Revelations paintings was powerful due to the extent that it prompted me to reflect on my research for this doctoral

337 Kristeva, Black Sun, 48.
project as a form of intellectual collage. The insights I have discussed throughout this thesis are indeed a form of theoretical collage (or what some would call assemblage or bricolage) combining Kristeva’s understanding of the relationship between depression and imaginary realm, Elizabeth Grosz’s ontology of becoming, Ernst Bloch’s philosophising about the utopian function of hope and Jürgen Moltmann’s theologising of hope.\textsuperscript{338} I have drawn their ideas together in order to theorise and explain how it was possible to halt a suicide attempt and instead work toward realising a narrative of my imagined future.

\textit{Art-making and creative practices}

Together with my reflections on my earlier artwork and engagement with the work of Outsider artists such as Charlotte Salomon and Bobby Baker, the process of planning and producing the \textit{Revelations} exhibition offered me insights into the role that art-making and creative practice can play in assisting people experiencing psychache to manage their suicidality. Perhaps the most important insight is the one I have just mentioned: art-making helps those enduring psychache to find ways to access its imaginative potential. Since melancholia (as Kristeva calls it) lies outside of and beyond available words and terms, creative practices such as art-making are able to help those experiencing it to move beyond “unsayability” and incoherence, and to begin to harness its imaginative dimension.

This aspect of art-making was all the more powerful in my case because my experience of halted suicide also involved the mystical experience of prophetic call. The experience of producing a narrative of an imagined future was in my case “unsayable”. It amounted in itself to what Jan Alber et al might call an “unnatural narrative”. I am hardly the only one for whom this has been the case. The medieval female mystic Hildegard of Bingen also turned to a visual medium to represent her own revelatory encounter with God.\textsuperscript{339} This has also been the case for Outsider artists such as Séraphine Louis de Senlis (1864–1942) and Madge Gill.

Since I am convinced that psychache has a spiritual dimension, Robert Henri’s concept of the “art spirit” has shed further light on why art-making has been such a potent force in my own


\textsuperscript{339} Hildegard of Bingen, \textit{Scivias}.  

127
ability to halt a suicide attempt. Art-making is a way to tap into the art spirit, and as such is likely to assist others in finding a way to manage their psychache.\textsuperscript{340} In addition, art-making and other creative enterprises have the power to reignite unfulfilled desires for what Bloch has called a utopian state-of-being, desires that would be extinguished through suicide.

While I do not see my own art-making as art therapy for the reasons discussed at the outset of this thesis, the process of producing art for public viewing has had a therapeutic benefit in allowing me to present deeply personal and painful information to others, but at the same time to feel that the artworks were shielding me from too much traumatic scrutiny. My \textit{Revelations} artworks felt particularly protective in this way because their symbolic nature reminiscent of medieval religious paintings required the viewer to interpret a whole series of motifs in order to unearth the concealed story. The artworks also portrayed protective domestic spaces – cozy bedroom-cum-studios, rife with signs of the familiar and the everyday – while at the same time taking the viewer into a fey realm where the imaginary seamlessly co-existed with the real.

Another reason why art-making is particularly valuable for people enduring psychache is that the process of creating art is a sensory, performative experience that draws attention to the self as an embodied physical being in the world. The sensory and grounded aspects of art-making counter the sensation of “not-being” that forms such a powerful and terrible component of acute melancholia. The embodied nature of art-making and the need to work at it doggedly and repeatedly highlights a further key insight emerging from this doctoral project: namely, that it is not enough to experience epiphany or engage in storytelling about oneself and one’s imagined future. Action and courage are also required.

To begin to realise a different and preferred future, one has to engage in the kind of steadfast, resolute daily actions that I have called \textit{radical courage}. Repeated and regular art-making is a way to enact this radical courage and magnify its force. This is why radical courage is so closely related to Jonathan’s Lear concept of radical hope. He too emphasises

\textsuperscript{340} Henri, \textit{The Art Spirit}. 

128
the need for doing rather than just wishing in order to realise the radical potential of hoping for the future.\textsuperscript{341}

**Autoethnographic techniques**

The process of producing *Revelations* came as the culmination of the autoethnographic research I conducted for this project. Key to this research was an intense reflection on art-making in which I engaged during and after my experience of acute suicidality and halted suicide attempt. I used this early art-making as an autoethnographic source, so much so that this thesis is likely to be of interest to others keen to use art in the course of autoethnographic research. I also produced new artworks during the process of research as a form of arts-based inquiry.

Using past artwork together with ongoing art-making as part of my research enabled me to create a layered and sophisticated understanding of my experience. Moreover, engaging in autoethnographic research was another way for me to make myself visible as a researcher and claim the right to be at the centre of my own narrative.

At the outset of this doctoral project, I set myself the task of using autoethnographic techniques to determine what had allowed me to halt a suicide attempt and subsequently live with ongoing suicidality. Underpinning this aim was a desire to pinpoint factors that might be more broadly useful to at least some other people experiencing psychache. I have already discussed some of these factors in the earlier section of this conclusion: namely, art-making and creative endeavor, a narrative of the future, and a radically courageous determination to move toward realising a preferred future.

For so-called “invisible women” such as myself, the courage to claim a place at the centre of one’s own narrative is also crucial. As a woman of faith within the Catholic tradition, it has been even more important to me to embrace a nurturing, female-oriented spirituality, informed by the knowledge of female mystics before me and by a sense of what Christina Lledo Gomez calls the “Church as Mother”.\textsuperscript{342} There are broader implications for research on suicidality and its treatment here: namely, the need to recognise its spiritual dimensions and the potential for spirituality to play a key role in its management into the future.


\textsuperscript{342} Gomez, *The Church as Woman and Mother*, 13.
My autoethnographic research has further helped me to realise the power of accepting that one is not healed from psychache. It takes courage to acknowledge there may be no possibility of recovery, and yet there is still a future to be embraced and worked towards. The courage that underpins this acknowledgment is also spiritual in dimension, because it requires a faith in the future – a faith, in my case, in God's prophetic call – as well as the effort to harness the “art spirit” through activities at once directed towards an imagined future and enacted in the here and now.

**Into the Future**

Though I have not discussed this in the earlier chapters, I have become involved in other projects while producing *Revelations* and writing this thesis that will play a powerful role in managing my psychache into the future. In addition to maintaining a studio practice as an artist, I have become involved in community art projects. I have acted as a team leader and collaborator with a group of other senior women in my local community, producing yarn-storming projects that we have exhibited in prominent public spaces. This work has shown me that becoming an artist has a communal dimension as well as one focused on consciously producing my own self-narrative. My future beyond this doctoral project includes involvement with community art projects. In embracing Grosz’s ontology of becoming, I will continue to adjust my narrative of an imagined future as a consequence of these new activities.

The 2019 project, *Wattle Wonder* of fifteen two-metre tall sleeves of gold coloured crocheted and knitted flowers, was installed in North Sydney’s Brett Whiteley Place and two months later at North Sydney’s Coal Loader Nature Reserve.
LIST OF PAINTINGS

PART A: De-structuring

Setting the stage

Figure 1: London’s basement (2010), watercolour and ink on paper, 45 x 30 cm.

Figure 2: A record of my misery (2015), mixed media on paper, 30 x 20 cm.

Eyes, hands, mouths and heart

Figure 3: Where is my Lord? (2015), watercolour on paper, 30 x 20 cm.

Figure 4: Blue hat figure (2010), watercolour and ink on paper, 30 x 20 cm.

Figure 5: My heart, mind, being all gone (July 2014), mixed media on paper, 30 x 20 cm.

Figure 6: Noise in my brain (September 2016), watercolour and ink on paper, 30 x 20 cm.

Figure 7: The art of trauma (July 2017), mixed media on paper, 30 x 20 cm.

Figure 8: Great times of the epoch (July 2017), mixed media on paper, 30 x 20 cm.

Figure 9: My heart is ripped out. Betrayal. (June 2015), watercolour on paper, 30 x 20 cm.

Mouths and maps

Figure 10: Rage against the dying of the light (2015), mixed media on paper, 30 x 20 cm.

Figure 11: Rue the day (2016), mixed media on paper, 30 x 20 cm.

Hands, mouths and red

Figure 12: The trappings of captivity (2017), watercolour on paper, 30 x 20 cm.

Figure 13: Pain: Trapped in the crossfire (2017) mixed media on paper, 30 x 20 cm.
**Interiors**

Figure 14: *Spilt and spoil* (November 2010), watercolour and ink on paper, 30 x 20 cm.

**The imaginary landscape**

Figure 15: *A Sea of Sorrows* (2010), watercolour and ink on paper, 30 x 20 cm.

Figure 16: *The influence of your country* (July 2017), mixed media on paper, 30 x 20 cm.

**PART B: Re-structuring**

**Rupture between self and past**

Figure 17: *Forget me not: I waited* (July 2016), mixed media on card, 20 x 30 cm.

Figure 18: *Do not disturb my webs* (March 2018), mixed media on card, 20 x 30 cm.

**God and the world**

Figure 19: *Out of the tomb* (August 2016), mixed media on paper, 20 x 30 cm.

**God’s prophetic call**

Figure 20: *God calls* (2016), mixed media on paper, 20 x 30 cm.

Figure 21: *Adoration of the Magi* (2016), mixed media on paper, 20 x 30 cm.

**Radical courage**

Figure 22: *Day 7 is a Nice day* (September 2016), old map and mixed media on paper, 20 x 30 cm.

Figure 23: “Self-portrait as an artist”, (2010) mixed media on diary page, 20 x 30 cm.

Figure 24: *Chosen at random for this drama* (2017), mixed media on paper, 25 x 35 cm.

Figure 25: *Creativity and functionality go hand in hand* (January 2019), mixed media on paper, 25 x 35 cm.
Figure 26: *Courage between the lines* (2017), old map and mixed media on paper, 20 x 30 cm

Figure 27: *Courage within* (2017), old map and mixed media on paper, 20 x 30 cm.

*Forays into the imaginary realm*

Figure 28: *I will dwell in the house of God forever* (2016), mixed media on paper, 20 x 30 cm.

**PART C: Con-structing**

Figure 29: *The traveller’s tale* (2018), gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.

Figure 30: *Courage, I hand to you* (2017), gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.

Figure 31: *The River of Life* (2016), gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.

Figure 32: *Thou must prophesy before peoples and nations* (2016), gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.

Figure 33: *How else would God speak to me, if not through my imagination?* (2017), gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.

Figure 34: *Saule and the threads of sun-life* (2017), gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.
Paintings: PART A: **De-structuring**

**Setting the stage**

Figure 1: *London’s basement* (2010), watercolour and ink on paper, 45 x 30 cm.

Figure 2: *A record of my misery* (2015), mixed media on paper, 30 x 20 cm.
Eyes, hands, mouths and heart

Figure 3: *Where is my Lord?* (2015), watercolour on paper, 30 x 20 cm.

Figure 4: *Blue hat figure* (2010), watercolour and ink on paper, 30 x 20 cm.
Figure 5: *My heart, mind, being all gone* (July 2014), mixed media on paper, 30 x 20 cm.

Figure 6: *Noise in my brain* (September 2016), watercolour and ink on paper, 30 x 20 cm.
Figure 7: *The art of trauma* (July 2017), mixed media on paper, 30 x 20 cm.

Figure 8: *Great times of the epoch* (July 2017), mixed media on paper, 30 x 20 cm.
Figure 9: *My heart is ripped out. Betrayal.* (June 2015), watercolour on paper, 30 x 20 cm.

Mouths and Maps

Figure 10: *Rage against the dying of the light* (2015), mixed media on paper, 30 x 20 cm.
Figure 11: *Rue the day* (2016), mixed media on paper, 30 x 20 cm.

**Hands, Mouths and Red**

Figure 12: *The trappings of captivity* (2017), watercolour on paper, 30 x 20 cm.
Figure 13: Pain: *Trapped in the crossfire* (2017), mixed media on paper, 30 x 20 cm.

Interiors

Figure 14: *Split and spoilt* (November 2010), watercolour and ink on paper, 30 x 20 cm.
The imaginary landscape

Figure 15: *A Sea of Sorrows* (2010), watercolour and ink on paper, 30 x 20 cm.

Figure 16: *The influence of your country* (July 2017), mixed media on paper, 30 x 20 cm.
Paintings: PART B, Re-structuring

Rupture between self and past

Figure 17: Forget me not: I waited (July 2016), mixed media on card, 20 x 30 cm.

Figure 18: Do not disturb my webs (March 2018), mixed media on card, 20 x 30 cm.
God and the world

Figure 19: *Out of the tomb* (August 2016), mixed media on paper, 20 x 30 cm.

God’s prophetic call

Figure 20: *God calls* (2016), mixed media on paper, 20 x 30 cm.
Figure 21: *Adoration of the Magi* (2016), mixed media on paper, 20 x 30 cm.

Radical courage

Figure 22: *Day 7 is a Nice day* (September 2016), mixed media on paper, 20 x 30 cm.
Figure 23: “Self-portrait as an artist” (2010), mixed media in diary page, 20 x 30 cm.

Figure 24: Chosen at random for this drama (2017), mixed media on paper, 25 x 35 cm.
Figure 25: *Creativity and functionality go hand in hand* (January 2019), mixed media on paper, 25 x 35 cm.

Figure 26: *Courage between the lines* (2017), old map and mixed media on paper, 20 x 30 cm
Figure 27: *Courage within* (2017), old map and mixed media on paper, 20 x 30 cm.

Forays into the imaginary realm

Figure 28: *I will dwell in the house of God forever* (2016), mixed media on paper, 20 x 30 cm.
Paintings: PART C, Con-structing

Figure 29: The traveller’s tale (2018), gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.

Figure 30: Courage, I hand to you (2017), gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.
Figure 31: *The River of Life* (2016), gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.

Figure 32: *Thou must prophesy before peoples and nations* (2016), gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.
Figure 34: *How else would God speak to me, if not through my imagination?* (2017), gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.

Figure 35: *Saule and the threads of sun-life* (2017), gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.

**Figure 1:** bi-fold panel, *The excruciating absence of God’s presence*, gouache and mixed media on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.

**Figure 2:** Poster: *What is Radical Courage?*, graphite pencil on watercolour paper, 90x 120 cm.

**Figure 3:** Poster: *What is De-Structuring?*, graphite pencil on watercolour paper, 90x 120 cm.
Figure 3: Poster: What is Re-structuring?, graphite pencil on watercolour paper, 90x 120 cm.

Figure 4: Poster: What is Con-structing?, Graphite pencil on watercolour paper, 90x 120 cm.

**Figure 1, 2, 3:** an example of being imprisoned by psychache

**Figure 4, 5, 6:** an example of calling out pschache’s incoherence

**Figure 1:** an example of a mystical experience

![Mystical Experience](image1.png)

**Figure 2:** *My hunger, my thirst* (2016) as an example of radical courage

![Radical Courage](image2.png)

Figure 1: *The traveller’s tale* (2017), gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.

Figure 2: *Courage, I hand to you* (2017), gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.

Figure 3: *Psalm 23: I will fear no evil* (2017), gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.
Figure 4: *The River of Life* (2016), gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.

![Image of The River of Life](image)

Figure 5: *Saule Mate and the threads of sun-life*, (2017), gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.

![Image of Saule Mate and the threads of sun-life](image)

Figure 6: *How else would God speak to me, if not through my imagination?* (2017), gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.

![Image of How else would God speak to me, if not through my imagination?](image)
Figure 7. *The blood of the new covenant: I am with you until the end of time* (2017), gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.

Figure 8. *The angel of the abyss: the demon is chained* (2017), gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.

Figure 9. *No more silence. Be daring and declare your future to the world* (2017), gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.
Figure 10: A new heaven and a new earth: different dreams create different ground (2017),
gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.

Figure 11: Thou must prophesy before peoples and nations (2016),
gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.
**Additional Revelation paintings** exhibited at the TAP Gallery, Nov/December 2017 and the InsideOut Gallery March–October 2018

**Figure 1: Be-yond Becoming** (2015), gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.

![Image of Beyond Becoming](image1)

**Figure 2: London belongs to me** (2016), gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.

![Image of London Belongs to Me](image2)

**Figure 3: Let every heart prepare some room** (2017), gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.

![Image of Let Every Heart Prepare Some Room](image3)
Figure 4: The glamour is cast, the story is lived (2017), gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.

Figure 5: No one is an island (2017), mixed media and gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.

Figure 6: Winds of change, spirit of change (2017), mixed media and gouache on MDF board, 60 x 90 cm.
Revelations exhibition at the TAP Gallery, December 2017.

Figures 1, 2, 3, 4: Paintings in the exhibition space, gouache on MDF, 60 x 90 cm.

Figure 5: Paintings in the exhibition space, collage and watercolours, 30 x 20 cm.
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186


RADICAL COURAGE
By Debra Phillips

A visual story of how a narrative of the imagined future displaced a narrative of suicidality
Exhibition Purpose and Themes

The purpose of the exhibition is to tell the story of how my narrative of the imagined future displaced a narrative of suicidality. The three sections of the exhibition chart the changes from suicidality to realising an imagined future.

The first section, De-structuring portrays the state of “psychache”. Its medium is watercolour on paper. De-structuring shows the impact of suicidal depression in my life. De-structuring describes the dissolving structure-less-ness of the “imaginary realm”. This section uses re-occurring motifs of talon-like hands and screaming mouths in claustrophobic interiors to express my fear of, and separation from the world. The paintings are my way of describing the loss of connection with others because I lost the motivation to, and the ability to verbally explain what was happening to me. The watercolour washes emphasise the bleeding, dissolving and dream-like quality of de-structuring.

The second section, Re-structuring explains how I used fragmented beliefs and imaginings to create a different self-narrative. Its medium is collage and mixed media. Both De-structuring and Re-structuring works-on-paper are raw expressions of my interior life from 2013 to 2018 and not originally intended for public viewing. They reveal my unmediated thoughts and emotions, and daily lived experience. Re-structuring. This term refers to how things (concepts or matter) are re-ordered and restructured by adjusting existing structures. Re-structuring tells of how a spiritual awakening ruptured my narrative of suicidality, prompting me to exercise Radical Courage. The collaged works on paper demonstrate my interest in gold as a symbol of spiritual transformation and old maps as a symbol of re-shaped perspectives of my future. The collage technique represents stitching together new and old matter to imagine a different, future-oriented, preferred self.

The third section, Con-structing tells how I built my self-narrative as an artist. Its medium is gouache paint on MDF board. Con-structing. Con-structing refers to my public self and narrative that I now present to the world. These paintings are influenced by fairy tales, biblical narratives, hagiographies and medieval visual-narrative art. The motifs of Little Red Riding Hood and Joan of Arc symbolise my new narrative agency. I introduce the visual motif of the chasm to illustrate that rupture can create a fecund space between stresses. Thread and knitting motifs represent the importance of my local yarn-archist community.
De-structuring

Storm in a tea-cup (2015)
water-colour on paper
30 x 20 cm
De-structuring

Bruises to prove I am worthy (2015)
water-colour, ink pen on paper
30 x 20 cm
De-structuring

The trappings of captivity (2017)
water-colour on paper
30 x 20 cm
De-structuring

What a ripper you are! Ripped out my heart! (2015)
water-colour on paper
30 x 20 cm
De-structuring

Dancing along the cracks of despair (2015)
water-colour on paper
30 x 20 cm
De-structuring

Interrogation (2015)
mixed media and water-colour on paper
30 x 20 cm
Different Data (2015)
mixed media and water-colour on paper
30 x 20 cm
Re-structuring

The affliction of these terrible dreams (2017)
mixed media and water-colour on paper
30 x 20 cm
Re-structuring

Out of the tomb (2016)
mixed media and water-colour on paper
30 x 20 cm
Con-structuring

Courage I hand to you (2017)
gouache on MDF
80 x 90 cm
Con-structuring

Thou must prophesy before peoples and nations (2017)
gouache on MDF
60 x 90 cm
BIography

My career as a teacher (Special Needs, Geography and Religion) was disrupted by two critical incidents of suicidal depression in 2010 and 2014. They triggered my quest to become an artist. The disruption, its catalyst and consequence are examined in my auto-ethnographic PhD by creative project. This exhibition, Radical Courage takes the viewer into my experiences of psychache, spiritual awakening, and into my imaginary realm. My commitment to realise an imagined future-as-an-artist was sustained by radical courage.

Exhibitions and Installations: (2014 – Present)

- 2017, community art installation: Poppies for Peace: Brett Whitely Place, North Sydney and then The Coal Loader Nature Reserve, Waverton.
- 2017, group exhibition: Share the Journey, InsideOut Gallery, Macquarie Hospital, Sydney.
- 2016, public art installation: Soule Mate, Stabu iela Street, Riga
- 2016, solo exhibition: Radical Courage, InsideOut Gallery, Macquarie Hospital, Sydney.
- 2015, October: community art installation, Pink Matters, Brett Whitely Place, North Sydney.
Academic Biography

- Ph.D. candidate at Australian Catholic University (North Sydney campus), with the Faculty of Education and the Arts, “Narratives of the Imagined Future”.
- M. Education (Hons, 1990); M. Religious Education (2002); B. Education; Post Grad. Expressive/Performing Arts; Post Grad. Remedial Education; Post Grad. Special Education; Dip Teaching (Social Sciences: Geography major).

Publications

- Debra Phillips, “In God’s House There are Many Rooms”: Feminist Theology, 2017. http://journals.sagepub.com/content/25/1/96.full.pdf+html

Presentations (2013 – Present)

- 2018, "In memory of her: an acknowledgement of WW1 nurses", public lecture, Stanton Library, North Sydney.
- 2016, "A narrative of radical courage": Narrative, Health & Well-being Research Conference, Noosa, Qld.
- 2015, "Narratives of the imagined future": Aarhus University, Summer School in Narrative Studies, Sonderborg, Denmark.
- 2013, "In God’s house": The Sacred and the Arts, Sydney.
**RADICAL COURAGE** is living with ‘psychache’, waiting patiently, knowing that it will eventually pass. Psychache is the state of unbearable anguish.

This exhibition is a component of a PhD by creative project at Australian Catholic University.

Thank you to:
Dr Melissa Bellanta
Dr Vicki Carruthers
Dr Elaine Lindsay

This exhibition was curated by Dr Lachlan Warner (ACU).

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Conversely, how I as an artist reveal a biblical perspective?
my name
of how
re-ord
how
RE
DeS

life. The

shelter

viewing

un-mediated

interior
This is the "ache" we want it will ever is the state the purpose
This is the "ache" we want it will evolve is the stage of our process
nútie

Rock a-bye

baby
Here Be Dragons

Chimera