



# University of HUDDERSFIELD

## University of Huddersfield Repository

Jarvis, Christine

Book Review: Celia Hunt. *Transformative Learning through Creative Life Writing: Exploring the Self in the Learning Process*. London: Routledge, 2013. 197 pp. ISBN 9798-

### Original Citation

Jarvis, Christine (2014) Book Review: Celia Hunt. *Transformative Learning through Creative Life Writing: Exploring the Self in the Learning Process*. London: Routledge, 2013. 197 pp. ISBN 9798-. *Biography*, 37 (3). pp. 822-825. ISSN 0162-4962

This version is available at <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/25392/>

The University Repository is a digital collection of the research output of the University, available on Open Access. Copyright and Moral Rights for the items on this site are retained by the individual author and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full items free of charge; copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided:

- The authors, title and full bibliographic details is credited in any copy;
- A hyperlink and/or URL is included for the original metadata page; and
- The content is not changed in any way.

For more information, including our policy and submission procedure, please contact the Repository Team at: [E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk](mailto:E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk).

<http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/>



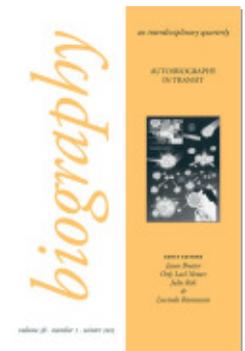
PROJECT MUSE®

---

**Transformative Learning through Creative Life Writing:  
Exploring the Self in the Learning Process by Celia Hunt  
(review)**  
Christine Jarvis

Biography, Volume 37, Number 3, Summer 2014, pp. 822-825 (Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press  
DOI: 10.1353/bio.2014.0065



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/bio/summary/v037/37.3.jarvis.html>

Wood gives us the view of schizophrenia as “written from the inside” (5), both by those who have received this diagnosis and those who are in close contact with them. It is a must read for those wanting to approach the mystery of schizophrenia from a non-medical angle. It allows us to appreciate the coherence in apparently incoherent narratives and behavior as people struggle to deal with the suffering and distress they experience, and to take an active role in the construction of their identities in a context in which they are assumed to be without a coherent identity.

Barbara Schneider

Celia Hunt. *Transformative Learning through Creative Life Writing: Exploring the Self in the Learning Process*. London: Routledge, 2013. 197 pp. ISBN 9798-0415578424, £24.99, \$44.95.

People change, often in profound ways, when they engage in creative practices, but understanding the nature of these changes and the reasons why they take place continues to challenge adult educators. This book takes a close look at the effects of participating in postgraduate programs in what the author terms “creative life writing,” and makes the case for considering the students’ experiences as a form of transformative learning. The author seeks to extend our understanding of the nature of transformative learning as a result of these analyses. In the introduction and in the opening chapter Hunt details the Creative Writing and Personal Development Programmes that took place at Sussex University between 1996 and 2010. The remainder of the book is divided into four sections.

The first part begins by exploring some concepts of the psyche, and goes on to use case studies to illustrate the kinds of changes students experienced during their time in these programs. The programs used a range of creative writing exercises and activities to help people deepen their understanding of themselves, enhance their creativity, and engage with the therapeutic potential of creative writing. Hunt outlines the unusual and hybrid nature of the programs. They help develop the craft of writing, but do not claim to produce professional writers; they encourage people to explore themselves and involve the study of therapeutic theories, but are not accredited either as therapy or as courses for therapists. There is hybridity, too, in the theoretical work, which she begins to delineate in the opening chapter. She draws on an array of theoretical frameworks to explain the kinds of learning and development taking place through creative life writing. She seeks to contribute to the expanding debate about the nature of transformative learning, positioning herself alongside those who have argued that to move forward, transformative learning

theorists need to think outside the dominant constructivist paradigm with which it is still associated. The teaching and the analysis are rooted in a critical realist perspective, which assumes that there is a core real or authentic self that can be accessed and affected by social, personal, and cognitive processes.

In part two Hunt considers how transformative change takes place through these programs by exploring the concept of reflexivity as a form of dialogue with the psyche—an engagement between a core bodily self and a language-based self. In this section she weaves together a very wide range of theoretical frameworks. She indicates early on that the work of Karen Horney remains at the heart of her thinking, but she also considers, variously, Damasio's concept of core consciousness, Archer's ideas about agency, thinking about left and right brain functions and their relationship to reflexivity, Boyd and Myers's Jungian reframing of transformative learning as dependent on emotional release, and Dirx's discussions of transformative learning as dependent on giving more space to the unconscious aspects of the psyche. At the heart of this discussion seems to be a concept of transformative learning as something that occurs primarily through a loosening of consciousness that allows repressed aspects of the self to emerge, having a profound impact on consciousness, self-expression, and agency. Helpfully, Hunt refers back throughout this section to the earlier case studies, particularly when she is examining the psychic difficulties faced by individuals and the way these are challenged through the life writing exercises. I enjoyed the way she wove these different theories together, adopting an eclectic approach in which she notes the similarities between ideas and frameworks coming from different traditions. At times, though, I wondered whether a reader with a keener interest in theoretical precision than I might want to challenge the way that some of these ideas are elided and combined, and also wondered whether some clarity was lost as a result of this inclusivity.

Part three focuses on process. It considers how the different activities developed as parts of the programs interact with different aspects of consciousness. Here she uses Kristeva's ideas of the semiotic and the symbolic to suggest the ways that participants were able to access some deeply felt pre-linguistic experiences. This section discusses the importance of stimulating the right brain hemisphere's capacity to process a range of linguistic symbols and images that feature ambiguity and open the mind to more oblique ways of viewing experience. In a section that reminded me of Brookfield's work on developing critical thinkers—in spite of the very different focus in Hunt's work on the psyche and inner self, rather than rational process—she discusses the way that certain of the creative life writing activities have a strong focus on imagining other ways of being by thinking outside the immediate physical and temporal space. Once again Hunt illustrates all of this with reference to

the case studies, significantly enriching the discussion in the process. She refers here to a concept that threads throughout the book: the tension between containment (through structured exercises and a supportive group process), and freedom to access thoughts and voices that had been repressed, but which might feel threatening or unsettling.

The final part of the book discusses some of the challenges of doing this kind of work. Hunt is refreshingly honest about the failures as well as the successes of the programs, demonstrating very powerfully that transformative learning is not necessarily experienced as beneficial by the learner. She demonstrates that even students who are ultimately successful found that there were times when they felt that the group support process failed them or they experienced depression and loss of confidence. Others left the course, feeling they were not achieving the increases in creativity and writing skill they had anticipated, and in some cases feeling that they had lost confidence because they had not succeeded. One thing I found a little disturbing was the assumption that the author made that these participants must have given up, at least partly, because they felt that opening up was too painful. It seems slightly disrespectful to students to turn their criticism of the course into a failure of courage, when it may simply have been that for them this was not the route to creativity. At this point this very wide-ranging and generally open-minded text comes close to suggesting that there is only one way to think about transformative learning and creative development.

The tension between the skills development and personal development elements of the course is discussed in this section as a cause of some of the difficulties students and tutors faced. Assessment poses particular challenges in this context, as any tutor who has been required to assess a piece of very personal writing knows. Do you focus on technicalities and the quality of the finished work, or on the personal development and the work that has clearly gone into reflecting on personal experience? Hunt explores the emotional demands of teaching in the program, and considers the suggestion that tutors might need some kind of support group themselves, just as counselors and therapists often do.

I found this to be a rich and stimulating text. It made me want to engage in a dialogue with the author on almost every page. For example, I wanted to know whether she felt the transformative learning process worked the other way round; she argues that deep emotional and psychic processes can lead to cognitive shifts—my experience has been that sometimes cognitive challenges to assumptions can lead to changes in self-awareness and to emotional shifts.

I was drawn to this book because I am interested in fiction, in creativity, and in transformative education. It is perhaps not surprising that I was most engaged by the discussions of the students' experiences in the early part of the

book, and by the accounts of the relationship between these and the specific activities that made up the programs themselves (parts one and three of the book). I would have been happy to see more case studies. There is a shortage of detailed empirical evidence of transformative learning from the arts. The book makes an important contribution to that literature and contributes to the growing literature on the extra-rational dimension of transformative learning. As teachers we know that people change when they participate in arts-based pedagogies of all kinds—and we know that this change can often be dramatic—but it can be very difficult to demonstrate this in ways that have a strong theoretical grounding and a rich empirical base. We need work such as this book, which has those two qualities. It is particularly important in the context of the political environment the author discusses, in which this, and other programs that focus on personal and academic development, are reducing in number as funding dries up and is directed primarily to training for employment.

Christine Jarvis

Sergio R. Franco. *In(ter)venciones del yo: Escritura y sujeto autobiográfico en la literatura hispanoamericana (1974–2002)*. [*In(ter)ventions of the Self: Writing and the Autobiographical Subject in Hispanic American Literature (1974–2002)*]. Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2012. 248 pp. ISBN 978-3865277107, \$32.00.

In *In(ter)venciones del yo* Sergio R. Franco analyzes the construction and function of the subject in five Latin American autobiographical texts which lie on the margin, as he sees it, of the literary production of canonical authors. His study includes three Nobel Prize winners—Pablo Neruda (Chile) 1971, Gabriel García Márquez (Colombia) 1982, and Mario Vargas Llosa (Peru) 2010—as well as highly acclaimed authors Margo Glantz (Mexico), and Severo Sarduy (Cuba). According to Franco, a critique of the lesser-studied life writings of these authors affords a disruptive reading of their literary corpus as a whole, and provides a differing, or richer, cultural understanding of their place and legacy within Latin American letters. Ultimately, Franco questions the values underlying the Latin American canon itself, as he uses these texts to tease out the conflicts, paradoxes, and hypocrisies concerning national politics, racial privileges, ethnic identity, gender, and sexuality that underlie the critical and popular assessment of these authors.

While not for the lay reader, *In(ter)venciones del yo* offers students and researchers a textbook review of theoretical approaches to the study of autobiography. Franco tips his hand to the multiple critical perspectives that he will employ with the epigraphs he chooses by Jorge Luis Borges, Gayatri Spivak,