THE ALASDAIR GRAY ARCHIVE

THE Agnes Owens ARCHIVE

CREATIVE SCOTLAND

ALBA | CHRUTHACHAIL

CREATIVE PRACITIONER CASE STUDY

WRITING IN THE MARGINS*

* TWO LITERARY RESIDENCIES

NAME

HEATHER PARRY



CREATIVE DISCIPLINE

Writer

PROJECT SCOPE

8 months

YEAR

2026

OUTCOME

New Fiction: Novel

FUNDER(S)

Supported by The National Lottery through Creative Scotland

> "I could not have asked for more support, more inspiration or better community than I have had at The Alasdair Gray Archive and The Agnes Owens Archive for the last eight months. I will never forget it."

The Alasdair Gray Archive and The Agnes Owens Archive appointed Kirstin Innes and Heather Parry as Writers-in-Residence for 2026, following a highly competitive open-call process. The eight-month residency programme, *Writing in the Margins*, invited the writers to explore how class, gender, and societal expectations intersect across the works of Alasdair Gray and Agnes Owens, under the overarching theme of 'neglected voices'.

How did this opportunity support the generation of new creative ideas or material in your practice? The time, space and financial support offered to me has created the perfect conditions for me to work towards the creation of a new book of fiction, as proposed in my application. I was not only supported but challenged by Sorcha and the team to push myself out of my comfort zone and to follow threads than have ended up being hugely generative. I don't think there's anything that I could have asked for that would have been turned down; repeatedly, resources were made available to me that I didn't have time to lean into, simply because there is so much to work with. Had I twice as much time, I still don't think I would have been able to tap into everything that the archive has to offer! Having so many other artists, academics and practitioners in the archive alongside me has been inspirational in a way I cannot describe and my job now is to take this unfathomable wealth of material and wrangle it into a book form.



Heather Parry Working in The Alasdair Gray Archive, 2026. Photograph by Alan Dimmick

Did the experience lead to experimentation or risk-taking in your work that you might not have otherwise pursued? Yes. I have been supported to experiment with form, with theme and with artistic response, notably through the visual diary I have been keeping to support my writing project. Every possible support has been given to me and I have been able to work with clay, with paint, with sketching and more during my time in the archives, encouraged over and over again to think outside the box and embrace new creative methods for exploring what I want to explore. I have submitted conference papers in response to what I've discovered in the archival materials, have written essays bringing together very different writers, and, of course, brought this expansive sense of experimentation to my main fiction project. All this I will take away with me after my residency, and it will continue to inspire a multidisciplinary approach for the rest of my career - of this I have no doubt.

What kinds of themes, methods, or approaches emerged in your creative process as a direct result of your engagement? The question of 'moral emblems' became very central in my last month at the archive, and going down this research hole led me to a consideration of the means of production as it relates to changes in the publishing landscape over the last 150 years. Studies of Gray's artwork has led me to explore themselves related to antifacist artwork, and in writing an introduction to one of Agnes Owens' reissues I was given the space to draw parallels between her work and the work of Shirley Jackson, as well as applying a Freudian analysis to the book. My resulting work of fiction will bring together these influences, with Derrida's 'sous rature' practice, Gray's concept of 'moral emblems', Jim Kelman's use of the term 'hostile patients' and Owens' exploration of structural violence being particularly important to this project.

In what way(s) did your involvement support your financial stability (e.g. through fees, sales, exposure, or follow-on opportunities)? The core funding for this residency quite literally paid my bills for the first eight months of this year, coming at a time of particular financial instability between projects and contracts. As well as directly supporting me financially it has allowed me to begin to create a full fiction project (book-length) which I will (hopefully) be able to sell to a publisher. Knowing that my main expenses have been covered has also allowed me to focus on other creative work outside of my residency time as well, basically gifting me eight months of security in which I have been able to begin several other projects and follow other creative interests in my non-residency time. As a full time freelancer this has all been incredibly vital for not only my core income for this period but as a way to establish future income streams and solidify working partnerships that will support me in future.

Did the opportunity lead to any additional paid work, commissions, or invitations? If yes, please describe. Early in the residency period I was invited to write an introduction for an Agnes Owens reissue for an additional fee, which has led to further introduction work from the same publisher, something I really enjoy. I was thrilled to be involved with the launch of these reissues at an event in Milngavie too. I have also been able to produce essays for my substack, which generates income for me, and have been invited to further events for additional fees, drawing on my work in the archives as well as my published work. These include potential workshop sessions at Barlinnie Prison, something I have done before and enjoyed, and at Woodside Library.

What financial or professional support structures were most beneficial to you during the project? I can't downplay the importance of the residency fee on my financial stability over the eight months of this year; this has been immeasurably helpful to me. However, the creative and practical support offered by Sorcha and Abby - as well as the larger network of creative and academic folks resident in various different ways in the archives - has been truly immeasurable. I have been encouraged, supported, challenged, inspired, cared for, praised, offered constructive critique and basically have been brought into the wider AGA/AOA family in a way that I can probably never successfully describe. This has simply been one of the most creatively supported times of my life and that is entirely down to Sorcha, Abby, and everyone else involved with the archives.



Heather Parry (right) at the Agnes Owens Centenary publication launch at Milngavie Town Hall, 2026. Photograph by Alasdair Watson.



Heather Parry visual diary entry shown in The Alasdair Gray Archive, 2026. Photograph by Abby Carter.

Do you feel this opportunity helped widen access to professional development or creative networks for you? If so, how? Yes, absolutely. I so strongly feel part of not just the immediate archive team but the wider family of artists orbiting in some way around the work of Alasdair Gray, from Rodge Glass to Chitra Ramaswamy to crafters and visual artists who've responded to Gray's books, to filmmakers making short films in response to his artwork, to those writing critical essays and PhDs on both he and Agnes Owens. This is not simply a theoretical network but is comprised of people I've shared space with over the course of the residency, which has highlighted to me the importance of having a physical, accessible space for such archives in which artists and fans come and go on a regular basis. I can barely think of a single day when the archive was not visited by a fascinating member of the public or a creative practitioner with whom I could discuss both my ideas and theirs. As a writer, working in solitude most often, this has been wildly generative and enjoyable, and has given me access to writers, networks and development opportunities I never have had access to before.

What barriers (if any) did the project help you overcome — creative, professional, financial, or otherwise? As mentioned above, the residency core fee allowed me a level of financial stability that I was otherwise lacking in the first two thirds of this year. In terms of my creative approach, the residency allowed me to resist capitulation to the publishing industry's worst tendencies - towards extremely thin, easily marketable slop - and instead lean into a more complex, more intellectual approach to my own work, challenging ideas of genre and form towards a multi-layered final project that speaks to the very real challenges we face as a society, and hopefully endures on that basis. Professionally, it allowed me to broaden my network, introduced new inspiration and connections, and allowed me to become more fully the writer I would like to be.

Were there particular aspects of inclusion, care, or accessibility in the project that supported your engagement? The flexibility and warmth shown to me from the very first moment was nothing short of beautiful, and though I do not have particular access needs I can see that this is considered in all of the archive's planning. Really what has made the different to this project, from my perspective, is the extreme care shown to all the archive's collaborators, including Kirstin and me, by Sorcha and Abby; we wanted for absolutely nothing through the length of the residency, and were supported at every possible turn. I leave this project knowing that I have made several (hopefully!) lifelong friends and creative collaborators, and I end the residency with a number of creative tendrils already reaching out towards new projects, commissions and events.

New works or creative projects developed: *Traumatised Objects* (or: *Hostile Patients*), a book of interconnected fictions

Events, workshops, or public outcomes delivered: Body Horror workshop; Agnes Owens event; Agnes Owens podcast; 4 essays on related topics, publicly available on substack for free; 1 book introduction.

Collaborations or partnerships formed (formal or informal): Informal partnerships: several

New opportunities gained post-project (commissions, residencies, exhibitions, etc.): Several commissions

Please describe a moment or experience during your time with The Alasdair Gray Archive that most clearly captured the value of supporting creative practitioners, whether in terms of growth, stability, inclusion, or artistic experimentation. I have been looking into both the visual and literary explorations of Gray's concept of the 'moral emblem', which led me back to the concept's origin, the work of Robert Louis Stevenson, who coined the term as a title for a series of woodcuts published alongside verse by his teenage stepson, who had received a small printing press for Christmas. Studies of these original moral emblems allowed me to start thinking about my own for my resulting fiction project, but I also discovered phrases useful to other creative projects. In residence alongside me at the archive was Callum from Piscine magazine, a grassroots arts publication, also looking into moral emblems; he was in discussion with Sorcha Dallas on this topic. After I shared my research findings with them both we were able to discuss the origins of moral emblems and the extrapolation of various ideas of morality and how they might be relevant today. Later that week, I was in conversation with my cousin, the Yorkshire poet Vic Leeson, about a creative community engagement project making use of a printing press with youngsters in my home town; I introduced the idea of the kids coming up with moral emblems for the town that express their own love for the place, helping them to reject antisocial narratives and take pride in their origins again. Being given space to explore just one aspect of Gray's work thus affected the work of four different artists and the children of one community.

Find out more about The Alasdair Gray Archive and The Agnes Owens Archive by visiting our website:
www.thealasdairgrayarchive.org



Heather Parry in The Alasdair Gray Archive, 2026. Photograph by Abby Carter.