



# Imagination and metaphor in narrative therapy and collective practice

by John Stublely



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## Abstract

In this paper I explore the use of metaphors in the creation of externalised problem narratives for individuals and larger collectives, as well as in the creation of preferred alternative narratives. Through practice examples, I relate some of the ways in which I have been working with imagination and metaphor in my own context in Western Australia. This includes therapeutic work with individuals, as well as collective processes in which I have been able to apply narrative principles. How this connects to the broader field of narrative work is also explored, as are some issues related to ethics and power.

**Key words:** *metaphor; imagination; art; poetics; social poetry; collective practice; narrative practice*

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## The metaphor of metaphor

The word “metaphor” comes from the Greek *metapherein*, from *meta* meaning “over, across”, and *pherein* meaning “to carry, bear” (Klein, 1971, p. 500). What is it that a metaphor carries over or across? We could say that it carries one thing over to stand in place of another: that it transfers “a name or descriptive word or phrase” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2002), or perhaps a “shared quality or characteristic across two distinct things” (Literary Terms, 2015), or even that it transfers meaning (Legowski & Brownlee, 2001, p. 20). We might also ask how this is achieved. Given that this process of carrying over does not happen of its own accord, we could ask what role an active or “agentive self” (White, 1995, p. 143) plays in the creation of metaphor; that is, in the creation of meaning by carrying or bearing one thing over in relation to another. Through “personal agency” (White, 2004, p. 71), we can perhaps become more perceptive to and agentive in the creation of metaphors, pictures, images and imaginations<sup>1</sup> – to perhaps even grow more imaginative. At the same time, the use of metaphors can potentially help us to expand our personal agency.

Language itself is metaphoric, as we have touched on in the example of the word “metaphor” above. Metaphors, according to Lakoff and Johnson, are “pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system ... is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” (1980, p. 3). Metaphor and imagination also have a long history in therapy, including narrative therapy.

## Metaphor in narrative therapy

Metaphor has a place in the history of narrative therapy and related disciplines, including the framing of therapy itself (White, 1986). Within the field of family therapy and counselling, for instance, Zimmerman and Dickerson have pointed to “the evolution of family therapy from a cybernetic metaphor to a narrative metaphor” (1994, p. 233), which has significant “implications” (1994, p. 233). In this sense, as Legowski and Brownlee have pointed out, a metaphor can “bridge concepts and ... extend the imagination into recognizing new possibilities” (2001, p. 20). As Schön has argued, metaphors are helpful for framing and enable a “certain kind of process in which new perspectives on the world come into existence” (1979, p. 254). Some other metaphoric framings of therapy

include therapy as problem-solving, as catharsis, as rite of passage or as co-research. Generally, in my work, I invite clients into the metaphor of co-research, but also invite any metaphors or framings that the client themselves would prefer to work with.

The above points to the ways in which metaphor can frame the therapeutic process as a whole. At the same time, metaphor and imagination can be used within therapy – within this overall therapeutic framing. Traditionally, as Bergman (1985) and others have pointed out, metaphor use within therapy has been therapist directed, involving, for instance, stories, rituals and other tasks as designed by the therapist (Bergman, 1985; Combs & Freedman, 1990). Therapist-directed metaphor would seem to be characteristic of the long narrative of therapeutics. We can also find, however, that some of the metaphor work taking place within therapy is therapist directed, yet client generated – for instance, art therapy, play therapy and so on (Legowski & Brownlee, 2001, p. 20). We find this also especially in collective narrative work, with such processes as the Tree of Life, the Team of Life, Seasons of Change, and many other collective processes (see, for example, Denborough, 2008). It can also be the case, however, that metaphor can be primarily client generated, albeit with scaffolding questions from the therapist. This aspect of attention to client-generated metaphors, in a way that does not seek to interpret such metaphors, seems to be a relatively recent and unique contribution that narrative therapy has made to the wider field of therapeutics.

In my work as a naturopath and counsellor, as well as a narrative designer in the field of social impact and systems change, I work with metaphor and the imagination primarily in the externalisation of problem narratives as well as in the construction of preferred alternative narratives. In a certain sense, “the act of telling a story is in itself the metaphor” (Legowski & Brownlee, 2001, p. 23), meaning story telling can become a framing metaphor for the process of “externalising”, which, as White (1989) argued, is the key to the re-authoring of stories. Legowski and Brownlee have equated externalisation to the building of a metaphor (2001, p. 23). The process of externalisation “is an approach that encourages persons to objectify, and at times, to personify, the problems they experience as oppressive” (White, 1989, p. 1). I find that listening out for and asking questions of particularly metaphoric language can help “thicken” (Geertz, 1978) and make more alive, rich and tangible (and thereby more externalised) this problem story,

as well as the subsequent preferred narratives. Some of the more famous of these externalised metaphors in the narrative therapy field are “Sneaky Poo” (White, 1984), “Fear Busting and Monster Taming” (White, 1985), “King Tiger and Roaring Tummies” (Wood, 1988) and “Itchy Fingers” (Menses & Durrant, 1986). Legowski and Brownlee questioned the role of the client in generating such images, however, arguing, “the very nature of these terms alone attest to the fact that they are essentially therapist initiated. It is highly unlikely that such catchy terms are consistently offered by such a wide variety of clients” (2001, pp. 23–24). This may be the case, but the terms must have originated somewhere, in a creative moment of more or less personal agency in which the client themselves articulated a metaphor, or in which the therapist had the ear to hear or possibly synthesise what was said (while quite possibly checking to see if it resonated with the client themselves). In a similar vein, Legowski and Brownlee pointed out that Winslade, Crocket and Monk (1997) described “Sneaky Poo” as having become something of a cliché, having lost something of its “therapeutic freshness” (Legowski & Brownlee, 2001, p. 24). Other than the tempting reply that we should be glad that poo, sneaky or otherwise, might lose some of its freshness, we can perhaps also ask for whom has it become cliché. The obvious answer for this is narrative therapy practitioners, and not necessarily clients. This concern may still have a certain validity, though, given it is practitioners who need to be in a position to listen out for and foster “therapeutic freshness” and creativity in the telling of preferred narratives. However, this fact itself is not an argument against the metaphor of Sneaky Poo, but rather for the continued development by clients (with support from therapists) of therapeutically fresh, metaphoric and imaginatively resonant images and narratives.

As Denborough has argued, creating a visual representation in such a way is “often influential in creating distance between it and the person’s identity” (2018, p. 88), which has the effect of opening a space for externalising conversations. Sometimes, the more imaginative and metaphorically thickened and lively these externalised images can be, the more effectively an imaginative externalising conversation can ensue. This activity is perhaps related to what Herman called “hypothetical focalizing” (Herman, 2009), in which the given nature of the metaphoric image is questioned and brought into a more fluid and malleable dynamic state through questions that encourage multiple viewpoints. In such a way, personal agency and identity – or even

a “sense of personhood” (White, 2004, p. 46) or “sense of myself” (White, 2004, p. 46) – is encouraged or invited to become more engaged. (White talked about identity as “a territory of life” [2004, p. 46], which can shrink following trauma, but can also become expanded again). Such hypothetical focalising can make use of the characters and settings within the imaginative narrative scene, perhaps asking what one character might say or do in relation to another. The building up of such visuality, Bal (2008) argued, “rivals action-generated events for dominance over plot structure”, calling it “figuration” (as cited in Denborough, 2018, p. 89). This is akin to those moments in stories and in our own lives when momentum is not found in action-generated events so much as in moments of observation, reflection and rich description (à la therapy).

When I discussed the use of metaphor with two other narrative practitioners, they described it as valuable for adding immediacy, feeling, different perspectives, remembering activity, empathy, the shifting of identity, shifting experiences of the past, context, multiple alternative meanings (including contradictions), reframing possibilities, a broad reach, sensitivity, inclusiveness and a nonbinary way of working (Paul Teo & Anny Rodjito, personal communication, October, 2018). Teo said he used metaphor when moving from the problem to the therapeutic image, when checking to see which images might resonate when other words aren’t available, and when wishing to refer quickly back to a person’s situation (Paul Teo, personal communication, October, 2018). Anny described the process of double-listening (for responses to problems or alternatives stories in addition to stories about the problem) (White, 2000, p. 41, 2004; Marlowe, 2010), and asking questions to develop alternative or preferred stories, as being like moving from the image of a stick person to an image of a fleshed-out person with muscles and bones and clothing existing within a whole landscape, including a social environment (Anny Rodjito, personal communication, October, 2018).

In their book *Symbol, story and ceremony: Using metaphor in individual and family therapy*, Combs and Freedman argued that “metaphor, with its multidimensional and inexact nature, allows psychotherapy to be purposive while leaving room for ‘the random’” (1990, p. xviii). This enables therapists to be influential in the counselling process without, on the one hand, being too directive (leaving the client unfree to find their own way) or too random (thereby

not having a useful influence) (Combs & Freedman, 1990, p. xvii). While not being explicitly narrative in approach, this book by Combs and Freedman looks at the way metaphor can be helpful in “developing a relationship, gathering information, accessing and utilizing resources, suggesting ideas, reframing, and facilitating new patterns of thoughts, feelings and behaviors” (1990, p. xix). Indeed, as touched on above, metaphor and imagination (including symbol, story and ceremony) can play a part in all language, thinking and modes of living, including social engagement and therapeutics. And although I work with metaphor and imagination in various ways within my life, in my therapeutic work (including many of the ways touched on by Combs and Freedman in their book above), and in my social impact/systems change work, in this essay I will continue to focus on the narrative techniques of externalising problem stories as well as developing preferred alternative stories. To do so, I will now touch on some examples from across my different spheres of work; namely, individual therapy and poetic mirroring.

## *The bully and the lioness*

I first started working with Marianne in the middle of 2017. She originally presented for a naturopathy consultation with a diagnosis of fibromyalgia. This is a complex syndrome involving chronic fatigue and pain (Clauw et al., 2011). It can involve both physiological and psychological elements (Nihalane et al., 2006).

After an initial consult, in which naturopathic treatment was prescribed, our conversations started to take a different course. Marianne was already seeing a number of other specialists, including integrative health practitioners. One of the first things I noticed while working with Marianne was how visual, metaphoric and image-laden her language was. At this point it was tempting to attempt an externalisation of this thing called fibromyalgia, especially given that it seemed to encompass so much of her physiological and psychological situation.

When informed that I was interested in narrative therapy, Marianne was enthusiastic to try out and consequently to pursue further this particular approach in relation to her situation. But what became apparent in our conversations was that she did not wish to focus on her medical diagnosis and its definition but, rather, on different problems that seemed to relate to one another in various ways.

During one of our sessions, the externalisation of a problem brought to our attention what Marianne was describing as “the weight issue”.

John: Could you tell me a little bit more about the weight issue, and what it says when it appears?

Marianne: Oh, that's easy: “you're dumb, you're stupid, you have no self-control, you're weak, you're ugly, unattractive”. I mean, there's a list that goes on from there.

John: When the weight issue comes, and says these words, what's the effect of that?

Marianne: Well, that just makes me really depressed and just confirms everything that I think anyway.

John: If this weight issue were a person and saying these things to you, what would this weight issue look like, saying these things to you?

Marianne: Oh god, I don't know how to visualise that. Overbearing and a bully. I never thought that before, but they're the two things that came to mind: this standing over/ overbearing and bullying.

John: How long has this bully been there, or how often does it appear?

Marianne: I think it's with me probably all the time when I feel I'm overweight, so if I lost seven kilos tomorrow it wouldn't be there. Or would it be and I'm just not aware of it? Would it be lurking in the background watching and waiting? I think it first appeared after I had kids, so it's been there on and off for 30 years.

Marianne went on to describe cycles where she had to have more food, and when she felt that the bully was constantly on her mind: “It's like an engine that's running 24/7, demanding”.

John: What do you think this bully might have in mind for you when it appears and says the kinds of things you mentioned – what might its intentions be?

Marianne: Just to bully me, to push me, to control me.



At this point, the voice of the bully began to become internalised a little more, so I asked if Marianne could again characterise this bully for me. “It’s black in colour”, she said:

There’s a scene in *The Green Mile* where [one of the main characters] spews out all these – I don’t know, were they bees? – but this black mass that comes out, so it’s like [visualising with her hands] ... that’s what it feels like to me ... I never thought that was the bully, but I think that’s what that is ... It’s exhausting, it’s negative, it’s too hard. I just don’t want to do it anymore.

I asked if this bully had shown up in other places in her life. She said, yes, including in workplaces, but especially with her father. In describing these moments, she began to also talk about the act of “speaking up and standing up”, which I asked her to describe in more detail. She said that at those times she was scared but found the courage to stand up because she was standing up for others, and because she knew she was right: “I can’t not say anything”. I asked if there were any other times in her life when she couldn’t not say anything, where she knew she was right, where she was standing up not only for herself but for others. “With my father a lot”, she replied:

and I really only started to speak up to him when my kids were little, because I could see he started to speak to them how he would speak to me, and I just wasn’t going to have that. There was just absolutely no way. I was very clear and very firm. There was no pussyfooting around. I think being a mother brings out that lioness in you.

I asked Marianne to describe this lioness a little more. She said it had “inner strength. It will not allow, no way ... it’s not aggressive, but very assertive”. I asked what the lioness might say to the bully (perhaps as an example of potential hypothetical focalising), and she replied:

“You are not allowed to bully Marianne anymore”. That’s really interesting, that – it wouldn’t take any shit. “That’s the line, that’s it”, you know. “That’s unacceptable. It doesn’t matter to me what I lose, I’m going to stand up ... Stop. It’s just reached that point: we’re done. That’s not how it’s going to continue”.

(We can perhaps note the way in which the “agentive self” [White, 1995, p. 143] or “sense of myself” [White, 2004, p. 46] became identified in this sentence with the

lioness). When I asked how the bully would take this, she replied, “It’d be a bit taken aback ... The lioness can handle the bully: ‘Nope, not going to happen – it stops now’”. Marianne then went on to describe a number of other situations in which she had been able to stand up and speak up to bullies, including within workplaces (advocating for students in her care), as a student at school (befriending and supporting a much smaller new student who was getting bullied at her school), and with her father (standing up for her kids). She also named people who knew this lioness in relation to Marianne (including family, friends and colleagues).

We later explored how she felt about the way in which this bully appeared elsewhere in cultural life – including the weight issue bully as it shows up in the media, including on billboards and advertising: “The lioness feels pretty angry about [social bullying] on a mass scale”. (For some examples of what we might call agentive responses to such bullying on a mass scale, see, for instance, Clark, 2018.)

After the session with the lioness, Marianne reported having six full days in which she experienced no bully whatsoever. She described it as “existence without anxiety”. She “wasn’t fighting anything, wasn’t resisting ... I belonged in the world and was safe”. She said:

after the last consult, I felt completely different, like an altered state of consciousness. I woke like someone had filled me with anti-anxiety drugs. This must be what happiness feels like. I felt hopeful and didn’t want this experience to be disturbed. I felt free from physical depression, not just mental and emotional. I stopped eating so much – wasn’t interested ... I was peaceful inside with no anxiety. I wasn’t fighting anything, wasn’t resisting. I let go and was in the flow of life, the flow of source.

After six days, this experience began to fade, but Marianne was able to access it again in a following consult, where she drew a picture of and described:

a child, in a field of flowers, with sun and stars, feeling a lot lighter, how I want to feel then and now, not that there is no tough stuff, but overall, it is lighter and a feeling of support – nothing to do, just dancing through flowers – nothing to be achieved [see Figure 1 below].

As a side note, illustratively, Marianne mentioned about a year or so later that she was wrestling with the pseudo-legal definition she had been given called



Figure 1. Drawing of a child in a field of flowers by Marianne.

“permanently disabled”, which by the end of our session she was defining as: “I have permanently disabled my old ways of operating; pushing and striving from my head – that no longer serves me”. Her new way of operating, pictured in the image of the child (Figure 1), she described as “I can be different and in flow”. This she linked to a “knowing in the heart”. This is interesting for me – and I have often heard it reported from people I work with – that metaphors help sink a story or image from the head to the heart, and then into the hands (see also Combs and Freedman’s chapter “Facilitating new patterns of thoughts, feelings and behaviors” [1990, p. xix]).

Marianne said that she had benefited and continued to benefit from working with metaphors and images in this way. She also said that she would sometimes write more about them at home, or use these metaphors or writings as the content for meditation, which she said could help to reinforce, strengthen and expand the preferred narrative.

## Metaphor for...

In situations like the above, I am not only engaged in a process of doubly listening (White, 2000, p. 41) but also metaphoric listening. I generally write down most of what clients say, but am especially concerned with: “What am I drawn to? What particular words or expressions have caught my attention? What sorts of images or metaphors have emerged? How have I been transported by reflecting on these words?” (Semeschuk, 2018, p. 33). When listening out for metaphor buried in language, I am interested in how to bring this metaphor from the blind spot to the spotlight, which is akin to the externalising process itself. (In doing so, we are better able to identify the problem narrative [and metaphor] and create distance between it and the client’s identity.) If necessary, I might go as far as to ask questions such as:

- If this problem were a person or a character, what kind of a person or character might they be?
- What colour might it be?
- If it was a form, what form might it take?
- Does it emit a particular sound or have a certain texture?

Primarily, though, I am concerned with “client-generated metaphors ... as the central theme of therapy without prescriptive and interpretive intervention” (Legowski & Brownlee, 2001, p. 19).

As part of this process, I am also listening out for the possibility of deconstructing problematic narratives – of “cracking open discourse” (Semeschuk, 2017, p. 9), and also becoming aware of “disembodied ways of speaking” (White, 1991, p. 27). And I am always listening out for ways of supporting personal agency through a sense of self, sense of personhood, the agentive self and identity. I tend to find that personal agency usually increases in this process when metaphor is involved, whether it be as part of a process of externalisation or of thickening a preferred story – that it is more likely that “new patterns of thoughts, feelings and behaviors” (Combs & Freedman, 1990, p. xix) will develop. In this sense we could also say that metaphor helps to strengthen a “grammar of agency” (White, 1995). Metaphor and imagination can form part of a language of the “agentive self” (White, 1995, p. 143), whether in relation to an externalised problem story, or a preferred alternative narrative.

Metaphors are complex and can contain multiplicities and contradictions. They can express a dominant problem story or a preferred alternative narrative, or even both in the same image. They are as complex as people’s lives – people’s stories. In many ways I am interested in “the use of metaphor in generating solutions that consider a continuum of options which reflects the complexity and depth of many clients’ problem-saturated stories” (Legowski & Brownlee, 2001, p. 19). This sentence calls to mind the image of tree roots underground being as broad and comprehensive as the branches above.

In terms of the image, Wolf argued that “a single picture can never actually represent a narrative but at best ... point to a story” (Wolf, 2005, p. 433). Wolf (2005) also said that the inability of images to represent detailed alternative developments and character’s thought worlds leads to a loss of suspense and eventfulness in verbal narratives (Wolf, 2005, p. 434). While this may be the case from a certain perspective, I would argue that an image or metaphor is a process – often a story – brought to rest at a particular moment of attention or, perhaps, time. That is, an image is a narrative brought to rest or condensed in a particular imagination. In other words, images occur in dynamic relationship with story.

## Resonance and personal agency

“One of the primary considerations is to restore that valued sense of who they are, that preferred sense of identity or personhood ... the ‘sense of myself’” (White, 2004, p. 46). In relation to responses to trauma, Michael White spoke of renewing “positive images of life and identity” (2011, p. 128) in order to revitalise a person’s “language of inner life” (White, 2004, p. 46, quoting James, 1890). This process amounts to a revaluing of responses to trauma, which can lead to what White called “resonance”. This resonance “has the effect of evoking positive images of life and identity that often present to the person in metaphorical and visual forms” (White, 2011, p. 128). White went on to say that these images “have the potential to set off reverberations into the history of the person’s experience of life” (2011, p. 128), which can then lead to an identification of how these reverberations relate to memories that are resonant with these present images. This is perhaps akin to the picture of a rock dropped into a pool, or the way that a sound can *re-sound*:

It is in the linking of episodes of life through history that is provided by these resonances that new connections and patterns of experience are developed, and that unifying themes of life are identified and named through metaphor. This process sponsors the development of an inner world that can be visualized, and a sense of aliveness that displaces a sense of emptiness and deadness. (White, 2011, p. 128)

We could perhaps go so far as to say that this process constitutes an autobiography of the “agentive self” (White, 1995, p. 143) or personal agency, with “sparkling moments connecting with previous sparkling moments ... plotting lived experience through the temporal dimension” (White & Epston, 1990, p. 83). Elsewhere, White spoke of memory systems, including the stream of consciousness, wherein “many aspects of a person’s experiences are organised according to the sort of progressive and associative nonlinear sequencing that is a feature of narrative structure. Imagination and pretence feature strongly in this stream, as does analogy, metaphor and simile” (White, 2004, p. 68). White went on to say that “the stream of consciousness is impinged upon by traumatic memories” (2004, p. 70). In this case, White said that:

life is experienced as just one thing after another, and is invariably recounted to others as a problem-saturated and fragmentary catalogue

of events. This is a recounting of life that lacks vitality and animation – it is flat, dead. The language employed in this recounting is linear and matter-of-fact, and it contains no evidence of any content of an inner personal reality – it is devoid of metaphor, association, and co-ordinating themes that provide for a sense of existence that is ongoing and unfolding; it is devoid of a sense of unity and continuity of self. (2004, p. 70)

However, as was the case with Marianne, “once identified, whatever it is about life and identity to which the person has accorded value provides an orientation for the development of resonance within the therapeutic conversation” (White, 2004, p. 71).

This resurrection is restorative of a sense of personal agency, one that is in harmony with the person’s preferred “sense of myself”. This is the “sense of myself” ... that provides an experience of continuity of personhood through the many episodes of one’s history. (White, 2004, p. 72)

This process, White said, is made possible by this “sense of myself”:

These considerations ... emphasise the importance of the priority given in this work to the reinvigoration and redevelopment of the “sense of myself”. Dissociated memory cannot be re-associated if there is no receiving frame to take this into; if there is no storyline through which can be traced a preferred “sense of myself” through the many episodes of personal history. Once there is progress in the reinvigoration and redevelopment of this “sense of myself”, people can be assisted to imaginatively speculate about how they may have responded to the traumas of their history, and about the foundation of these responses. In this imaginative speculation, people are encouraged to project back, into the history of their lives, what is becoming more richly known about their sentiment of life, and about the practices of living that are associated with this, including their practices of counter-power. (White, 2004, p. 72)

This is connected with a “personal agency that would be in harmony with the persons’ familiar and preferred sense of myself” (White, 2004, p. 71).



## Poetic mirroring

Another way that I have found to be particularly helpful for articulating preferred narratives and inviting the kind of personal agency and resonance outlined above is through the use of what I am calling “poetic mirroring” (Stubley, 2023) (what one of my colleagues has called generative poetics, or what Semeschuk [2017, p. 2] called “rescued speech poems”). This has especially been the case when I have been working with metaphor and imagination in the articulation of dominant problem stories as well as preferred stories in collective narrative practice in social poetry (Stubley, 2023). I would like to touch on a brief example of this in order to point to further possibilities which could continue to be opened up in the field of collective narrative practice.

In early 2018, I was asked to create a poetic summary at the end of a one-day event called Healthy Soils, Healthy Communities, which was exploring regenerative food systems. There were around 100 participants from across sectors – producers, distributors, consumer groups, government representatives (agriculture, education, health), academics, media and others. The organising team was made up of a similarly diverse group of individuals and organisations, including Sustain: the Australian Food Network, Perth Natural Resource Management, Edith Cowan University, the Heart Foundation, Commonland, the Centre for Social Impact at the University of Western Australia, Presencing Institute, Hassell and others.

Throughout the day, multiple methods were used to help smaller groups and the whole room to externalise the dominant problem stories around food through drawing, 3D sculpting and conversations. Many of these methods were metaphoric and imaginative in nature, enabling an externalised image or picture of the dominant problem story or stories. These pictures were then shared with others in the room through walkthroughs or whole-group conversation. The problems related broadly to issues of food production, distribution and consumption. Additionally, the same methods were also used to articulate preferred alternative narratives, which were also shared with others in the room in similar ways.

Participants gave research permission at the start of the morning. I then attempted to listen throughout the day in ways similar to those outlined above. Mostly, I was listening out for particularly lively, resonant language and descriptions of both the externalised problem stories around food, and the preferred alternative

stories. In many instances, I found myself writing down metaphors and images. I wrote these words, expressions and phrases while conducting filmed interviews, as well as during unrecorded one-on-one conversations, lectures, small group work, breaks and whole-group sessions. I also wrote down particularly resonant words and phrases that people wrote on posters, tables and sticky notes. I wrote all these words in a journal, in chronological order.

Towards the end of the event, I looked over the words I had written and tried to see which among them were most resonant and if they wished to come into poetic form, with at least some semblance of rhythm and rhyme, although being mostly free-form.

I then shared the result with two other organisers, edited the piece based on their feedback, and read it out at the end of the event (but not before minor changes based on those who spoke immediately before it was read). The piece, as it appears below (Figure 2) is an unedited version of what was read on the day. I have additionally made the experiment of colour-coding expressions related to problem and preferred narratives (orange for preferred, blue for problem, with dark text for more neutral or both preferred and problematic aspects). This colour-coding is a mere experiment, with, interestingly, the potential for the preferred story to be found within the questions of the externalised problem. Perhaps, though, a whole gradation of colour-coding, rainbow-like, would be needed.

In many ways, the whole piece is a metaphor – be it standing tall on the edge with friends, or the Supreme Court of Food. Within it, various metaphors appear and reinforce many of the themes of the day. Following the reading, I gave the poem to the rest of the organising team. One of the academic researchers connected to the event wrote “this is a wonderful summary of the day that shares the sense of collaboration and urgency of the efforts. I believe a communication strategy should include this” (Ros Sambell, personal communication, March 2018). The piece was then incorporated within the more formal academic write-up and documentation of the day. One of the facilitators later wrote to me and said, “that captured the imagination of the whole day. I can go back and read the poetic piece and remember the essential pieces of the new story that I must carry forward into my work” (Katie Stubley, personal communication, March 2018).

## Problem

## Preferred

### Stand Tall on the Edge, With Friends

Here we stand on the land  
of the first first-nation people.  
What do we hear of its speaking?  
What of the layers of our listening?  
Natural Intelligence.  
What have we made of the  
real estate between our ears?  
Can we read the landscape  
with child's eyes?  
Are we ecologically, socially,  
vertically literate?  
Where is the school of our  
food and land learning?

Maybe it's time to **reset**  
the table, and **sit**  
down to dine at the site  
where **good stories go**  
to grow, and **broken**  
systems go to die.

WTF?  
WTF (Where's the Food)  
WTF (Without the Farmer?)

Maybe it's time to celebrate  
life and cry: Inspiration – return!

We need access to this  
to produce, process, consume  
and learn.

Extra lights on the traffic sign!

Peaches, apples, olives, figs –  
Catch the Durian.  
Me, I'm an avocado man:  
I meet the skin, and punch through  
to the seed within.

But how do I need to be  
to see the new gold in land and  
within my fellow humans?

"There is no greater currency  
on Earth," says Noel Nannup,  
"than our fellow human beings."

Money moves.  
Divest through.  
Human capital financing  
cultivated soils of  
social fields, urban  
and rural together and  
a place for ethics at the table.

I am water sensitive  
and I am able  
to let agri-culture  
move my hands  
and those of my fellow humans.

Maybe, to side step  
this **second silent spring**  
I need to observe, observe, observe,  
then grow silent within,  
till a sweet and juicy future  
takes my hands and  
makes of them something  
worthy of yours.  
No **second silent spring**,  
no second thought.

The future moves,  
and moves in us.  
I go with it – with you –  
to other markets  
on the other  
side of this underground  
revolution – where the  
law we answer to  
is the land's  
and our own networked  
peak body of the  
Supreme Court of Food.

Figure 2. "Stand tall on the edge, with friends": poem by author

This was the first time I had attempted collective work in this way. On other occasions since then, I have also posted the poetic mirroring document online in a co-editable form so that participants can make alterations or additions if they wish; additionally, they are also encouraged to make their own contributions of completely different poems. On other occasions I have also shared poetic mirroring while working alongside generative scribes who capture day-long or multi-day events in visual diagrams and symbols. I have also worked alongside other note-takers (poets), as well as other traditional artists, in order to capture as much as possible the externalised problem story and the preferred alternative narrative during collective processes, and then share that back at the end of the event (or even during individual days within longer events).

It would seem that the more thick and full the metaphors and images are, the more externalised from one's own identity the problem story can become (and, in an interesting way, the more malleable), and the more thick, full and resonant (also throughout history) the alternative, preferred narrative can grow. If this is mirrored back from multiple perspectives, through multiple artistic disciplines, then individuals and collectives can engage in this process in multiple ways.

## Gallery of picture pitfalls

Operations of power and privilege exist throughout all my work. I attempt to be as mindful of these operations as I can while trying to implement practices of accountability wherever possible. In this direction I'd like to share here some operations of power and privilege as I experience them in specific relation to working with metaphors and pictures, either in individual therapy or as part of collective processes. I have documented these in relation to Marianne's story above to offer an example, but the same or similar pitfalls can be encountered when working with collective processes, including poetic mirroring and other methods. I have named these to fine-tune my practice.

### **Picture colonisation**

– if Marianne had no interest in using pictures,  
and I imposed this

### **Picture theft**

– taking Marianne's pictures or metaphors and  
making them my own

### **Painting over**

– painting over Marianne's pictures with  
my own pictures

### **Finishing the picture**

- taking Marianne’s original picture and “thickening” it for her

### **Continuing the picture or commencing a preferred picture**

- continuing the externalised problem picture towards a preferred imagination, or else simply starting on a preferred imagination

### **Exhibiting the drafts**

- if I were to become very attached or focused on a particular picture, word or phrase that had no relevance, importance or meaning for Marianne, and still continued using this picture, word or phrase as the dialogue continued

### **Getting stuck on the first picture**

- this is perhaps akin to going to an exhibition and only looking at the first image (e.g. fibromyalgia), when there are a whole lot of other pictures in the gallery

### **Attending blind**

- this involves not seeing or hearing any of the pictures that a client is mentioning because I am not listening out for them

### **Reworking the finished image**

- this belongs more to the post-session phase, in which the practitioner can be tempted to rework the words, phrases and images to suit some other method of appraisal, including literary.

## **Conclusion**

Engaging in narrative practices – especially those of externalising, double-listening and alternative-story development – has made much of my existing work much stronger. It has also given a more methodological framework and broadening of application for my use of metaphor and imagination. At the same time, I have found that the use of metaphor and imagination in my individual and collective practices has helped make more tangible both the experience of the externalised problem narrative, as well as the preferred alternative narrative in the ways outlined above. At all times, however, I need to be mindful of the operations of power and privilege, as touched on in the Gallery of Picture Pitfalls. In this direction, one of my colleagues, working with gang members in Los Angeles, has often articulated the following: “How do I need to be in order for you to be free?” (Orland Bishop, personal

communication, 2010 and thereafter). While different elements of this sentence, including the concept of freedom, might be open for interpretation, something of the spirit of this question helps to guide me in my work, including my narrative work with imagination and metaphor. I experience this question as being generative of accountability to a personal sense of agency and the agentive self – both mine and others’. (For an interesting discussion on reconciling Foucauldian notions of the constituted subject with narrative ideas of the agentive subject [and, in a way, freedom], see Guilfoyle, 2012.)

The etymology of agency is “abstract noun from Latin *agentem* (nominative *agens*) ‘effective, powerful,’ present participle of *agere* ‘to set in motion, drive forward; to do, perform,’ figuratively ‘incite to action; keep in movement’ (from PIE [Proto-Indo-European] root \*ag – ‘to drive, draw out or forth, move’)” (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.).

It is this personal sense of agency – this “sense of personhood” (White, 2004, p. 46), “sense of myself” (White, 2004, p. 46), “continuity of self” (White, 2004, p. 70), or “agentive self” (White, 1995, p. 143), in the context of socially constituted and constructed lives – that I continually attempt to make a space or invitation for in my listening and in my speaking. As part of this, I continue to listen out for metaphors that enable a more comprehensive externalisation of problem narratives, as well as description of preferred narratives. It is my experience that a sense of agency is involved in (and develops through) both the externalisation of problem narratives and the articulation of preferred alternative narratives. That is, personal agency – or we could say the agentive self – is active and grows more active in the creation of imaginations and metaphors in narrative work. It is the agentive self, I believe, that can be involved in (and grow from) the transferring over or across – which can engage in the carrying or bearing of one concept in relation to another in meaning creation. It is in service of this process as it exists for individuals and collectives within socially constituted and constructed lives that I do my work. And I am grateful to all those I work with, the spirit of the time within which I work, and the different Countries I work on – including Noongar Country – for the opportunity to be of service in such ways as this.

## **Note**

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I use the terms “metaphor”, “picture”, “image” and “imagination” interchangeably. Imagination is related to *imaginari* – to “form an image of, represent” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2002)

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