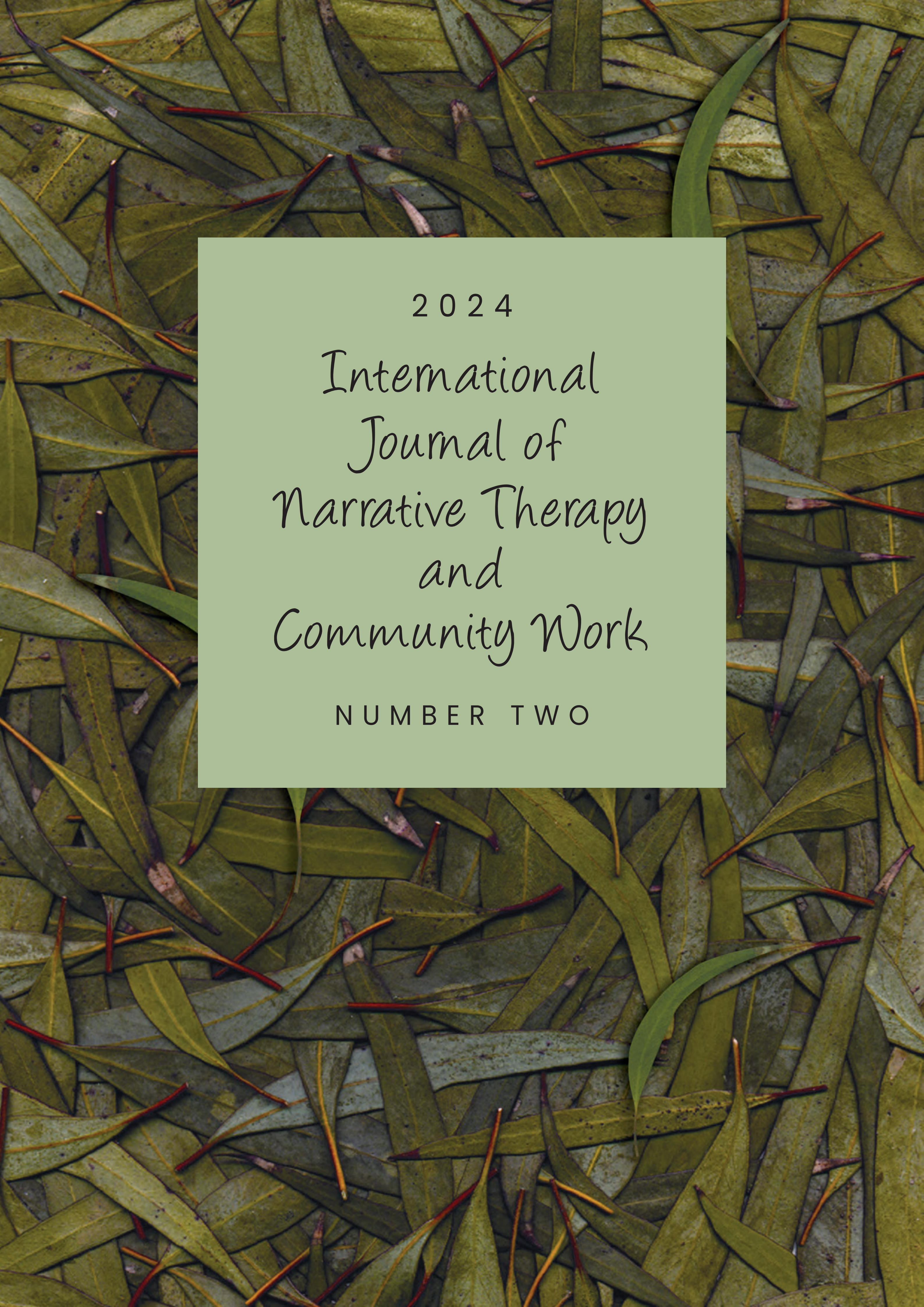

2024

International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work

NUMBER TWO

Editorial

Dear Reader

This issue is a compelling offering of peer-reviewed articles, audio recordings, videos, reviews and multimedia from narrative practitioners in Nepal, Armenia, Hong Kong, China, Chile, Australia, the UK and the USA. There is a diversity of themes that sparkle with everyday acts of resistance, a call for epistemic justice and communities as sites of healing.

Yasna Mancilla Monsalve engages us in accounts of how she and others in her community responded to anti-lesbian hate crime in Chile using collective narrative practice, scraps of fabric and fanzines as ways to weave together histories and generate visibility as forms of activism. We're delighted that this paper is the first for *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work* to be published in two languages – English and Spanish.

Hamilton Kennedy highlights the significance of seeking epistemic justice for the most unusual of stories – those sometimes characterised as delusions. Hamilton reflects on how we can recognise "individuals as knowers, ensuring they are heard fairly … supporting them in making sense of their experiences" and acknowledging them as experts on their own lives.

Anne-lise Ah-Fat writes about oral histories as an antidote to the positioning of the therapist as an expert while working with grief and death within queer, trans and Black, Indigenous and people of colour communities. Their stories of resistance create an archive based in local knowledges and highlighting the lives of those who are silenced or erased.

Through the metaphor of a spider's web, peer worker and narrative therapist Frankie Hanman-Siegersma describes how friendship responses to mental health crises can increase community connectedness and local support networks and offer ways beyond medicalised responses to distress.

Will Sherwin's account of the "Read Everything Michael White Published Project" might speak for many of us when he writes: "I don't see narrative therapy as a container that I try hard to stay within. I don't hold it as a big long list of 'don't do these things, and don't use these words' that feels tight and confining. Instead, I see it as an inspiring ethics-based therapy with lots of creative ideas that, compared with what I was doing before, provides me with a foundation to see more possibilities and enquire more interestingly into the worlds of others."

“Body as a Picture Book” by Paul Graham brings us stories of how tattoos can be powerful statements and can invite narrative conversations about survival, recording history, defying expectations, expressing pride in culture, and reclaiming ownership of our own bodies. Jacob Tumanko’s response to this paper brings our attention to Māori traditions in which “each and every line within my tā moko (tattoo) has meaning, and it is this meaning that makes my identity visible … tattoos [can be] forms of resistance and documentation”.

Alicia Bruzek questions dominant ideas that pathologise and push negative identity conclusions with the label of borderline personality disorder , which can leave people “exhausted by the pressure to conform or fit the mould”. She offers ways we can honour people’s experiences to expand territories of identity. Tiffany Sostar responds to this paper with a tender appeal: “The main thing I hope for in this small response paper, as you maybe can tell, is more! More narrative engagement with this community that I love so much, more engagement with the social and political contexts of borderline lives, more solidarity to examine and stand against unjust discourses and the harm they cause.”

Manja Visschedijk reviews *Reframing trauma through social justice: Resisting the politics of mainstream trauma discourse* edited by Catrina Brown. Manja highlights the book’s call: “to resist neoliberal invitations to reduce persons affected by trauma into measurable KPIs and economic units of service provision; to resist the truth claims of universalising, ‘evidence-based’ treatments; and to resist attempts at erasing the richness of diverse worldviews into narrow, pathologising, one-size-fits-all approaches, adopting instead a spirited championing of many, diverse approaches to promoting collective wellbeing and ever-changing expressions of individual freedoms.”

Trans bodies, trans selves: A resource by and for transgender communities, edited by Laura Erickson-Schroth (2nd edition), is reviewed by Tiffany Sostar. The book presents a wide-ranging view of trans and gender-expansive experience. Among multiple themes, the review brings our attention to “whether it is possible to connect the projects of feminism to notions of a multiplicity of genders; to gender-diversity; to multiple ways to become gendered or sexed; to freedom of gender-expression; to gender rights”.

There are two featured videos. Wenjia Li explores fascinating stories that are inspired by Chinese mythical animals as metaphors in narrative practice (in Mandarin with English subtitles). This video documents how, through the use of local metaphors, people can resist alienation and build connections with the wisdom and experience of Chinese culture, history and ancestry. Jaya Luintel and Biju Kandel invite us to The Story Kitchen, which has ignited and built courage for justice in Nepal with women survivors of armed conflict. Again, it uses local metaphors to navigate the identity shift from survivors to storytellers through collective healing and redefining justice.

In an audio practice note (in English and Cantonese), Hong Konger Jack Chiu engages us in an aching question that every immigrant might ask themselves sometimes: “What is life away from home?” Through inviting people to gather together as if to warm each other with their support and acknowledgement, Jack has documented the stories of 39 families who have emigrated from Hong Kong or are considering doing so.

An audio recording of a paper from the journal's archives, "Poststructuralism and therapy – what's it all about?", juxtaposes the intellectual struggle we may face as we grapple with poststructuralist ideas and yet the excitement and the new possibilities they bring for creative forms of listening and working with people.

The photo essay by Ani Margaryan, Sara Portnoy and Heghine Poghosyan is a rich documentation of narrative practice drawing on Armenian "revivalist" experiences. The Armenian people have a long history of survival and reviving from trauma – the genocide, a devastating earthquake and a recent conflict with a neighbouring country. The piece "'Still standing': Armenian revivalism and narrative practice – a story of a unique initiative" highlights how narrative practices can support large-scale community programs that acknowledge hardships that people are continuing to face, make space for stories and histories of survival, and start imagining the continuation and sustenance of dreams for their lives ahead.

As I immersed myself in the profound ideas and practices in this issue, Michael White's words kept echoing in my mind:

> Is this work better defined as a world-view? Perhaps, but even this is not enough. Perhaps it's an epistemology, a philosophy, a personal commitment a politics, an ethics, a practice, a life, and so on. (White, 1995, p. 37)

In solidarity
Shelja Sen
New Delhi, India.

Reference

White, M. (1995). The narrative perspective in therapy (D. L. Bubenzer, J. D. West, & S. R. Boughner, interviewers). In M. White (Ed.), *Re-authoring Lives: Interviews and Essays* (pp. 11–40). Dulwich Centre Publications.

ABOUT THE EDITOR

Shelja Sen is narrative therapist, writer and co-founder of Children First, New Delhi. Her latest book is Reclaim Your Life *and she is also a columnist with a national newspaper,* Indian Express*. Shelja has worked as a narrative practitioner and teacher for over 20 years in various contexts in the UK and India. She is an international faculty member at Dulwich Centre Foundation, Adelaide, and a clinical tutor at The University of Melbourne, Australia. Shelja is a curator of the unique skills, expertise and know-how of the children, young people and families she has the honour of working with, and is committed to building innovative, culturally aligned, ethical practices using a feminist intersectional lens.*

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Author pronouns: she/her

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We exist and resist as woven patches:

Collective narrative practices in an activist context challenging and responding to an anti-lesbian hate crime

by Yasna Mancilla Monsalve

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Abstract

This article describes a participatory process in which a group of feminist, lesbian feminist and dissident activists came together to respond therapeutically to the impacts of anti-lesbian hatred. The therapeutic context was created gradually with the deployment of a set of metaphors related to textile art, inspired by the re-authoring conversations proposed by Michael White. The process included the creation of a collective document that acknowledges and honours the participants' wisdom, knowledge and particular ways of responding to anti-lesbian hatred. This work was embodied in three different forms: a patchwork quilt, a video and a fanzine. Collectivised through a definitional ceremony, these forms embraced manual-artistic creation and the materiality of fabric as valued means of expression, beyond the limits of the verbal. This work contributed to the visibility, externalisation and politicisation of acts of injustice, acknowledging forms of resistance, care and protest. The process invited us to reflect on the importance of collectivisation, fluidity and flexibility in structuring the therapeutic space, and allowed us to question the roles of therapist and activist as predefined identities.

Key words: lesbian; hate crime; homophobia; collective narrative practice; activism; re-authoring; metaphor; textile art; collective document; definitional ceremony

Mancilla Monsalve, Y. (2024). We exist and resist as woven patches: Collective narrative practices in an activist context challenging and responding to an anti-lesbian hate crime (M. Shearer, Trans.). *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (2). 2–19. https://doi.org/10.4320/YTDZ5796

Author pronouns: she/they

I am an activist, lesbian, feminist and dissident. Belonging to this community, and living in a patriarchal culture in defiance of the dominant order, entails facing violence and marginalisation. Our dissident bodies represent a radical opposition to the political regime of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980), which operates as a system of oppression in relationship with other oppressive systems, such as race and class.

The lesbian and dissident movements emerged in the Western world in the late 1960s in response to patriarchal violence, and developed in close relationship with other movements such as the second wave of feminism and the gay liberation movement, the latter gaining momentum after the Stonewall uprising (Falquet, 2006). At the same time, in predominantly white countries and also in Abya Yala[1], precedents of lesbian feminism were emerging. This movement, based on separatist lesbianism, approaches relationships between women from an anti-colonial, anti-capitalist and anti-racist perspective (Velázquez, 2021). It takes an intersectional view, analysing sex, race, class and sexuality as fundamental political and theoretical categories to understand the subordination of women and lesbians in specific historical contexts.

In the last decade, in Chile and other regions of Abya Yala, lesbian feminist activists have mobilised the concept of anti-lesbian hatred to make visible the structural and systematic violence directed specifically towards lesbian identities.[2] Anti-lesbian hate crimes or lesbicides differ from femicide in that they do not usually involve domestic or family elements. These acts constitute hegemonic attempts at annihilation, motivated by hatred and the rejection of lesbian women. It is important to highlight that lesbicide, being motivated by hatred, is a specific type of femicide. However, it is crucial to keep in mind that not all femicides are lesbicides (Peres, Soares, & Días, 2018).

For this text I decided not to use the term “lesbophobia”, as it suggests personal attitudes rooted in an internal psychological issue, reducing crimes targeted at lesbians by failing to consider the complex political, social and historical framework that has perpetuated the marginalisation and stigmatisation of lesbian identities. This directly threatens our lives and the freedom to experience relationships and sovereignty over our bodies in various ways. Therefore, beyond the term itself, anti-lesbian hatred is an instrument of repression and correction. It manifests through hate speech and corrective practices, and is embodied in harassment, beatings, kidnappings, torture, sexual assaults and lesbicides. In Chile, the inland part of the Valparaiso region is considered a “red zone” for lesbians and sex-gender dissidents, and several cases of murder motivated by anti-lesbian hatred have been reported here. In these areas, discrimination and anti-lesbian hatred continue to be hidden by the hegemonic criminal “justice” system. This increases the precarity of lesbian existence and is a manifestation of necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003) towards bodies considered non-productive for capitalism.

The beginning of our story

We are not all here, Nicole is missing

Our history as a collective is interwoven with a call for justice for the lesbicide of Nicole Saavedra Bahamondes. Nicole was from a town called El Melon.[3] *Machismo* and heteronormativity are prevalent in this small town, and lesbian and dissident visibility is severely condemned by the community. In this context, Nicole faced the challenges of living as a woman, lesbian and *camiona*[4], refusing to submit her existence to patriarchal domination. She chose to embrace her lesbianism and gender expression, challenging stereotypes of femininity. Nicole confronted society with strength and determination, facing the world exactly as she was. Her very existence was an act of resistance. On 18 of June 2016, Nicole boarded a bus to return home. She was abducted and killed by the driver in an anti-lesbian hate crime. Her family, friends and acquaintances searched relentlessly for her. Her body was found on 25 June 2016.

This story had a profound impact on our lesbian and dissident community. Sara Ahmed (2004) has invited us to consider the damage inflicted on the bodies of oppressed groups as not only affecting a person’s epidermal surface but also the skin of a community. Thus, violence was inflicted not only on Nicole’s body but also on the fabric of a community that was being torn apart.

Faced with the negligence of the judicial system in addressing this crime, Nicole’s family summoned feminist, lesbian feminist and dissident activists who rallied around the Justice for Nicole Movement. The Justice for Nicole Movement was created with the goal of solving Nicole’s murder and establishing it as a reference to raise awareness of anti-lesbian hate crimes, promote the creation of self-defence networks, mutual aid and construction of community dynamics, and lesbian feminist networks that impact society. The movement held actions throughout Chile and in other parts of the world to demand justice. As an activist, lesbian, feminist and dissident, I joined this large network. The pursuit of legal justice for Nicole dragged on for five years due to continued negligence and inaction by the state and judicial system.

The proposal: Embracing the spirit of collective narrative practice

I turned to collective narrative practice as an opportunity to continue to enrich the broad fabric of the Justice for Nicole Movement by incorporating a therapeutic/activist perspective that would allow us to create safe spaces where we could talk and reflect on our struggle and the challenges we faced during these five years of activism. My goal was to honour our acts of resistance and to continue to build collective ways to contribute to activism. To achieve this, I needed to find a practice that would really resonate with our collective experience. I came up with the idea of creating a collective narrative practice that incorporated textile art, specifically the technique of joining fabric pieces into a patchwork.

This textile metaphor, rooted in Abya Yala’s feminist and lesbian feminist movements, reveals profound connections with our practices of bringing fragments together. Just as scraps of fabric can be sewn together to create a larger, more meaningful piece, we have stitched together our histories, resistances and struggles to form a collective narrative of resistance and emancipation. The practice of piecing scraps together is not only culturally appropriate in Abya Yala, it is also highly resonant with the feminist and lesbian feminist movements in these regions, in which a diversity of experiences and voices intertwine to create a fabric of community and resistance.

I also wanted to include in my proposal a form of collective documentation that would be culturally responsive to this context. The fanzine emerged as a powerful tool that could be adapted to local practices of knowledge production and distribution, allowing our stories to be told authentically and without censorship. Abya Yala’s feminist and lesbian feminist movements have embraced the fanzine as a networking or weaving tool that can be subversive and emancipatory. Fanzines are manifestations of cultural resistance that defy the norms imposed by patriarchy and colonialism, as well as being tools for visibility and agency.

This proposal drew on existing collective narrative practices and expanded their horizons, diversifying them and integrating them into the particular cultural, social and political context of the lesbian feminist and dissident movement in this region. The adaption of collective narrative practice to the cultural context of Abya Yala contributed to recognising, integrating and uplifting the local traditions and practices commonly employed in the feminist and lesbian feminist movements, such as textile art, the metaphor of weaving and the fanzine.

Honouring stories of resistance in the face of an anti-lesbian hate crime

Why is it important for our dissident community to honour the stories of our challenges and responses to an anti-lesbian hate crime?

David Denborough (2008) wrote that we choose paths of action based on our knowledge and skills to face the problems in our lives. However, stories of trauma and injustice are often remembered more clearly than other narratives, leaving stories of resistance in the shadows. Using methodologies that aim to make visible and share the skills and knowledge implicit in people’s responses and acts of resistance, and linking these to a local cultural context, can strengthen these initiatives and enable future actions, both for ourselves and for others (Denborough, 2008).

In addition, Denborough has argued that it is possible to convene rituals and ceremonies that reinforce collective self-definitions, allowing the skills and knowledge of groups of people affected by social problems to benefit others in similar situations. These practices can therefore contribute to local social movement and to the sustainability of activist work (Denborough, 2008).

The maps of narrative practice (White, 2007) offer us a travel guide, which we can adapt to fit our geographies, conditions and worldviews.

Bearing in mind the idea of “the copying that originates” (White, 1989, p. 38), the process was assisted by metaphors for working with groups and communities, such as the Tree of Life (Ncube, 2006), and the work of the Mt Elgon Self-Help community, as described in *Raising our heads above the clouds: The use of narrative practices to motivate social action and economic development* (Denborough, 2006).

Calling the meeting: The search for scraps

When planning the call for our first meeting, I remembered Enne, an activist and dissident whom I had met during the Justice for Nicole Movement. I recalled our stories of struggle, calling for justice in activist spaces. We met again one summer afternoon in December 2019. I shared with her the initial ideas for this project and invited her to participate.

The proposal to create a therapeutic space through textile art and fanzines in response to our five years of activism resonated with Enne, and they[5] took on the task of contacting other activists from the Justice for Nicole Movement. A few days later, Enne informed me that three people were interested in joining: Chio, Bego and Aloe. The network further expanded thanks to Chio, who in turn invited Maria and Karen.[6]

At our first meeting, I shared the three initial aspects of the proposal:

1. a therapeutic space to discuss the long and challenging path of seeking justice
2. the creation of a textile work using a "patchwork" technique
3. the creation of a collective document in fanzine format.

The group expressed interest in participating and suggested that we start a WhatsApp group to facilitate communication and organisation. Chio took charge of creating the Patchwork Project group. Aloe offered to take on the task of photographically documenting the therapeutic process.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic forced us to postpone the project for a year. However, the WhatsApp group remained active. We exchanged greetings, information and commemorative words on dates that were significant for the group.

In March 2021 we resumed the project. I messaged the WhatsApp group to invite everyone to meet. Maria communicated her need to be fully involved in the judicial process for Nicole, and for this reason decided to withdraw from the project, as did Karen.

Chio proposed that we continue to weave this network and extended the invitation to Lore, Amapola and Hortensia, activists from the Nicole Saavedra Bahamondes Feminist Self-Education School.[7] We held virtual meetings in which, as well as discussing the project, I proposed a collective analysis of the problem.

In our opinion, the rise of different expressions and mechanisms of anti-lesbian hatred stems from the influence of patriarchal ideas in the contexts in which they occur. In rural areas of Chile, lesbians and gender dissidents coexist with invisibility, discrimination and violence:

> There is silencing of these issues where people do not know what an anti-lesbian hate crime is, we have to fight every day to break these barriers. (Hortensia)
>
> Being a woman, a lesbian and *camiona* is like a snowball that gets bigger, like the violence that surrounds it. (Chio)

Co-research methodology and collective narrative practice

In this process, I adopted a co-research orientation aligned with the methodology of collective narrative practice, embracing a broad and collaborative scope. More than a research topic, this story traverses my dissident existence. Therefore, I position myself from an irrevocable place of vital resistance and shared political love, inevitably involving both my identity as a co-researcher and therapist and my identities as an activist, lesbian, dissident and so many others that have been flung into this therapeutic–activist process.

In my approach to assuming the role of a narrative practitioner, and from my influential position, I made several proposals to the group as the process developed. Throughout our activities, I took on the role of planning questions that were offered to the group as a guide each session. In narrative conversations, it is usually the therapist who asks the questions and takes notes. In this work, I expanded and dispersed the position of therapist, supporting the autonomy of other collective members by collectivising the roles of posing questions, sharing responses and taking notes. In narrative practice there is an important emphasis on the spoken word (Denborough, 2008); however, in this work, the asking of questions during conversations unfolded differently. My decision to join as a participant meant not maintaining an expert position in asking questions. Instead, after offering my questions to the collective, I joined in the conversations and shared reflections in my own evolving roles as a participant and activist.

Creating our therapeutic space

4 June 2021

A few days before starting our work together, I reached out to the collective through our WhatsApp group and suggested that people bring to the first session a piece of cloth or an item of clothing they no longer used. This would begin to create the framework for the unfolding metaphorical work. I also invited them to bring images or personal objects to begin creating the therapeutic space from the collective’s contributions.

We met in hybrid mode, both online and in person. Aloe, Enne and Amapola attended in person, bringing offerings. We began to create the therapeutic space with meaningful objects, images, incense, candles and crystals, along with a woodcut print titled “Come back to you”.[8] Lore, Hortensia, Chio and Bego joined virtually, and shared their favourite images to include them in the space.

I had prepared some questions inspired by Michael White’s (2007) re-authoring conversations map:

- Do you remember the history of that piece of cloth or garment? What meaning and/or importance does this fabric have in your life?
- What does the reuse and recycling of clothes or other things mean to you? Who was the first person you saw reusing or recycling? Do you remember that moment? What is the importance of reuse and recycling in your life?
- What do you know about sewing? How did you learn about sewing? What sewing stories do you remember? How important is sewing in your life? Who was the first person you saw sewing or engaging in a similar activity?
- What images does the practice of joining scraps or creating a patchwork bring up for you? What do you know about the practice of making patchwork? Does it have any meaning in your life? Do you remember any stories about this practice?
- Are you familiar with fanzines? What meaning do they have in your life? How did you find out about them? What was the first fanzine you read? Do you remember any topics you read about that were important to you? Do you have stories about fanzines?

Figure 1. Creating our therapeutic space. Photographs by Aloe, 2021.

To start the conversation, and in order to facilitate communication between virtual and face-to-face participants, I proposed that we split into three small rotating groups to address each topic.

At the end of each topic, I invited the group to come together and collectively share our reflections. We recorded our findings on a flip chart.

Figure 2. Personal and collective meanings. Photograph by Yas, 2021.

Textiles

In the conversation, we honoured the stories of the fabrics and old garments, and their meanings and importance in our lives:

> This piece of cloth for me has a connection to life and death. (Enne)
>
> I have had this jumper for more than 10 years, it is my teacher jumper ... I like the idea that it can transform, it has so much history ... (Chio)

Other histories related to clothes emerged, including clotes that had been inherited and passed down between generations:

> I would always inherit my siblings' clothes ... we were always inadvertently recycling in our family. (Lore)
>
> I wore my cousins', sisters' clothes ... things of my mum's. They still hold value, even if they are faded. (Hortensia)

We remembered that reusing clothes was an ingrained practice in our families. This was ancestral knowledge for survival. We honoured the trades of sewing, weaving and repair, which have deep roots in our history and identities, passed down between generations as ancestral traditions. These trades are not only forms of economic sustenance but also expressions of cultural identity and resistance to the capitalist system. Through these practices we preserve ancestral knowledge, and promote self-reliance, community and the valuing of local resources over industrial exploitation:

> Reusing clothes was standard practice in families, as survival, because there was no money to buy clothes. Before it was common for the women of the family who knitted to pull apart a knitted sweater or items that were now too small, make a ball of yarn and then knit something new ... a sweater, scarves. (Hortensia)
>
> My grandmother is a seamstress, and the sewing machine was a gift from her, it was an exciting moment ... now sewing is my main source of income. Sewing allows me to reinvent myself, to keep the fire of creativity alive. It is a family knowledge. I like to transform clothes, it is part of my life, of my ancestors ... sewing allows me to create, repair things, fix things that are important to people, help people in their existences and diversities ... it is a way of surviving in community. (Enne)

To continue with the necessary contextualisation for the development of metaphorical work, we explored our knowledge associated with the patchwork technique:

> When I lived in Peñalolén, I met the *arpilleristas* of Lo Hermida ... pieces of recycled fabric with a message ... I associate patchwork with *arpillera*[9]; it is a closer concept ... patchwork is more foreign, more gringo, but I know it has to do with joining pieces together with sewing and recycled fabric. I like the idea of doing it and through that remembering everything that these years of fighting for Nicole have involved. (Hortensia)

In the context of this conversation, the collective proposed replacing the term patchwork to describe our practice. We saw this as part of a broader linguistic decolonisation effort, which acquires special relevance in a historically colonised context such as ours. For this reason, we decided to call this practice *unión de retazos*, meaning "joining pieces together" or "a union of scraps".

Fanzines

As we explored the meanings around fanzines, we defined them as "books of resistance" in constant motion:

> The first fanzine I ever held was lent to me, and when I finished reading it, it said "pass it on". For me, a fanzine, is a history book. They are a form of resistance that unites us in our lives and allows us to share knowledge, to resist intellectual property in which knowledge is only for some. (Enne)
>
> I discovered fanzines at the same time as discovering lesbian feminism, because 10 years ago, they were the only way to read alternative things ... counterculture, animal liberation, recipes ... I like that the transfer is between people, it is more accessible ... The first ones I read were about lesbian feminism, medicinal plants ... I remember that a friend made a fanzine that reclaimed madness. (Chio)

Getting ready to sew!

18 June 2021

To continue generating context for the unfolding of our textile metaphors, and at the same time continue creating the therapeutic space, I proposed starting our conversation with the following questions:

- How do we prepare when we're getting ready to sew?
- What might I need for this sewing experience?

These questions led us to recall favourite stories from times when we had undertaken sewing practices. They invited us to bring this knowledge into the present and make it available for this experience.

Next, I suggested that we each create a personal sewing kit. This metaphor contributed to continuing to build the space collaboratively and in a way that was resonant with the group, expanding the possibilities of contributing to the creation of the metaphorical work and the transformation of the therapeutic space.

In the personal sewing kit, we can include:

- sewing implements
- special insights and stories about how they were learnt
- significant rituals or symbols
- anything you might need for this sewing experience.

Figure 3. Preparing to sew. Photographs by Aloe, 2021.

After inviting the group to share our personal sewing kits collectively, we outlined a route towards the construction of a great collective sewing basket.

Amapola's sewing kit: *thread, wool, thread cutter, stories of women who sewed for me, my grandmother, my mother. Overview of sewing in the women of my family, Nicole's altar, connection with nature, the sea, needles to lead the way, patience, calmness, tranquility.*

Enne's sewing kit: may we always have the initiating fire, the "Vuelve a ti" woodcut print, courage, empathy, tolerance. Creating collectively, the desire to be open to experimenting, belief in oneself, being open to frustration, changing the structures, always renewing oneself, transformation. Redefining death as part of our lives, memories of my ancestors.

Chio's sewing kit: *the "vuelve a ti" woodcut print, non-human (animal) companions (Sam and Neo), a sincere look, words with meaning, courage, respect, heartbeats, a safety pin, water, wind, forest, stars, thread to stitch up wounds, thread that sutures, this story is a wound that we have been healing, murals, songs, documentaries are born from this wound.*

Aloe's sewing kit: *white candles, the "Vuelve a ti" woodcut print, tea – in my family we always had tea at our gatherings. Scissors to cut through injustice. Sunset. A needle that carries the thread to heal.*

Lore's sewing kit: *pieces of resistance, pieces of hope, love and rebellion, tenderness, joy, humour. Sewn with the thread of affection and care. Fire, Nicole's altar, creativity, scissors to cut down the patriarchy, a special button that demands justice and revenge for Nicole and for everyone, desire to make music, a piece of my garden.*

Yas's sewing kit: solving things with what you have on hand. Being open, first and foremost. Sunset, the sea, the forest. Patience. Threads that support and resist.

We collectively defined the tools and metaphors that we wanted to include in the collective sewing basket, leaving open the possibility of adding new elements at any time. We used a flip chart to record group notes.

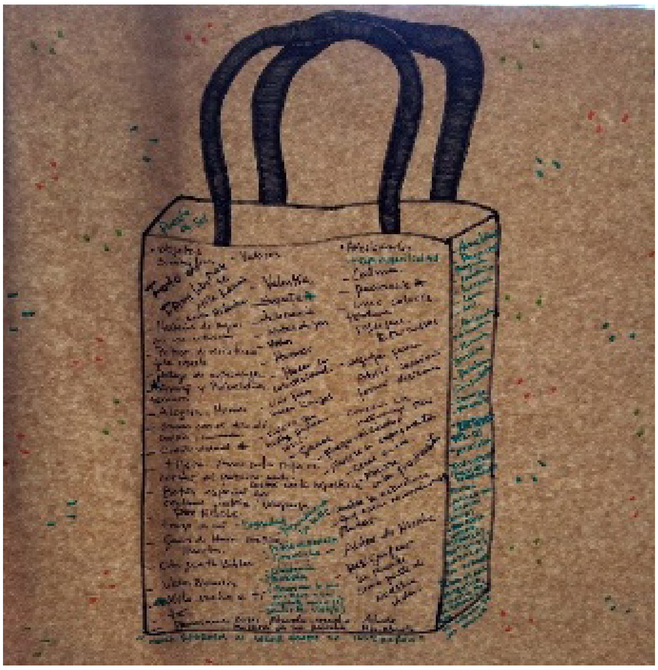


Figure 4. Collective sewing basket creation process. Photograph by Yas, 2021.

The great sewing basket and an encounter with the dragon

2 July 2021

For this session, the collective decided to relocate to an activist space that was highly symbolic for the group: the Nicole Saavedra Bahamondes Feminist Self-Education School. We all met face-to-face. We decided to set up outdoors so we could enjoy the sun, the sea view, and the breeze. We were greeted by a host who kept the fire – the dragon[10] – burning throughout the day.

Figure 5. The dragon. Photograph by Yas, 2021.

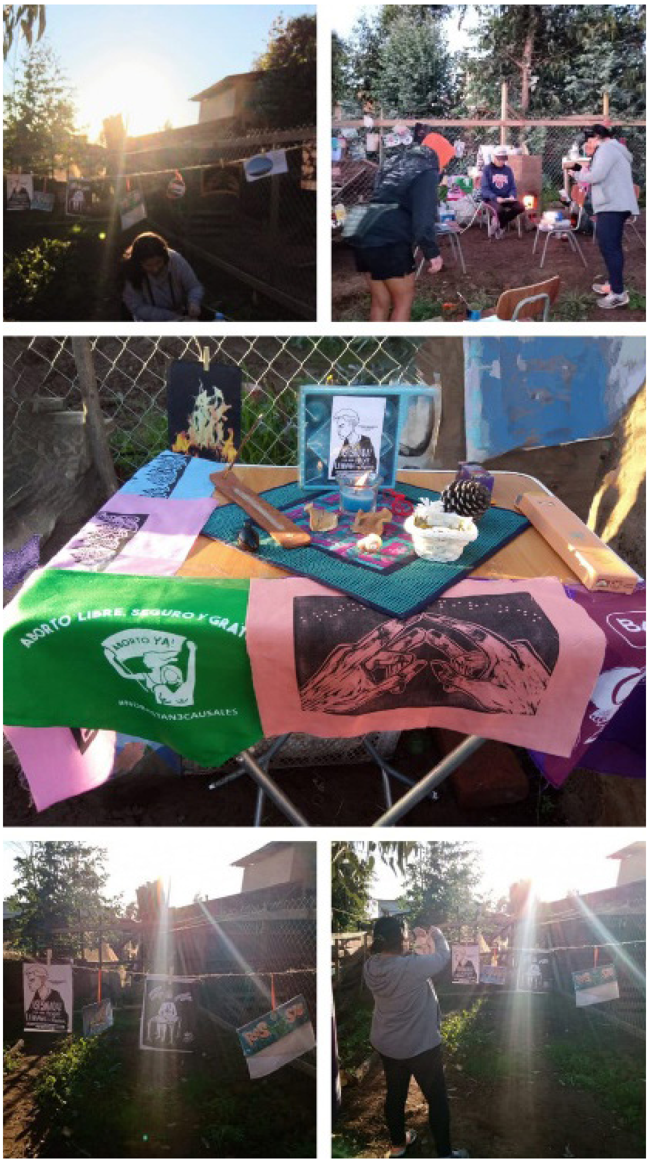


Figure 6. *The great sewing basket and an encounter with the dragon. Photographs by Aloe and Yas, 2021.*

We continued to compile an inventory of the set of metaphors in our collective sewing basket. I planned some questions that guided the beginning of the conversation:

Scrap metaphor

- What skills, values, and pieces of knowledge would you like to bring to the table? How did you learn them?

Wool and weaving metaphors

- What skills, values or knowledge were once woven that I now want to unweave because they no longer make sense to me?
- What skills, values or knowledges do I want to unweave, weave or reweave?

The metaphors of patches of rebellion, scraps of resistance and fragments of hope led us to identify and honour some of our underutilised, hidden or undervalued values: ancient, old-fashioned and faded knowledge. These metaphors provided a basis for identifying subjugated knowledges. They invited us to identify aspects of our lives that go beyond single-storied accounts, and that resist the norms and expectations of dominant discourses (White & Epston, 1990). This knowledge included:

> That linking of the intimate and the political, of the personal and the collective, feeling pierced by this fight ... the ability to be attentive to deeply personal processes ... because this fight is so strong, with marches and creating awareness, but also this subtle way of accompanying life and pain ... humanising the fight, listening, feeling that behind this fight there is profound human suffering. (Lore)

> Knowing how to take care of oneself. Knowing when it is time to stop, to channel the energy. It is okay to take a break – that is not within the political ideal, and that also makes me feel that I am failing in the fight ... trusting the pack ... I hold back to give it my all later, pacing myself. Deconstructing the idea that to fight, one must be a martyr. There can be a handoff to someone else. (Enne)

To further explore the textile metaphor, we drew on the knowledge of our ancestors, who wove, unwove and rewove. We explored skills and knowledge that were once woven and that we want to unweave today, and reweave again. This conversation led us to a process of deconstruction of dominant discourses and exploration of preferred stories.

> Something that was tightly woven and that I want to undo and weave again is language. I want to weave an inclusive language ... to unweave the binary language imposed by the RAE[11] and incorporate all experiences. There are many experiences that have been ignored. (Aloe)

We closed this meeting with an enjoyable conversation by the fire. The dragon’s flames danced with the cadence of the sea breeze. The heat embraced us, sheltered us.

Completing the great sewing basket and threading our needles

16 July 2021

A collective sewing basket was created using recycled materials – an unused cardboard box, scraps of paper and plastic bags, among other things – to continue honouring recycling practices. We put sewing implements in it together with small notes, thus maintaining a written reminder of the metaphors we had been developing.

Figure 7. The great collective sewing basket completed. Photograph by Aloe, 2021.

Implements and metaphors that initially made up the collective sewing basket:

- scraps of rebellion
- scraps of resistance
- scraps of hope
- wool for weaving, unweaving and reweaving
- the needle that leads the way
- the threads that unite with love and attention
- threads to stitch up wounds
- threads that resist
- buttons that demand revenge and justice for Nicole and for all
- scissors to cut through injustice, the patriarchy
- the activating fire
- Nicole's altar.

To contribute to the unfolding of the metaphors, I prepared some questions to begin the conversation:

Metaphor of the needle that leads the way

- What pathways do we want to open?
- What paths do we want to travel?
- Who do we want to join us on those paths?
- What gives the needle the strength to move forward?

Metaphor of the threads that heal, resist and bind with care and affection

- What acts of resistance hold us together?
- What has sustained this collective?
- What has allowed us to heal our wounds?

Metaphor of buttons demanding revenge and justice for Nicole and for all

- How have we demanded justice?

Metaphor of scissors for cutting through injustice and the patriarchy

- What do we want to cut or transform?
- What are the hopes, dreams or desires that I harbour for myself, for the community, region or for forms of social or political change?

We began by exploring the metaphor of the needle that leads the way, and at the same time, as decided by the group, we threaded our needles and began to create our personal textile piece as we spoke, generating resonance between verbal narration and materiality as means of expression:

> I want to travel pathways of breaking down prejudices and limitations ... I want to be accompanied by people who resonate with the same vibe, to seek out those connections ... With Nicole's struggle, I have been transforming, meeting people, chances that have taught me many things ... resistance, collectivity, where my paths lead. (Enne)

Figure 8. Completing the great sewing basket and threading our needles. Photographs by Aloe, 2021.

The metaphor of threads allowed us to honour our personal and collective acts of resistance:

> I feel that the most important act of resistance that unites us is to exist, to be who I decide to be. It is also a political act to decide to continue living ... to stand firm, to discover other wounds, other existences, to keep each other company, shelter each other. (Enne)
>
> Existing is already an act of resistance, and sometimes we resist and exist in different ways, as we see through Nicole, but not being visible is also a value and a struggle. (Lore)

The metaphor of buttons led us to elevate the ways in which we demand justice, recognising our diverse responses to anti-lesbian hatred:

> For me, our justice has been the perseverance over time. Attach those buttons that demand justice, that resist, because the stitching that was done was so well, there were many stitches: heart, time, life, empathy, conscience ... because there are lives different from ours, but there is one point that unites us, and that point is to belong to a dissident group. (Chio)

The scissors symbolise a tool that cuts and transforms, providing openings to talk about our dreams, desires and hopes:

> Transforming society ... I have hope that we can be at peace being and living as we are ... I trust that things can change little by little. We are in times of transition, and we are also the transition of breaking the status quo. (Enne)

The expansion of the great sewing basket and Margarita's visit

7 August 2021

For this meeting, Enne brought in their sewing machine, named Margarita. To integrate Margarita into the therapeutic context, I invited Enne to tell us about Margarita's history and talk about its importance in her life:

> Its name, Margarita, is in honour of my grandmother, because she gave it to me ... and because it means a lot to me to continue to keep this ancestral knowledge alive ... Margarita has really supported me because I sustain myself through sewing. (Enne)

Figure 9. Margarita the sewing machine next to the great collective sewing basket. Photograph by Aloe, 2021.

We continued to explore the metaphors we had been working with. I suggested expanding the great sewing basket to include other sewing implements that might be associated with everyday knowledge:

> What do we know about: pins, thimbles, velcro, pincushions, measuring tapes?

This time I asked the following questions to help us collectively define the metaphor of the pincushion, a place for pins and needles to rest. This led us to explore alternative stories, knowledge and skills.

Metaphor of the pincushion

- Faced with challenges, what helps you return to moments of calm?
- What spaces do you enjoy?
- What spaces give you comfort or rest?

> Learning to trust the pack around me, to trusting others. I rest and enjoy the community. It relaxes me, helps me to let go of control. (Enne)
>
> Being by the sea, on a rock listening to the ocean, stopping for a while to see where everything is, clearing doubts, more paths open up and certain actions become engaging again. (Amapola)

Gradually, the expansion of the great collective sewing basket slowed down, and we agreed that we now had everything we needed to continue. We threaded our needles and resumed our personal textile projects. Some people completed their individual piece, and so, stitch by stitch, Margarita put the pieces together, and the united scrap quilt began to take shape.

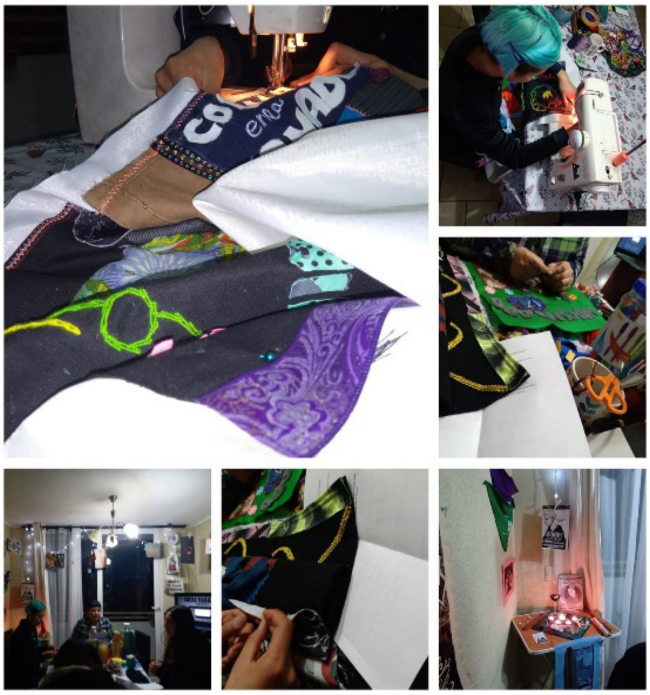


Figure 10. The expansion of the great sewing basket and Margarita's visit. Photographs by Aloe, 2021.

Stitching stories and Facilita's visit

30 August 2021

For this meeting, Amapola brought her sewing machine, Facilita. This time, the collective members took the lead in asking Amapola about Facilita's story and its importance in her life.

> Facilita was a gift from my mother. When she moved to the south a few years ago, she left it to me. It is like an inheritance because it has been in the family for a long time and it's super supportive ... Its name honours that: it means easy to use. (Amapola)

Figure 11. Facilita the sewing machine. Photograph by Aloe, 2021.

In this session, we talked about our experience of our time together and its effects on our lives. To prepare the questions, I drew on the questions developed by Adler et al. (2008), adapting them for this session:

Sewing stories

- Which session(s) do you remember as particularly significant or important?
- What effects has gathering together had on you?
- Which areas of our lives have been touched by these encounters?
- What values that you hold have been honoured in these conversations?
- What has been made possible through this project of sewing together in this space?
- Where might this experience take us?

The collective highlighted several important meetings, especially “the encounter with the dragon”.

> It’s one of the most significant moments because that day we were all there, watching the sunset, feeling the warmth of the dragon. (Aloe)

This process fostered our desire to continue contributing to activism. It offered a safe and therapeutic space, allowing us to connect with the present and with what we value:

> This has been a different way of healing in relation to what happened to Nicole: knowing the strength that weaves us together fighting the fight, retelling our stories, exploring our values and taking a stand. I think we are people with a lot of courage, and I am grateful for that. (Chio)

In addition, our work together contributed to mobilising concrete actions. During and after this process, we convened and joined different spaces of activism that connected us to the broader fabric of this region.

The collective valued several aspects of this process: a safe space, active listening, respect, comfort, fluid interaction, and the participation of the entire collective in creating the space.

After this conversation, we returned to our sewing to finish joining our personal textile pieces together, with Facilita’s assistance.

Figure 12. Stories of seams & Facilita’s visit. Photographs by Yas, 2021.

Figure 13. The completed quilt. Photograph by Aloe, 2021.

This quilt, the union of scraps we constructed, expresses the things we value. We transformed our pain into a bright expression of life, weaving our dreams and hopes through this collective expression of art and love.

The creation of a fanzine: The book of resistance

25 September 2021

Earlier, I had collected the material we had generated across our five sessions together and drafted collective document. When we met again, each participant read a paragraph of the document aloud. This was a crucial step in the process of creating the collective document (Denborough, 2008) as it allowed the participants to ensure that the document reflected their unique skills and knowledges accurately and in detail. Following Denborough (2008), we implemented a process for members of the group to make changes and additions, thus collectively creating a document that would represent us in our unity and diversity. Once the revisions and adjustments of the document were completed, we transformed it into a fanzine.

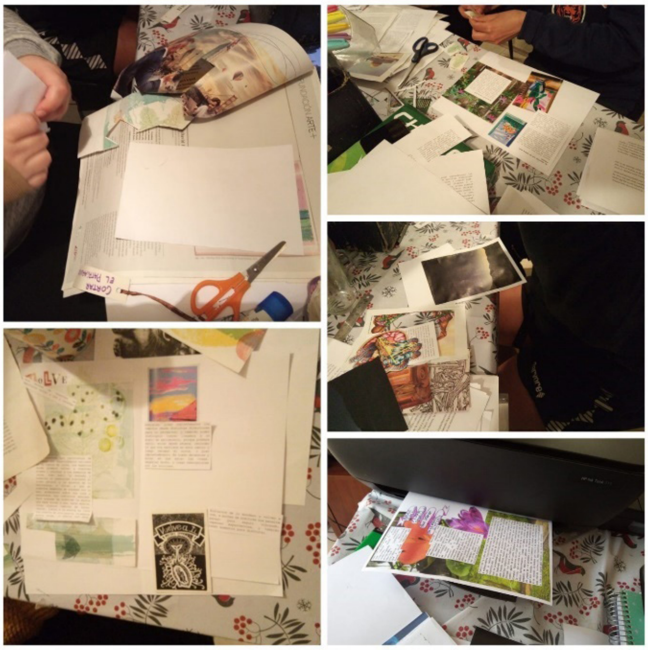


Figure 14. The creation of the fanzine: The book of resistance. Photographs by Yas, 2021.

Video has also been used as a form for collective narrative documents (Denborough, 2008), and we decided to take up this tool, producing a collective audiovisual document.

Preparing a definitional ceremony

We reviewed the idea of holding a definitional ceremony: what this would consist of, its stages, and how we wanted it to unfold. Any questions or concerns were addressed.

We decided that an intimate venue would be appropriate, and that we would invite no more than four people to attend as witnesses. The following questions guided our discussion about how to invite.

Questions to select the audience

- With which person, group or community would we like to share our work with?
- What kind of audience might resonate with this experience?

We agreed to invite an audience of four activists, carefully chosen for this moment. One of the people invited was Bego, who had participated in the first sessions of our group before withdrawing for personal reasons. The other three invitees were Dani, Sol and Nicole, activists involved in the Justice for Nicole Movement.

Definitional ceremony: We exist and resist as connected pieces

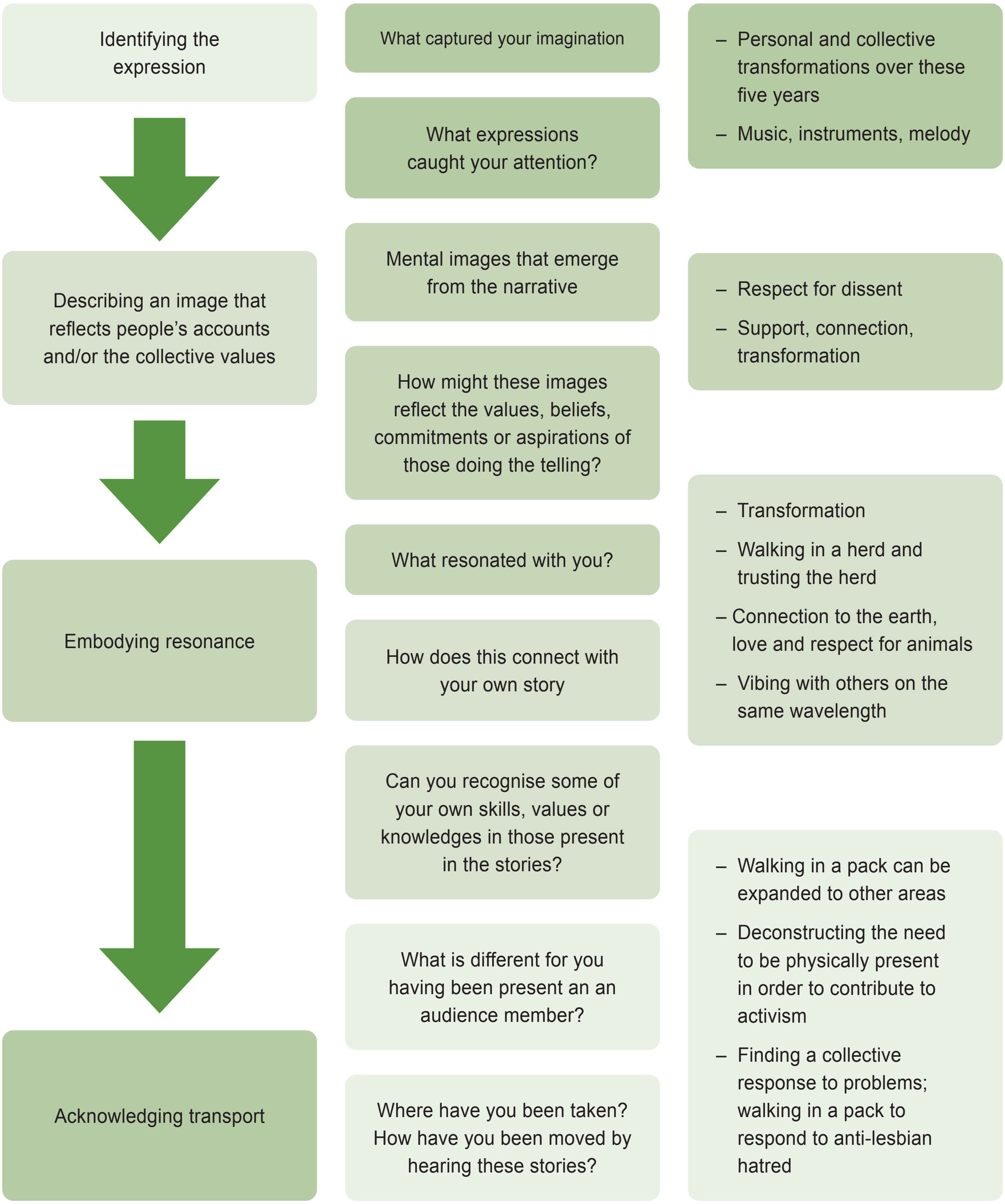
17 October 2021

To complete our process, we met at the Nicole Saavedra Bahamondes Feminist Self-Education School. The dragon's flames began their dance, and everything was set. The audience was present.

Before conducting the definitional ceremony, I followed White's (2007) suggestion to prepare the outsider witnesses. I met with our invited audience to explain that they would be participating in a particular tradition of recognition that can enrich our collective stories. I invited the witnesses to engage in a retelling based on attentive listening and focusing on particular aspects of the story that captured their attention. There were asked to express these retellings in non-evaluating ways, responding from their personal perspective about what stood out to them and how it affected them. They were asked to refrain from many of the common ways in which people respond to others' life stories, such as such as offering opinions, giving advice, making judgements or expressing praise (White, 2007, p. 165). In addition, I took ethical responsibility for the consequences of the retellings. Later, I described the four categories of inquiry reflected in my questions, and provided the outsider witnesses with a copy of these.

To carry out our ritual, we followed the definitional ceremony structure described by White (2007), which consists of three distinct stages: the telling of the meaningful story by the group at the centre of the ceremony – in this case the telling was done through a video; the outsider witnesses' retelling of the story; and the retelling of the outsider witnesses' retelling by those at the centre of the ceremony.

At the end of the definitional ceremony, the collective distributed copies of the fanzine to the audience. We



Identifying the expression

Describing an image that reflects people's accounts and/or the collective values

Embodying resonance

Acknowledging transport

What captured your imagination

What expressions caught your attention?

Mental images that emerge from the narrative

How might these images reflect the values, beliefs, commitments or aspirations of those doing the telling?

What resonated with you?

How does this connect with your own story

Can you recognise some of your own skills, values or knowledges in those present in the stories?

What is different for you having been present an an audience member?

Where have you been taken? How have you been moved by hearing these stories?

– Personal and collective transformations over these five years

– Music, instruments, melody

– Respect for dissent

– Support, connection, transformation

– Transformation

– Walking in a herd and trusting the herd

– Connection to the earth, love and respect for animals

– Vibing with others on the same wavelength

– Walking in a pack can be expanded to other areas

– Deconstructing the need to be physically present in order to contribute to activism

– Finding a collective response to problems; walking in a pack to respond to anti-lesbian hatred enjoyed an afternoon of celebration, contemplating the sea and the sunset, and being embraced by the warmth of the dragon. There was laughter and love – a lot of love, the kind of love that gives us strength.

Figure 15. Definitional ceremony: We exist and resist as united pieces. Photographs by Aloe, 2021.

The collective that has become therapeutic

The role of the direct-action activist and the role of therapist are based on predefined identities, structures that must be adhered to and followed. Deleuze might describe such normative positions as "majoritarian" (in Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). In this process, we collectively threw ourselves into an unknown and unexplored territory in which dominant identities were destabilised and deconstructed, challenging the roles of therapist and activist to the point of rendering them unrecognisable from the most common perspectives.

By throwing these predefined identities into the dragon's fire, the collective that becomes therapeutic releases its political and therapeutic energy, mobilising us to weave and interweave in a new, shared fabric.

In activist contexts, certain actions are valued while others are dismissed and undervalued. These sharply defined structures perpetuate oppressive and classificatory dominant discourses. During our work together, we questioned and challenged dominant structures and discourses that perpetuate oppression. One of the ways we did this was by recognising all forms of activism, from direct and visible actions to those that might commonly be seen as small or trivial. We also confronted and honoured our contradictions as activists, giving voice to our discomforts. Jules Falquet (2022) offered a critical perspective on the complexities and contradictions within social movements, in which certain actions can perpetuate existing power relations or exclude certain groups, highlighting the importance of addressing intersectionality and the different dimensions of oppression.

Artmaking as central to this process

Usually in therapeutic practice, emphasis is placed on conversational processes, with non-verbal processes often given little attention. In this work, the artmaking neither replaced nor supplemented the conversational process. It is not my intention to suggest that one is more valuable than the other. Rather, for us there was an interaction between both practices, resulting in a multiplicity. Our collective documents are concrete examples, unfolding in three forms: a fanzine, the united scrap quilt and the video. Our quilt can be understood as a non-verbal collective narrative document. In its creation, our stories of resistance, and our values, dreams and hopes were translated into images, shapes, colours and textures. When contemplating this visual collective document, multiple images may emerge, and along with them infinite meanings, metaphors, suggesting "a multi-textured story" (Denborough, 2008, p. 41).

Textile art enabled us to tell our stories, make meaning and generate strategies of collective resistance (Sánchez-Aldana et al., 2019). The united scrap quilt and the fanzine have become texts that story the identities of those of us who are not part of the dominant discourses or the hegemonic stories (Espinoza et al., 2019). They allowed us to raise our voices, resist injustices and preserve our memories.

Final comments

Providing a metaphorical framework in a context that allows individuals to draw from their own knowledge can empower a community to adopt, replicate and transform the metaphor. This reflects the spirit of collective narrative practice: it is by the community and for community.

We hope that our experience of working with collective narrative practices can contribute to others, and we invite the continued expansion and transformation of the sewing metaphors we developed. In this work, the collective sewing basket continued to grow until we decided that we had talked about all we needed to talk about. Even so, we remain hopeful that its expansion will continue in multiple ways, accompanying other communities. The great sewing basket is timeless, knows no borders, and is available to all.

Acknowledgments

This work would have been impossible without the participants, who allowed its dissemination as a testimony to our resistance and strength, and to contribute to other communities facing similar challenges. My thanks to this collective.

This article is an original work. It is enriched by the research project titled *Collective narrative practices in an activist context, challenges and responses to an anti-lesbian hate crime*, which I completed as part of a master's degree at the University of Valparaiso, Chile. The thesis is available at https://repositoriobibliotecas.uv.cl/handle/uvscl/10383?locale-attribute=es_ES

Editors' acknowledgments

The Editorial Team would like to thank Carla Galaz, Paola Grandón Zerega and Darío García Rodríguez for their generous assistance in producing the journal's first paper to be published simultaneously in two languages.

Notes

[1] This is a term adopted by Indigenous communities to refer to South America.

[2] The concept of "lesbo-odio" was coined by lesbian feminists and dissidents in Chile to talk about the murder of Nicole Saavedra Bahamondes. It was then adopted by the broader lesbian feminist movement in Abya Yala. The direct translation of the concept is "lesbo-hate"; however, in this article it has been decided to translate this as "anti-lesbian hate".

[3] A town located in Nogales, in the province of Quillota, Valparaiso Region, Chile. It is a small town with a population of around 20,000.

[4] In Latin America, camiona refers to lesbian women who adopt certain characteristics associated with masculinity, both in their appearance and their behaviour. Like the English expressions "butch", "dyke" and "tomboy", it has been reclaimed by lesbians.

[5] Throughout the process, we sought to respect, honour and make visible the diverse gender identities that were part of this collective, and among those who might wish to join us through this document. I have tried to use language that includes all identities, adopting the use of preferred pronouns throughout this article.

[6] Maria, Nicole's cousin, has been one of the leading voices demanding justice in relation to Nicole's murder. Together with other activists, Maria and Karen worked tirelessly to bring attention to this crime, denounce the irregularities in the investigation, and demand that those responsible be brought to legal justice. In 2019 they staged a building occupation in prosecutor's office with three other activists to demand progress in the investigation. This resulted in the criminalisation of the five activists.

[7] The Escuela de Autoformación Feminista Nicole Saavedra Bahamondes collective was founded in 2017 with the aim of fostering feminisms in the Central Coast region. Its purpose is to build a self-education school in areas where feminism is not so visible, and to make known cases of anti-lesbian hatred, including the murder of Nicole Saavedra Bahamondes.

[8] "Vuelve a ti". This image was highly symbolic and significant for this collective. It is a woodcut print that was created by participants of this collective and that was present as an offering at the two-year commemoration of the murder, placed on an altar in the place where Nicole was found.

[9] Arpillera can be translated as burlap, but it describes a three-dimensional textile picture constructed from patchwork, applique and embroidery. This Chilean artform has often been used to depict political themes and local struggles.

[10] The dragon is a wood-fired oven, built with brick, mud and straw. It was built and offered to the Nicole Saavedra Bahamondes Feminist Self-Education School by a dissident activist from the Central Coast who decided to share her skills by making these ovens in community spaces, using the natural resources available on site.

[11] Real Academia Española or Royal Spanish Academy. This Spain's official institution for regulating the Spanish language. It is a symbol and mechanism of ongoing colonisation.

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Existimos y resistimos como retazos unidos:

Prácticas narrativas colectivas en contexto activista: Desafíos y respuestas frente a un crimen por lesbo-odio

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Abstract

Este artículo ilustra un proceso de trabajo metafórico y participativo en el cual un grupo de activistas feministas, lesbo-feministas y disidentes nos reunimos para responder terapéuticamente a los efectos del lesbo-odio. El contexto terapéutico se creó progresivamente, junto al despliegue de un conjunto de metáforas relacionadas con el arte textil, inspiradas en las conversaciones de reautoría propuestas por Michael White. El proceso incluyó la creación de un documento colectivo (Denborough, 2008) que reconoce y honra los saberes, conocimientos y nuestras formas particulares de responder frente al lesbo-odio, materializado en tres versiones; manta de retazos, video, y fanzine. Colectivizadas en un acto ceremonial, estas versiones incluyen el trabajo de creación manual-artístico y la materialidad del tejido como medios privilegiados de expresión, más allá de los límites de lo verbal. Este trabajo contribuyó a la visibilización, exteriorización y politización de actos de injusticia, reconociendo formas de resistencia, cuidado y protesta. El proceso nos invitó a reflexionar sobre la importancia de la colectivización, la fluidez y flexibilidad en la estructuración del espacio terapéutico, y a cuestionar los roles de terapeuta y de activista concebidos como identidades predefinidas.

Palabras clave: prácticas narrativas colectivas; activismo; re-autoría; metáfora; arte textil; documento colectivo; ceremonias de definición

Mancilla Monsalve, Y. (2023). Existimos y resistimos como retazos unidos: Prácticas narrativas colectivas en contexto activista: Desafíos y respuestas frente a un crimen por lesbo-odio. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (2), 20-38. https://doi.org/10.4320/NTMW8527

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Introducción

Soy activista, lesbiana, feminista, disidente. Pertenecer a esta comunidad, y vivir en una cultura patriarcal desafiando el orden dominante, conlleva enfrentarse a la violencia y la marginalización. Nuestros cuerpos disidentes representan una oposición radical al régimen político de heterosexualidad obligatoria (Rich, 1996) el cual opera como un sistema de opresión que se articula con otros sistemas opresores, tales como raza y clase.

El movimiento lésbico y disidente surge en el mundo occidental a finales de los años sesenta, en respuesta a la violencia patriarcal, y se desarrolla en estrecha relación con otros movimientos, como la segunda ola del feminismo y el movimiento homosexual, este último cobrando impulso tras la revuelta de Stonewall (Falquet,2006). Paralelamente, en países mayoritariamente blancos, y también en Abya Yala[1], surgen antecedentes del lesbofeminismo. Esta corriente, fundamentada en la lesbiandad separatista, aborda desde una perspectiva anticolonial, anticapitalista y antirracista de relaciones entre mujeres (Velázquez, 2021). Adopta una visión interseccional, analizando el sexo, la raza, la clase y la sexualidad como categorías políticas y teóricas fundamentales para comprender la subordinación de mujeres y lesbianas en contextos históricos específicos.

En la última década, en Chile y otras regiones de Abya Yala, activistas lesbofeministas acuñan el concepto lesbo-odio, a fin de visibilizar la violencia estructural y sistemática dirigida específicamente hacia las identidades lésbicas. Los crímenes por lesbo-odio o lesbicidios se distinguen del feminicidio en que no suelen presentar rasgos domésticos o familiares. Estos actos constituyen intentos hegemónicos de aniquilación, siendo motivados por el odio y el rechazo hacia las mujeres lesbianas. Es importante resaltar que el lesbicidio, al estar motivado por el odio, se configura como un tipo específico de femicidio. Sin embargo, es crucial tener en cuenta que no todos los femicidios son lesbicidios (Peres, Soares, & Días, 2018).

Para este texto decidí no utilizar el término “lesbofobia”, ya que este sugiere actitudes personales, arraigadas en un problema psicológico interno, reduciendo los crímenes dirigidos a lesbianas al no considerar el complejo entramado político, social e histórico que ha perpetuado la marginalización y/o estigmatización hacia las identidades lésbicas, amenazando directamente nuestras vidas y la libertad de experimentar las relaciones y la soberanía de nuestros cuerpos de diversas formas. Por lo tanto, más allá de la palabra, el lesbo-odio es un aparato de represión y corrección. Se exterioriza por medio de discursos de odio y prácticas correctivas, materializándose en: acoso, golpes, secuestros, torturas, agresiones sexuales y/o lesbicidios. En Chile, el interior de la región de Valparaíso se considera una “zona roja” para las lesbianas y las disidencias sexo-genéricas, donde se han registrado varios casos de asesinatos motivados por lesbo-odio. En estos territorios, la discriminación y el lesbo-odio siguen siendo fenómenos invisibilizados por el aparato hegemónico de justicia, el cual se suma a la precariedad como manifestación de la necropolítica (Mbembe, 2003) hacia los cuerpos considerados no productivos para el capitalismo.

El comienzo de nuestra historia

No estamos todas/es[2], falta Nicole

Nuestra historia como colectivo se entreteje con un llamado a exigir justicia frente al lesbicidio de Nicole Saavedra Bahamondes. Nicole pertenecía a un pueblo llamado El Melón.[3] El machismo y la heteronormatividad son imperantes en este pequeño pueblo, y la visibilidad lésbica y/o disidente son severamente condenadas por la comunidad. En este contexto, Nicole afrontó los desafíos de vivir como mujer, lesbiana y camiona[4], negándose a someter su existencia a la dominación patriarcal. Eligió vivir su lesbianismo y su expresión de género, desafiando estereotipos de feminidad. Nicole encaraba a la sociedad con fuerza y determinación, enfrentándose al mundo tal y como se sentía. Su sola existencia fue un acto de rebeldía. El 18 de junio de 2016, Nicole abordó el autobús para regresar a su casa donde fue secuestrada y asesinada por el conductor en un crimen por lesbo-odio. Su familia, amistades y personas conocidas la buscaron incesablemente. Su cuerpo fue encontrado el 25 de junio de 2016.

Esta historia generó un impacto profundo en nuestra comunidad lésbica y disidente. Sara Ahmed (2015) nos invita a considerar el daño hacia los cuerpos de grupos oprimidos no solo como la superficie epidérmica de la persona, sino como la piel de una comunidad. Así, la violencia no solo se infligió en el cuerpo de la persona, sino también en el tejido de una comunidad que se desgarra.

El movimiento de justicia por Nicole

Ante la negligencia del sistema judicial en esclarecer este crimen, la familia de Nicole convocó a activistas feministas, lesbofeministas y disidentes, quienes se entrelazan alrededor del Movimiento de Justicia por Nicole llevando a cabo acciones en todo Chile y otras partes del mundo para exigir justicia. El Movimiento Justicia por Nicole se creó con el objetivo de conseguir el esclarecimiento del asesinato de Nicole y establecerlo como un referente para visibilizar los crímenes de lesbo-odio, promover la generación de redes de autodefensa, cuidados mutuos y construcción de dinámicas de comunidad, y redes lesbo-feministas que impacten en la sociedad. Como activista, lesbiana, feminista y disidente me uní a este gran entramado. La búsqueda de justicia por Nicole se prolongó durante cinco años debido a la continua negligencia e inacción por parte del estado y el sistema judicial.

El nacimiento de la propuesta: El espíritu de las prácticas narrativas colectivas se pone a nuestra disposición

Recurrí a las prácticas narrativas colectivas como una oportunidad de continuar enriqueciendo el amplio tejido del movimiento de justicia por Nicole incorporando una perspectiva terapéutica/activista, que nos permitiera crear espacios seguros donde pudiésemos dialogar y reflexionar sobre nuestra lucha y los desafíos que enfrentamos durante estos cinco años de activismo. Mi propósito fue honrar nuestros actos de resistencia y seguir construyendo formas colectivas de contribuir en el activismo. Para lograrlo necesitaba encontrar una práctica altamente resonante con nuestra experiencia colectiva. Me surgió la idea de crear una práctica narrativa colectiva incorporando el arte textil, específicamente la técnica de unir retazos, que también es conocida como “patchwork”[5] en el contexto anglosajón.

La metáfora del textil, arraigada en los movimientos feministas y lesbofeministas de Abya Yala, revela una conexión profunda con la práctica de unir retazos. Al igual que los retazos de tela se entrelazan para crear una pieza más grande y significativa, nuestras historias, resistencias y luchas se entrecruzan para formar una narrativa colectiva de resistencia y emancipación. Esta práctica de unir retazos no solo es culturalmente adecuada al contexto de Abya Yala, sino que también es altamente resonante con el movimiento feminista y lesbofeminista de estos territorios, donde la diversidad de experiencias y voces se entrelazan para crear un tejido de comunidad y resistencia.

También quise incluir en esta propuesta una forma de documentación colectiva que resultara culturalmente responsiva a este contexto, emergiendo el fanzine como una poderosa herramienta, ya que se adapta a las prácticas locales de producción y distribución de conocimiento, permitiendo que nuestras historias sean contadas de manera auténtica y sin censuras. Los movimientos feministas y lesbofeministas de Abya Yala han abrazado el fanzine como una herramienta de tejido, subversiva y emancipadora. Los fanzines son manifestaciones de resistencia cultural que desafían las normas impuestas por el patriarcado y el colonialismo, y una herramienta de visibilización y agenciamiento.

En este contexto, dispusimos de las prácticas narrativas colectivas expandiendo sus horizontes, diversificándolas e integrándolas en el particular contexto cultural, social y político del movimiento lesbofeminista y disidente de esta región. Su adaptación a las prácticas culturales de Abya Yala contribuye a reconocer, integrar y enaltecer tradiciones locales y recursos comúnmente empleados en el movimiento feminista y lesbofeminista, como el arte textil, la metáfora del tejido, y el fanzine.

Honrar historias de resistencia frente a un crimen de lesbo-odio

¿Por qué es importante para nuestra comunidad disidente honrar las historias de nuestros desafíos y respuestas frente un crimen de lesbo-odio?

David Denborough (2008) señala que las personas elegimos caminos de acción basados en nuestros conocimientos y habilidades para afrontar los problemas en nuestras vidas. Sin embargo, a menudo los relatos de trauma e injusticia se recuerdan mejor que otras narrativas, dejando en la sombra las historias de resistencia. Utilizar metodologías que busquen compartir y visibilizar las habilidades y conocimientos implícitos en estas respuestas de resistencia, tanto para nosotras/es como para otras personas, y enlazarlas con un contexto cultural local, puede fortalecer estas iniciativas y habilitar futuras acciones (Denborough, 2008).

Además, Denborough sostiene que es posible convocar rituales y ceremonias que refuercen las autodefiniciones colectivas, permitiendo que las habilidades y conocimientos de aquellos grupos de personas afectadas por problemas sociales beneficien a otros en situaciones similares. Estas prácticas pueden, por tanto, contribuir a un movimiento social local y a su sostenibilidad (Denborough, 2008).

Los mapas de la práctica narrativa (White, 2016) nos ofrecen una guía de viaje, transformándose inevitablemente para adaptarse a nuestras geografías, formas y cosmovisiones.

Teniendo en cuenta la idea de “la copia que origina” (White, 1989, p. 38), metáforas para trabajar con grupos y comunidades, como The Tree of Life (Ncube, 2006), el proyecto *Raising our heads above the clouds: The use of narrative practices to motivate social action and economic development* (Denborough, 2006), asistieron el proceso.

El proceso de la convocatoria: La búsqueda de retazos

Al planificar la convocatoria para este proceso recordé a Enne; activista, disidente, a quien conocí durante el Movimiento de Justicia por Nicole. Rememoré nuestras historias de lucha exigiendo justicia en espacios de activismo. Nos reunimos una tarde de verano, en diciembre del 2019. Le compartí las ideas iniciales de este proyecto, invitándole a participar.

La propuesta de crear un espacio terapéutico en respuesta a estos cinco años de activismo a través del arte textil y el fanzine resonó con Enne, quien se encargó de contactar a activistas del Movimiento de Justicia por Nicole y, días después, me informó que tres personas estaban interesadas/es en unirse: Chío, Bego y Aloe. La red se expandió gracias a Chío, quien a su vez invitó a María y Karen.[6] En una primera reunión, les compartí tres aspectos iniciales de la propuesta:

1. un espacio terapéutico para dialogar sobre el extenso y arduo camino en la búsqueda de justicia
2. la confección de una obra textil con la técnica “patchwork”
3. la creación de un documento colectivo en formato fanzine.

El colectivo manifestó interés en participar, sugiriendo además la creación de un grupo de WhatsApp para facilitar nuestra comunicación y organización. Chío se encargó de crear el grupo “Proyecto patchwork”. Aloe ofreció asumir la tarea de documentar fotográficamente el proceso terapéutico.

Los efectos de la pandemia de COVID-19 nos obligaron a posponer el proyecto durante un año. El grupo de WhatsApp se mantuvo activo; intercambiábamos saludos, información y palabras conmemorativas en fechas significativas para el colectivo.

En marzo del 2021 retomamos el proyecto. Escribí a través del grupo de WhatsApp para invitarles a reunirnos. María nos comunicó su necesidad de involucrarse de lleno en el proceso judicial por Nicole, razón por la cual decidió apartarse del proyecto, al igual que Karen.

Chío propuso seguir tejiendo esta red y extendió la invitación a Lore, Amapola y Hortensia, activistas de la Escuela de Autoformación Feminista Nicole Saavedra Bahamondes.[7] Realizamos reuniones virtuales en las que, junto con conversar sobre el proyecto, les propuse realizar un análisis colectivo del problema.

Según nuestra apreciación, el incremento de distintas expresiones y mecanismos de lesbo-odio, obedece a la influencia de ideas patriarcales en los contextos donde ocurren. En zonas rurales, las lesbianas y disidencias sexo-genéricas coexisten con la invisibilización, la discriminación y la violencia:

> Hay un silenciamiento de estos temas, donde no se conoce lo que es un crimen de lesbo-odio, hay que luchar día a día para romper con estos cercos. (Hortensia)
>
> Ser mujer, lesbiana y camiona es como una bola de nieve que se va agrandando igual que la violencia que la rodea. (Chío)

Metodología de co-investigación y prácticas narrativas colectivas

En este proceso adopté una práctica de co-investigación afín con la metodología de las prácticas narrativas colectivas, asumiendo una dimensión aún más amplia y colaborativa. Más que un tema de investigación, esta historia atraviesa mi existencia disidente. Por lo tanto, me posiciono desde un lugar irrevocable de resistencia vital y amor político compartido, involucrando de manera ineludible tanto mi identidad de co-investigadora y terapeuta como mis identidades de activista, lesbiana, disidente y tantas otras que se arrojaron a este proceso terapéutico/activista.

En mi aproximación al rol de practicante narrativa, y desde mi postura influyente fui realizando distintas propuestas al colectivo conforme se desarrollaba el proceso. Dentro de estas múltiples acciones, asumí la función de crear preguntas para las sesiones que fueron entregadas al colectivo como una guía al inicio de cada tema. En la práctica de conversaciones narrativas usualmente es el terapeuta quien hace las preguntas y toma notas. En este caso, expandí esta posición dotando de autonomía al resto del colectivo en la distribución de los roles de preguntar, narrar, y tomar notas. También, en las prácticas narrativas existe un énfasis importante en las habilidades de la palabra hablada (Denborough, 2008), sin embargo, en este proceso las habilidades para hacer preguntas durante las conversaciones se desarrollaron de forma diferente. Mi decisión de incorporarme como participante implicó no mantener una posición de experta en hacer preguntas, ya que, luego de entregar las preguntas al colectivo, me sumaba a las conversaciones y reflexiones en mi devenir participante, activista, y otros involucrados.

Creando nuestro espacio terapéutico

4 de junio de 2021

Días antes de iniciar el proceso, me puse en contacto con el colectivo por medio del grupo de WhatsApp y sugerí llevar un trozo de tela o una prenda en desuso para la primera sesión, con el fin de comenzar a generar el contexto para el despliegue del trabajo metafórico. Además, les invité a llevar imágenes u objetos personales preferidos para comenzar a crear el espacio terapéutico a partir de las contribuciones del colectivo.

Nos reunimos en modalidad híbrida, tanto online como presencial. Aloe, Enne y Amapola asistieron presencialmente, aportando ofrendas. Comenzamos a crear el espacio terapéutico con objetos significativos, imágenes, inciensos, velas y cuarzos, junto a una xilografía titulada "Vuelve a ti".[8] De forma virtual, se unieron Lore, Hortensia, Chío y Bego, quienes compartieron sus imágenes favoritas para integrarlas en el espacio.

Figura 1. Creando nuestro espacio terapéutico. Fotografías por Aloe, 2021

Previamente, preparé algunas preguntas inspirándome en el mapa de conversaciones de re-autoría de Micheal White (2016):

- ¿Recuerdas la historia de ese trozo de tela y/o prenda en desuso? ¿Cuál es el significado y/o importancia que ha tenido esa prenda y/o tela en tu vida?
- ¿Qué significa para ti la reutilización y el reciclaje de prendas u otras cosas? ¿A quién viste por primera vez reutilizando o reciclando? ¿Recuerdas ese momento? ¿Cuál es la importancia de la reutilización y reciclaje en tu vida?
- ¿Qué conoces de costuras? ¿Cómo conociste la costura? ¿Qué historias de costuras recuerdas? ¿Qué importancia tiene la costura en tu vida? ¿A quién viste por primera vez cosiendo o alguna actividad similar?
- ¿Qué imágenes emergen en ti con la practica unión de retazos o patchwork? ¿Qué conoces de esta práctica? ¿Tiene algún significado en tu vida? ¿Recuerdas alguna historia sobre esta práctica?
- ¿Conoces el fanzine? ¿Qué significado tiene en tu vida? ¿Cómo lo conociste? ¿Cuál fue el primer fanzine que leíste? ¿Recuerdas algún tema leído que haya sido importante para ti? ¿Alguna historia en torno al fanzine?

Para iniciar la conversación, propuse dividirnos en tres pequeños grupos rotativos para cada tema, con el fin de facilitar la comunicación entre participantes virtuales y presenciales.

Al concluir los temas, invité a reunirnos y compartir colectivamente nuestras reflexiones. Contamos con un papelógrafo en el que registramos los hallazgos.

En la conversación honramos las historias de las prendas/telas en desuso, su significado e importancia en nuestra vida:

> Este trozo de tela para mi tiene una conexión con la vida y la muerte. (Enne)
>
> Este polerón lo tengo hace más de 10 años, es mi polerón de maestra … me gusta la idea de que pueda transmutar, tiene harta historia … (Chío)

Figura 2. Significados personales y colectivos. Fotografía por Yas, 2021

Surgieron otras historias de prendas; las prendas heredadas y traspasadas entre generaciones:

> Fui heredando las prendas de mis hermanos … sin quererlo siempre estuvimos reciclando en la familia. (Lore)
>
> Usé ropa de primos, hermanas … cosas de mi mamá. Tienen un valor igual, aunque estén desteñidas. (Hortensia)

Recordamos que la reutilización de prendas era una práctica arraigada en nuestras familias, un conocimiento ancestral de sobrevivencia. Honramos los oficios de costura, tejido y reparación, que tienen profundas raíces en nuestra historia e identidad, transmitidos entre generaciones como tradiciones ancestrales. Estos oficios no solo son formas de subsistencia económica sino también expresiones de identidad cultural y resistencia al sistema capitalista. Por medio de estas prácticas preservamos conocimientos ancestrales, promovemos la autogestión, la comunidad, y la valoración de los recursos locales frente a la explotación industrial:

> Reutilizar las prendas eran prácticas normalizadas en las familias, como sobrevivencia también porque no había plata para comprar ropa. Antes era común que las mujeres de la familia que tejían desarmaban los chalecos o las prendas que iban quedando chicas, hacían el ovillo y después tejían algo de nuevo … un chaleco, bufandas. (Hortensia)

> Mi abuela es costurera, la máquina de coser que tengo me la regaló ella, fue un momento emocionante … hoy mi sustento principal es la costura. La costura me hace reinventarme, que esté vivo el fuego de la creatividad. Es un conocimiento familiar. Me gusta transformar ropa, es parte de mi vida, de mis ancestras… coser me permite crear, reparar cosas, arreglar cosas que son importantes para las personas, apañar a las personas en sus existencias y diversidades…es una forma de sobrevivir en comunidad. (Enne)

Para continuar con la contextualización necesaria para el desarrollo del trabajo metafórico, exploramos nuestros saberes asociados a la técnica patchwork:

> Cuando vivía en Peñalolén, conocí a las arpilleristas de Lo Hermida … trozos de tela recicladas con un mensaje en un telar … patchwork lo asocio a la arpillera, es un concepto más cercano … patchwork es más extranjero, más gringo, pero sé que tiene que ver la unión de retazos con la costura y tela reciclada, me gusta la idea de hacerlo y a través de eso recordar todo lo que han sido estos años de lucha por Nicole. (Hortensia)

En el contexto de esta conversación, el colectivo propone sustituir el término patchwork para describir nuestra práctica, como parte de un esfuerzo más amplio de descolonización lingüística, lo que adquiere especial relevancia en un contexto históricamente colonizado como el nuestro. Por esta razón, decidimos denominar esta práctica como “unión de retazos”.

En la exploración de significados en torno al fanzine, lo definimos como un “libro de resistencia” en constante movimiento:

> El primer fanzine que tuve en mis manos me lo prestaron y cuando lo terminé de leer, decía “que circule”. Para mí el fanzine es un libro de historia, es la resistencia que nos une en nuestras vidas poder compartir conocimiento, resistir a la propiedad intelectual donde el conocimiento solo es para algunes. (Enne)

> Conocí el fanzine cuando conocí el lesbofeminismo, como hace 10 años atrás era la única forma de leer cosas alternativas … la contracultura, liberación animal, recetas … me gusta que el traspaso es entre las personas, es más accesible … los primeros que leí eran de lesbofeminismo, plantas medicinales … recuerdo que una amiga hizo un fanzine que revindicaba la locura. (Chío)

¡Preparándonos para costurear!

18 de junio de 2021

Para continuar generando contexto para el despliegue de la metáfora y al mismo tiempo seguir creando el espacio terapéutico, propuse iniciar la conversación guiándonos con las siguientes preguntas:

- ¿Cómo nos preparamos cuando nos disponemos a costurear?
- ¿Qué podría necesitar para esta experiencia de costuras?

Estas preguntas nos llevaron a recordar historias preferidas de otros momentos en los que hemos desarrollado prácticas de costura. Además, nos invitan a traer al presente estos saberes y ponerlos a disposición para esta experiencia.

Figura 3. Preparándonos para costurear. Fotografías por Aloe, 2021

Seguidamente, propuse crear un costurero personal. Esta metáfora contribuyó a continuar construyendo el espacio, de forma colaborativa y resonante con el colectivo, expandiendo las posibilidades de contribuir a la creación del contexto metafórico y a la transformación del espacio terapéutico.

En el costurero personal podemos incluir:

- implementos de costura
- conocimientos especiales e historias de cómo se aprendieron
- rituales, aspectos simbólicos significativos
- todo aquello que pueda necesitar para esta experiencia de costuras

Luego de invitar a colectivizar nuestros costureros personales, esbozamos la ruta hacia la construcción de un gran costurero colectivo.

Costurero de Amapola: Hilo, lanas, corta hilacha, historias de mujeres que me cosieron, mi abuela, mi mamá. Panorama de coser en las mujeres de mi familia, altar de Nicole, conexión con la naturaleza, mar, agujas para abrir caminos, paciencia, calma, tranquilidad.

Costurero de Enne: Que nunca falte el fuego iniciador, xilografía vuelve a ti, valentía, empatía, tolerancia. Crear en colectividad, ganas de abrirse a experimentar, creer en une, abrirse a la frustración, cambiar la estructura, estar siempre renovándose, mutar. Resignificar la muerte como parte de nuestra vida, recuerdos de mis ancestras.

Costurero de Chío: Xilografía "vuelve a ti", Compañeres (animales) no humanes (Sam y Neo), una mirada sincera, palabras con sentido, coraje, respeto, latidos del corazón, alfiler de gancho, agua, viento, bosque, estrellas, hilo para coser las heridas, el hilo que sutura, esta historia es una herida que hemos ido sanando, de esta herida nacen murales, canciones, documentales.

Costurero de Aloe: Velas blancas, xilografía vuelve a ti, té; en mi familia las reuniones siempre fueron con un té. Tijeras para cortar con la injusticia. Atardecer. Aguja que transporta el hilo para ir sanando.

Costurero de Lore: Retazos de resistencia, retazos de esperanza, amor y rebeldía, ternura, alegría, humor. Cosido con el hilo del cariño y del cuidado. Fueguito, altar de Nicole, creatividad, tijeras para cortar el patriarcado, botón especial que reclame justicia y venganza por Nicole y por todes, ganas de hacer música, un trozo de mi huerta.

Costurero de Yas: Resolver con lo que tenga a la mano. Tener apertura, ante todo. Puesta de sol, la mar, el bosque. Paciencia. Hilos que sostienen y que son resistentes.

Definimos colectivamente aquellos implementos y metáforas que deseábamos incluir en el costurero colectivo, dejando abierta la posibilidad de añadir nuevos elementos en cualquier momento. Utilizamos un papelógrafo para registrar notas grupales.

Figura 4. Proceso de creación del costurero colectivo. Fotografía por Yas, 2021

El gran costurero y un encuentro con la dragona

2 de julio del 2021

Para esta sesión el colectivo decidió trasladar el espacio terapéutico hacia un espacio de activismo altamente simbólico para el grupo, la Escuela de Autoformación Feminista Nicole Saavedra Bahamondes. Logramos reunirnos de manera presencial. Decidimos acomodar el espacio al aire libre, para disfrutar del sol, la vista al mar, la brisa. Nos recibió una anfitriona que aportó con el fuego activador durante la jornada; la dragona.[9]

Figura 5. La dragona. Fotografía por Yas, 2021

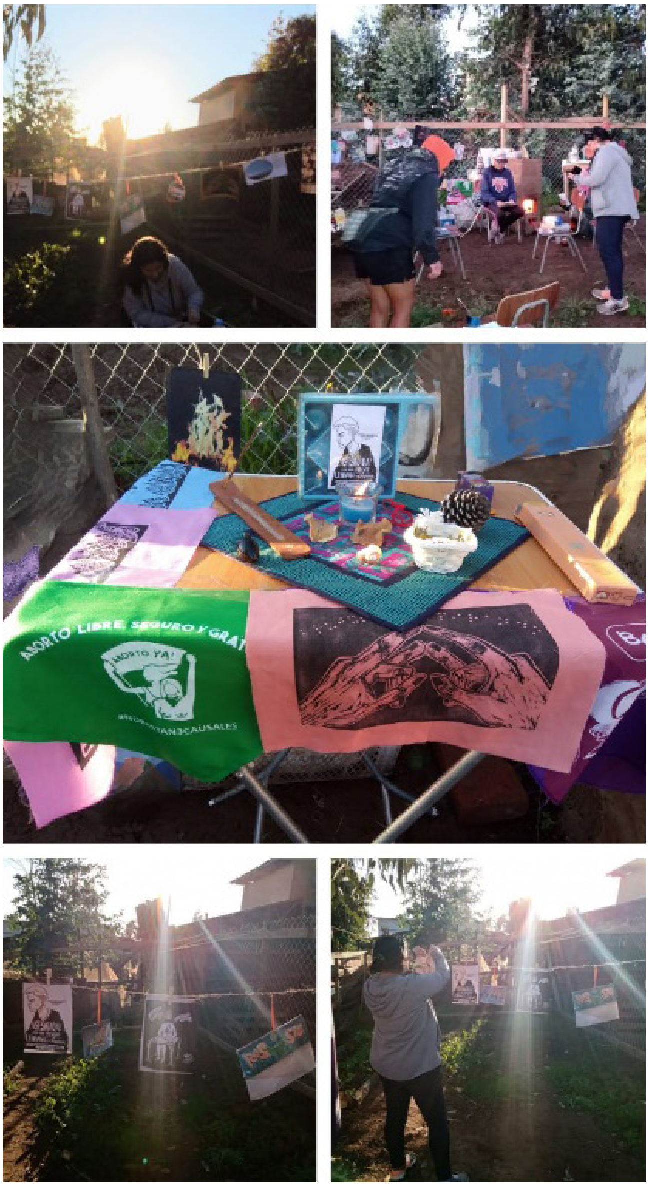

Figura 6. El gran costurero y un encuentro con la dragona. Fotografías por Aloe y Yas, 2021

Continuamos inventariando el conjunto de metáforas de nuestro costurero colectivo. Previamente redacté las preguntas que guiaron el inicio de la conversación:

Metáfora de retazos

- ¿Qué habilidades, valores, conocimientos retazos quisiera traer a la mano? ¿Cómo los aprendí?

Metáfora de lana y tejido

- ¿Qué habilidades, valores, conocimientos estaban tejidos y hoy quiero destejer porque ya no me hacen sentido?
- ¿Qué habilidades, valores, conocimientos quiero destejer, tejer o retejer?

La metáfora de los retazos de rebeldía, retazos de resistencia, y retazos de esperanza, nos llevó a identificar y honrar aquellos valores subutilizados, invisibilizados, infravalorados. Saberes antiguos, pasados de moda, desteñidos. Esta representación nos brindó una base para identificar conocimientos subyugados, invitándonos a distinguir aquellos aspectos que valoramos de nuestras vidas, pero que no encajan con lo que definen estos conocimientos unitarios, es decir, que no se adaptan a las normas y expectativas planteadas por estos conocimientos (White & Epston, 1993).

> Esa articulación de lo íntimo y lo político, de lo personal y lo colectivo, sentirme atravesada por esta lucha … la capacidad de estar atenta a los procesos más personales … porque esta lucha es tan fuerte, la marcha y la visibilización, pero también este modo sutil de acompañar la vida y el dolor … humanizar la lucha, escuchar, sentir que detrás de esta lucha hay sufrimiento humano profundo. (Lore)
>
> Saber cuidarse. Saber cuándo es el momento de parar, canalizar la energía, está bien hacer pausas, eso no está dentro del ideal político, y eso también hace sentir que estoy fallando en la lucha … confiar en la manada … me guardo para después darlo todo, dosificar la energía. Deconstruir la mirada de que para luchar hay que ser mártir, también se puede hacer un relevo. (Enne)

Para desplegar la metáfora del tejido nos inspiramos en los conocimientos de nuestras ancestras, quienes tejían, destejían y retejían. Luego, nos desplazamos a explorar habilidades y saberes que estaban tejidos y que hoy queremos destejer, y volver a tejer. Esta conversación nos llevó a procesos de deconstrucción y exploración de formas preferidas.

> Algo que estaba muy tejido y quiero destejer y tejer nuevamente es el lenguaje, quiero tejer un lenguaje inclusivo … destejer el lenguaje binario, lo impuesto por la rae, incorporar todas las existencias, hay muchas existencias que hemos sido ignoradas. (Aloe)

Este encuentro lo cerramos con una grata conversación junto al fuego. Las flamas de la dragona danzaban junto a la cadencia de la brisa marina. El calor nos abrazaba, nos cobijaba.

Materializando el gran costurero y enhebrando nuestras agujas

16 de julio del 2021

El costurero colectivo fue creado utilizando material reciclado: una caja de cartón en desuso, retazos de papel, bolsas de plástico, entre otras cosas, con el fin de continuar honrando las prácticas de reciclaje. Incorporamos en su interior los implementos de costura junto a pequeñas notas, manteniendo así un recordatorio escrito de las metáforas.

Figura 7. El gran costurero colectivo materializado. Fotografía por Aloe, 2021

Implementos/metáforas que, inicialmente, conforman el costurero colectivo

- retazos de rebeldía
- retazos de resistencia
- retazos de esperanza
- lanas para tejer, destejer, retejer
- la aguja que abre los caminos
- los hilos que unen con cariño y cuidado
- hilos para coser las heridas
- hilos que resisten
- los botones que reclaman venganza y justicia por Nicole y por todas/es
- la tijera para cortar la injusticia, el patriarcado
- el fuego activador
- el altar de Nicole

Con el fin de contribuir con el despliegue de las metáforas, preparé previamente algunas preguntas que guiaron inicialmente la conversación:

Metáfora de la aguja que abre los caminos

- ¿Qué caminos queremos abrir? ¿Qué caminos deseamos recorrer? ¿Quiénes queremos que nos acompañen en esos caminos? ¿Qué le entrega a la aguja la fuerza para avanzar?

Metáfora de los hilos que sanan, resisten, y unen con cariño y cuidado

- ¿Qué actos de resistencia nos unen? ¿Qué es lo que ha sostenido a este colectivo? ¿Qué es lo que ha permitido sanar nuestras heridas?

Metáfora de los botones que reclaman venganza y justicia por Nicole y por todas/es

- ¿Cómo hemos reclamado justicia?
- Metáfora de la tijera para cortar la injusticia y el patriarcado
- ¿Qué queremos cortar/transformar?
- ¿Cuáles son las esperanzas, sueños o deseos que albergo para mí, para la comunidad, territorio, y/o para formas de ordenamiento social o político?

Iniciamos con el despliegue de la metáfora de la aguja que abre los caminos, y al mismo tiempo, por decisión del colectivo enhebramos nuestras agujas y comenzamos a crear la obra textil personal durante la conversación, generando multiplicidad entre la narración verbal y la materialidad como medio de expresión:

> Quiero recorrer los caminos de derribar
> prejuicios, limitaciones … quiero que me
> acompañe la gente que vibra en sintonía,
> ir al encuentro de esas complicidades…
> con la lucha de Nicole me he ido transformando,
> conociendo personas, eventualidades que
> me han hecho aprender muchas cosas …
> la resistencia, la colectividad, para donde
> van mis caminos … (Enne)

Figura 8. Materializando el gran costurero y enhebrando nuestras agujas. Fotografías por Aloe, 2021

Las metáforas de los hilos nos permitieron honrar nuestros actos de resistencia personales y colectivos:

> Yo siento que el acto de resistencia más importante que nos une es existir, ser quien yo decido ser, también es un acto político decidir seguir viviendo … mantenernos firmes, encontrarse con otras heridas, con otras existencias, acompañarnos, cobijarnos … (Enne)
>
> Existir ya es un acto de resistencia, y a veces resistimos y existimos de distintas maneras, tan visibles como la Nicole, pero no ser visible también es un valor y una lucha … (Lore)

La metáfora de los botones nos llevó a enaltecer nuestras formas de reclamar justicia, reconociendo nuestras respuestas ante el lesbo-odio:

> Para mí, nuestra justicia ha sido la perseverancia de todo el tiempo. Adherir esos botones que reclaman justicia, que resisten, porque fue tan buena la costura que se hizo, fueron muchas puntadas; corazón, tiempo, vida, empatía, consciencia…porque hay vidas distintas a la nuestra, pero hay un punto que nos une, y ese punto es pertenecer a una disidencia. (Chío)

La tijera simboliza un implemento que corta y transforma, abriéndonos la posibilidad de hablar de nuestros sueños, deseos y esperanzas:

> Transformar la sociedad … tengo la esperanza de que podamos estar tranquis siendo y viviendo

> como somos … confío que las cosas pueden ir cambiando de a poco, estamos igual en tiempos de transición, y nosotres somos también la transición de romper con lo establecido. (Enne)

La expansión del gran costurero y la visita de Margarita

07 de agosto de 2021

Para este encuentro, Enne puso a disposición su máquina de coser, de nombre Margarita. Para integrar a Margarita al contexto terapéutico, le propuse a Enne que nos contara la historia de Margarita y la importancia que tiene en su vida:

> Su nombre Margarita es en honor a mi abuela, porque ella me la regaló...y porque significa mucho para mí mantener este conocimiento ancestral...me ha apañado caleta porque me autogestiono con la costura. (Enne)

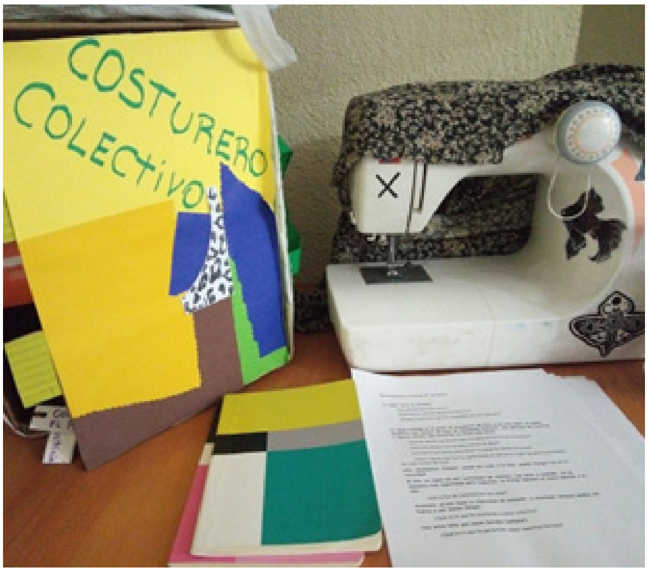

Figura 9. La máquina de coser Margarita junto al gran costurero colectivo. Fotografía por Aloe, 2021

Continuamos desplegando el trabajo metafórico. Propuse expandir el gran costurero hacia otros implementos de costura explorando saberes cotidianos asociados:

¿Qué sabemos de: alfileres, dedal, velcro, almohadilla, huincha de medir?

Esta vez, formulé las preguntas al momento de definir colectivamente la metáfora de “la almohadilla”, significada como la zona de descanso para alfileres y agujas, lo que nos llevó a explorar relatos alternativos, conocimientos y habilidades presentes.

Metáfora de la almohadilla

- Ante los desafíos ¿Qué te permite volver a momentos de tranquilidad?
- ¿Cuáles son los espacios que disfrutas?
- ¿Qué espacios te brindan comodidad, descanso?

> Aprender a confiar en la manada que me rodea, confiar en los demás, descanso y disfruto la colectividad, me relaja, me hace soltar el control. (Enne)
>
> Estar con la mar, en una roca escuchar la mar, parar un rato para ver en que está todo, despejar dudas, se abren más caminos y se reencantan ciertas acciones. (Amapola)

Progresivamente, la expansión del gran costurero colectivo disminuyó, y acordamos que ya disponíamos de todo lo necesario para continuar. Enhebramos las agujas y retomamos nuestras obras textiles personales. Algunas personas concluyeron su trabajo individual, y así, puntada a puntada, Margarita unió las piezas, comenzando a materializarse la manta de retazos.

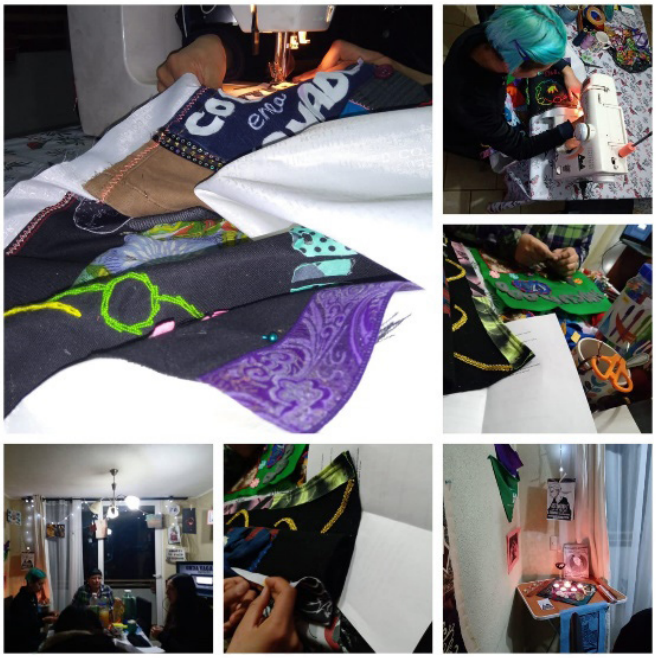

Figura 10. La expansión del gran costurero y la visita de Margarita. Fotografías por Aloe, 2021

Historias de costuras y la visita de Facilita

30 de agosto de 2021

Para este encuentro, Amapola puso a disposición su máquina de coser, de nombre Facilita. Esta vez, participantes del colectivo son quienes preguntan a Amapola la historia de Facilita y la importancia que tiene en su vida

> Facilita fue un regalo de mi madre, cuando se fue a vivir al sur hace unos años atrás, me la dejó, es como una herencia porque ha estado mucho tiempo en la familia, es super apañadora … y su nombre es en honor a eso, es fácil de usar. (Amapola)

Figura 11. La máquina de coser Facilita. Fotografía por Aloe, 2021.

En esta sesión conversamos sobre nuestra experiencia en este proceso y sus efectos en nuestras vidas. Para elaborar las preguntas me asistí del cuestionario de historias en psicoterapia (Adler et al., 2008), siendo adaptado para esta sesión:

Historias de costuras

- Qué sesión/es recuerdas como significativa/s o importante/s?
- ¿Qué efectos ha tenido para ti reunirnos?
- ¿Qué ámbitos de nuestra vida se han visto tocados o palpados en estos encuentros?
- ¿Qué aspectos que valoramos han sido honrados en estas conversaciones?
- ¿Qué se ha movilizado a partir de este trabajo de coser juntas/es en este espacio?
- ¿Hacia dónde nos podría impulsar esta experiencia?

El colectivo destacó varios encuentros importantes, en especial “el encuentro con la dragona”.

> Es uno de los momentos más significativos, porque ese día nos encontramos todes, estuvimos mirando la puesta de sol, el calorcito de la dragona. (Aloe)

Este proceso fomentó nuestro deseo de seguir contribuyendo en el activismo, ofreciendo un espacio seguro y terapéutico, llevándonos a conectar con el presente y con aquello que valoramos:

> Este es el lado de hacer otro tipo de sanación con respecto a lo sucedido con Nicole, conocer esa fibra que nos toca para estar ahí dando la pelea, el recapitular, el buscar, y también el posicionarse. Creo que somos personas con mucho coraje, y eso yo lo agradezco mucho. (Chío)

Además, se movilizaron acciones concretas; durante y después del proceso convocamos y adherimos a distintos espacios de activismo que involucran un tejido más amplio en este territorio.

El colectivo otorgó valor a varios aspectos de este proceso; “el espacio seguro”, “la escucha activa”, “el respeto”, “la comodidad”, “la interacción fluida” y la participación de todo el colectivo en la creación del espacio.

Tras la conversación retomamos la costura para terminar de unir nuestras obras textiles personales con la colaboración de Facilita.

Figura 12. Historias de costuras y la visita de facilita. Fotografías por Yas, 2021

Esta manta de retazos expresa aquello que valoramos. Transformamos nuestro dolor en una luminosa acción de vida, entrelazamos nuestros sueños y esperanzas a través de esta expresión colectiva de arte y amor.

Figura 13. La materialización de la manta de retazos. Fotografía por Aloe, 2021

La creación del fanzine: El libro de la resistencia

25 de septiembre de 2021

Previamente, recopilé el material generado desde la sesión 1 a la 5 y elaboré un bosquejo del documento colectivo. Cada participante leyó en voz alta un párrafo del documento. Este es un paso crucial y distintivo de la metodología de los documentos colectivos (Denborough, 2008), ya que permite a los participantes verificar si el documento refleja con precisión y detalle las habilidades especiales y los conocimientos identificados. Siguiendo la propuesta de David Denborough, durante este momento, generamos un contexto para que el resto del colectivo realizara cambios y adiciones al documento, creando así de forma colectiva un documento que nos representa en unidad y diversidad. Una vez finalizadas las correcciones y ajustes del documento, lo transformamos en versión fanzine.

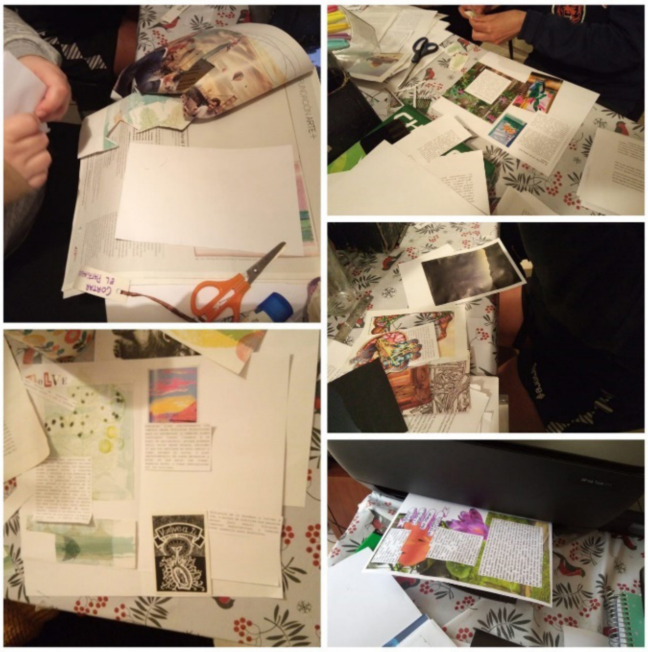

Figura 14. La creación del fanzine; El libro de la resistencia. Fotografías por Yas, 2021

Continuamos con una documentación colectiva audiovisual. El video se encuentra entre los diferentes medios que podemos utilizar para la documentación narrativa colectiva (Denborough, 2008). En esta oportunidad decidimos también recurrir a esta herramienta.

Preparando la ceremonia de definición

Revisamos en conjunto en qué consiste, sus etapas, despejamos dudas, y acordamos como queríamos que se desarrollara. Nos pareció importante escoger un espacio íntimo, invitando como máximo a cuatro personas.

Preguntas para elegir a la audiencia

- ¿Con qué persona, grupo, comunidad nos gustaría compartir nuestro trabajo?
- ¿Qué tipo de audiencia podría resonar con esta experiencia?

Acordamos invitar a una audiencia de 4 activistas escogidas cuidadosamente para ese momento. Una de las personas invitadas es Bego, quien participó en este proceso en las primeras sesiones y se retiró por motivos personales. Las otras tres personas invitadas; Dani, Sol y Nicole, son activistas que participaron activamente en el Movimiento de Justicia por Nicole.

Ceremonia de definición: Existimos y resistimos como retazos unidos

17 de octubre de 2021

Para culminar nuestro proceso, trasladamos el espacio terapéutico hacia el territorio de la colectiva Escuela de autoformación feminista Nicole Saavedra Bahamondes.

Las flamas de la dragona inician su danza, todo estaba preparado. Se hace presente la audiencia.

Antes de realizar la ceremonia de definición, White (2016, p. 169) nos sugiere "preparar a los testigos externos", por lo que me reuní con la audiencia para contarles que participarían en una tradición de reconocimiento que es crucial para el enriquecimiento de relatos.

Les invité a involucrarse en recuentos resultantes de una escucha atenta, centrándose en aspectos particulares de la historia que captó su atención. Se les invitó a expresar estos recuentos de una manera no impositiva, responder desde lo personal, y hablar de su entendimiento de lo que les llamó la atención y cómo les impactó. Se les pide abstenerse de muchas de las formas comunes en que las personas responden a los relatos de vida de otras personas, como dar su punto de vista, dar consejos, emitir juicios, alagos. Además, asumí la responsabilidad ética de las consecuencias de los recuentos (White, 2016).

Posteriormente, les describí las cuatro categorías de indagación que se reflejan en las preguntas, y les proporcioné una copia.

Para llevar a cabo nuestro ritual oral, mantuvimos la estructura de ceremonia de definición informada por White (2016), que consta de tres etapas distintas: la narración del relato significativo por parte del colectivo que recibe la ceremonia, en este caso la narración se realizó a través de un video; el recontar de la audiencia; y la recapitulación de estos relatos por parte quienes reciben la ceremonia.

Transporte	¿Hacia dónde te moviliza? ¿Cómo crees que te ha impactado o removido participar como audiencia de esta experiencia?	– Caminar en manada se puede expandir hacia otros ámbitos – Deconstruir la obligación estar físicamente para contribuir en el activismo – Encontrar una respuesta colectiva al problema; caminar en manada para responder al lesbo-odio
Resonancias	¿Puedes reconocer en tu vida algunas de las habilidades, valores o conocimientos que aparecen en los relatos? Conexión con tu propia historia Lo que resonó en tu interior	– Transformación – Caminar en manada y confiar en la manada – Conexión hacia la tierra, el amor y respeto hacia los animales – Vibrar con otres seres en la misma sintonía
Imágenes que reflejan un entendimiento de lo que las personas y/o el colectivo valora	Lo que estas imágenes pueden reflejar de los valores, creencias, compromisos, aspiraciones de quienes narran Imágenes mentales que emergen a partir de la narración	– El respeto a la disidencia – Apañe, unión, transformación
Particularidades de lo que se expresa	Lo que capturó tu imaginación Expresiones que llamaron tu atención	– Las transformaciones personales y colectivas durante estos 5 años – La música, los instrumentos, la melodía

Al finalizar la ceremonia de definición, el colectivo entrega copias del fanzine a la audiencia. Disfrutamos una tarde de celebración, contemplando el mar y el sol en su ocaso, siendo abrazadas/es por el calor de la dragona. Risas, amor. Mucho amor, ese amor que nos da fuerza.

Figura 15. Ceremonia de definición: Existimos y resistimos como retazos unidos. Fotografías por Aloe, 2021.

El colectivo que ha devenido terapéutico

El rol de activista de acción directa y el rol terapeuta son espacios identitarios definidos de antemano, estructuras que hay que seguir y a las cuales hay que acomodarse, "lo mayoritario" diría Deleuze (Deleuze y Guattari, 2004, p. 108) como "un sistema homogéneo y constante". En este proceso nos arrojamos colectivamente a un territorio desconocido e inexplorado, donde las identidades dominantes se desarticulan en tanto totalidades inteligibles, poniendo en riesgo el rol de terapeuta y activista hasta el punto de hacerlos irreconocibles desde las perspectivas más comunes.

Al arrojar estas identidades predefinidas en el fuego de la dragona, el colectivo que deviene terapéutico libera su energía política y terapéutica movilizándonos a tejer y entretejer en un nuevo entramado compartido.

En contextos de activismo, ciertas acciones son valoradas mientras que otras son descalificadas e infravaloradas. Estas estructuras rotundamente definidas perpetúan discursos dominantes opresivos y clasificatorios. Durante nuestro proceso, cuestionamos y desafiamos las estructuras y discursos dominantes que perpetúan la opresión. Una de ellas fue reconocer todas las formas de activismo, desde las acciones directas y visibles hasta aquellas comúnmente definidas como mínimas o inacciones. También nos enfrentamos y honramos nuestras contradicciones como activistas, dando voz a nuestras incomodidades. Jules Falquet nos brinda una perspectiva crítica sobre las complejidades y contradicciones dentro de los movimientos sociales, donde ciertas acciones pueden perpetuar relaciones de poder existentes o excluir a ciertos grupos, destacando la importancia de abordar la interseccionalidad y las diferentes dimensiones de la opresión (2022).

El contexto manual artístico en este proceso

Usualmente, en los procesos terapéuticos se otorga énfasis a los procesos conversacionales, a menudo subvalorando los procesos no-verbales. En este proceso, el contexto manual artístico no reemplazó ni complementó al proceso conversacional. No es mi intención sugerir que uno sea más valioso que el otro. Más bien, se produjo una interacción entre ambos procesos, resultando en una multiplicidad. Nuestro documento colectivo es un ejemplo concreto y tangible, desplegándose en tres versiones: fanzine, manta de retazos y video. La creación de nuestra manta de retazos puede considerarse un documento colectivo narrativo no verbal; en cada creación están traducidos a imágenes, formas, colores, texturas nuestros relatos de resistencia, nuestros valores, sueños y esperanzas. Al contemplar este documento narrativo colectivo no verbal, pueden emerger múltiples imágenes, e infinitos significados, metáforas, o como diría David Denborough "historias de múltiples texturas" (2008, p. 41).

El arte textil nos habilitó para narrar, otorgar sentido y generar estrategias de resistencia colectiva (Sánchez-Aldana et al., 2019). La manta de retazos y el fanzine se transforman en textos que narran identidades de quienes no formamos parte de los discursos o de las historias hegemónicas (Espinoza et al., 2019). Nos permitió alzar la voz, resistir ante las injusticias y preservar la memoria.

Comentarios finales

Proveer un marco metafórico en un contexto que permita a las personas posicionarse desde sus propios saberes puede facilitar que la comunidad se apropie de la metáfora, replicándola y transformándola. Esto refleja el espíritu de las prácticas narrativas colectivas a disposición de la comunidad y por la comunidad.

Esperamos que esta experiencia de aprender las prácticas narrativas pueda contribuir a otras personas, e invitamos a continuar ampliando, transformando, expandiendo las metáforas de costuras. En este colectivo, la expansión del costurero colectivo continuó hasta que decidimos que habíamos hablado de aquello que necesitábamos hablar. Aun así, mantenemos la esperanza de que su expansión continúe de múltiples maneras, acompañando a otras comunidades. El gran costurero es atemporal, no conoce fronteras y está disponible para todas, todes, y todos.

Agradecimientos

La realización de este trabajo habría sido imposible sin las personas que participaron, quienes autorizaron su difusión como testimonio de nuestra resistencia y fortaleza y para permitir la contribución hacia otras comunidades que viven dificultades similares.
Mis agradecimientos a este colectivo.

Este artículo es una versión original, se nutre de la investigación titulada “Prácticas narrativas colectivas en contexto activista, desafíos y respuestas frente a un crimen de lesbo-odio” realizado en el marco de trabajo de tesis para optar al grado de magíster en psicología clínica, mención psicoterapia constructivista y construccionista, en la Universidad de Valparaíso, Chile. Disponible en https://repositoriobibliotecas.uv.cl/handle/uvscl/10383?locale-attribute=es_ES

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El equipo editorial desea agradecer a Carla Galaz Souza, Paola Grandón Zerega y Darío García Rodríguez por su generosa colaboración en la producción del primer artículo de la revista que se publica simultáneamente en dos idiomas.

Notas

[1] Término adoptado por comunidades indígenas para referirse a Sudamérica.

[2] Durante este proceso visibilizamos, respetamos y honramos las identidades de género diversas que forman parte de este colectivo y a quienes deseen acompañarnos a través de este documento, por lo que he incorporado un lenguaje que incluya a todas las identidades, adoptando uso de pronombres neutros a lo largo de este artículo.

[3] Es una localidad ubicada en Nogales, perteneciente a la provincia de Quillota en la Región de Valparaíso, Chile. Es un pequeño pueblo donde habitan alrededor de veinte mil personas.

[4] Se refiere a mujeres lesbianas que adoptan ciertas características asociadas con la masculinidad, tanto en su apariencia como en su comportamiento. Esta expresión ha sido adoptada en espacios disidentes.

[5] Cuando estaba planificando la propuesta compartí algunas de mis ideas incipientes con una querida compañera de magister, Fiona. Después de escucharme, Fiona dijo: “lo recibo como un patchwork”. Para honrar esta contribución mantuve el concepto en mi propuesta inicial. La traducción de patchwork podría ser: “cobertor”, “colcha”, “edredón”, sin embargo, cabe destacar una de las cualidades de este tipo de creación textil que hace referencia a su elaboración a partir de retazos de tela, de diferente color, forma y textura

[6] María, prima de Nicole, ha sido una de las principales voces en exigir justicia por su asesinato. Junto a otras/es activistas, María y Karen trabajaron incansablemente para visibilizar este crimen, denunciar las irregularidades en la investigación y exigir que los responsables sean llevados ante la justicia. En 2019, irrumpieron en una sede de la Fiscalía con otras tres activistas, para demandar avances en la investigación, lo que resultó en la criminalización de las cinco activistas.

[7] La colectiva “Escuela de Autoformación Feminista Nicole Saavedra Bahamondes” se fundó en el año 2017 con el objetivo de fomentar los feminismos en el Litoral Central. Su propósito es construir una escuela de autoformación en zonas donde el feminismo no es tan visible y dar a conocer el caso de lesbo-odio y el asesinato de Nicole Saavedra Bahamondes.

[8] Imagen altamente simbólica y significativa para este colectivo. Se trata de un grabado en xilografía que fue creado por participantes de este colectivo y que estuvo presente como ofrenda en la conmemoración del segundo año de asesinato, en un altar en el lugar en que encontraron a Nicole.

[9] La dragona es una cocina a leña, construida con ladrillo, barro y paja. Fue construida y ofrendada a la Escuela de Autoformación Feminista Nicole Saavedra Bahamondes por una activista disidente del Litoral Central quien decidió compartir su habilidad en la fabricación de estas cocinas en lugares comunitarios, utilizando los recursos naturales disponibles en el lugar.

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Delusions:

Seeking epistemic justice for the most unusual of stories

by Hamilton Kennedy

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Abstract

The label of delusion can be so powerful that people so labelled are no longer believed or supported in preferred ways by those around them. This leads to a lack of meaningful and non-pathologising support for their significant, and at times unusual, beliefs. This phenomenon constitutes a form of epistemic injustice. To address this issue, this paper outlines specific approaches practitioners can adopt to better respond to such beliefs, illustrating these strategies with real-world examples from practice. By doing so, it aims to foster a form of epistemic justice that respects the knowledge and experience of people labelled as delusional and supports them to understand and lessen the impact of these often-distressing experiences. This paper is informed by research undertaken with people who had been labelled by psychiatry as "delusional".

Key words: delusion; paranoia; schizophrenia; hallucination; belief; epistemology; narrative practice

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Narrative practitioners occupy a privileged position, allowing them to hear and engage with the stories of the individuals and communities they work with, irrespective of the specific work context. These narratives vary, with some being familiar and others more unusual. It is important to recognise that certain beliefs we hear may be very unusual, particularly when they diverge from our own beliefs or from cultural norms. Denying their unusual nature obscures their exceptionalness. Narrative practitioners are often aware of this, yet responding to such beliefs can be challenging when they significantly differ from what is commonly known or deemed appropriate.

During 2023 and 2024, I conducted a series of interviews aimed at understanding and documenting the experiences of individuals labelled as "delusional". This formed the basis of a PhD thesis. It involved multiple conversations with people over several months in an attempt to explore the histories and origins of the experience that was labelled "delusional" as well as how they came to see this experience as true. Having their belief identified as delusional by someone else, even if this was done with "good intentions", was frequently experienced by participants as a form of epistemic injustice. My research project sought to better understand these experiences, to identify their often-neglected features, and to identify potential improvements in practice. The research explored the significance, meaning, and utility of these "delusional" beliefs and the contexts that produced them.

This article presents the experiences and reflections of participants in relation to epistemic injustice.

Miranda Fricker's (2007) concept of "epistemic injustice" refers to the delegitimisation of people's capacity to "know", which stems from an undermining of personhood. This article outlines strategies to resist and repair such injustices – to attempt to support epistemic justice. While unusual beliefs can pose challenges to practitioners, I demonstrate how these beliefs and experiences can be approached with the respect and consideration given to other beliefs. This approach recognises the problems these beliefs may present, the opportunities they offer, and the contexts they reflect. Such an approach can resist the epistemic injustice commonly experienced by individuals within the mental health system.

Background

Professionals in people-oriented services consistently encounter interesting stories from those they speak with. Whether these narratives emerge over coffee or within the confines of a therapist's office, they can be truly remarkable. Occasionally, these stories challenge our perceptions of what is possible or real. In the mental health field, the most unusual of these narratives are sometimes labelled as delusions. This psychiatric label typically refers to a false, firmly held belief that remains unchanged despite conflicting evidence (Bortolotti, 2022a). However, such beliefs are not exclusive to clinical settings: a significant portion of the non-clinical population also holds beliefs that could be labelled delusional (Verdoux & van Os, 2002).

Through examples from my research, this paper explores approaches that avoid perpetuating epistemic injustice, which invalidates individuals' experiences and negatively impact relationships with them. Instead, I focus on ways to offer meaningful and resonant support. Importantly, this work also includes the perspectives and reflections of those who have been labelled as delusional, emphasising their desires and needs in interactions with others.

Who was involved in this research?

The experiences of five participants are explored in this paper.[1] Detailed here is an overview of the participants' beliefs, the impact of these beliefs, their responses to these beliefs, and the impact of these responses. For some individuals, the belief caused significant fear and distress, but for others it was experienced more as unusual. This illustrates the broad scope of what can be labelled as a delusion. It was common for participants to feel fearful or reserved about sharing their beliefs with others. This was largely due to the perceived or actual consequences of doing so, which for many included forced psychiatric treatment or stigmatisation and discrimination by those around them.

Janelle

Janelle is a Christian woman in her 30s who is married with children. She was initially diagnosed with depression with psychotic features and later with schizophrenia. This was in the context of Janelle's belief that she was dead. Even while this belief emerged, she continued living a relatively normal life until the psychiatric system forcibly intervened. She described this intervention as being worse than the initial belief she had. This belief persisted for a period and has returned periodically. Janelle's experiences arose from significant grief following the deaths of two children, one in utero and the other shortly after birth. She is fearful of future psychiatric intervention because of her previous experiences.

Bethany

Bethany is a woman in her 40s. She lives with chronic health conditions and has also been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. Bethany has been labelled delusional for expressing the belief that she is being surveilled by covert cameras at home, in public and specifically in bathrooms. She also believes that this surveillance extends to her child and to others more generally. This impacts her life as she is concerned about being observed at home and in public, and this evokes a spectre of fear in her day-to-day life. While she has been able to discuss this with some people, she is hesitant to discuss this fear with others as it has led to her being dismissed or seen as mentally ill.

Michael

Michael is a man in his late 40s who has been diagnosed with schizophrenia and labelled delusional at various times throughout his life. Some of these beliefs include that he is being observed and assessed by the government and that he is capable of telepathy. At times this has been distressing and at other times enjoyable. He has been forcibly hospitalised more than 17 times and has been on near permanent compulsory treatment orders for nearly 20 years. He does not speak openly with mental health staff for fear of psychiatric intervention and also as he believes he will be ignored or dismissed.

Amanda

Amanda is a woman in her early 60s. Living with multiple chronic health conditions affecting her daily life and mobility, she frequently interacts with the health care system. She believes that she is the target of harassment orchestrated by a powerful family, with whom she had very real interactions in her earlier life. Amanda perceives the harassment extending into various facets of her life, including public housing, her day-to-day experiences and especially in health care. This causes ongoing fear and distress, which she chooses not to discuss with others for fear of the consequences of doing so.

Critical perspectives on delusion

The nature and experience of delusion vary significantly among those labelled as delusional (Ritunnano et al., 2022), as does its definition among academics (Rodrigues & Banzato, 2010). A discrete diagnostic category suggests that all beliefs can be categorised as either delusional or non-delusional. However, this binary approach fails to account for the nuanced spectrum of belief and the subjective meaning of experiences, ultimately rendering the experiences of those labelled as delusional as "false". As one participant astutely remarked, "It's just so reductive to reduce it to ticking boxes; that's not how any of this works".

While such unusual beliefs are typically considered features of mental illnesses, they are also common among the general population (Freeman, 2006). This was aptly summarised by another participant: "Maybe we should just relax a bit instead of pretending that we're all completely a hundred per cent sane and neurotypical a hundred per cent of the time." This flexible approach is crucial for practitioners to recognise, as it challenges the assumption that all beliefs and stories must fit neatly into categories of being entirely true or false thus dictating whether they are worthy of careful consideration.

Epistemic injustice

Labelling someone as delusional can be considered a unique form of injustice, despite its ostensibly benevolent intentions. This labelling occurs because people's sincere beliefs and expressions are deemed to be a combination of bizarre, fixed, irrational, resistant to counter-argument, and most notably, false. Regardless of the veracity of the claim, the experience of delusions can be jarring, confusing and extremely upsetting. This injustice can be best understood through the concept of epistemic injustice. According to Fricker (2007), epistemic injustice consists of two forms: testimonial injustice, where someone is discredited or not believed, and hermeneutical injustice, where a person is unable to express or make sense of their experience due to a lack of support or shared perspective.

When individuals' sincere stories of suffering or excitement are labelled as delusional, it typically renders their belief false and not worthy of further inquiry. Labelling someone as delusional is a form of "testimonial injustice" as it creates an identity marker that leads them to be disbelieved on account of that label. It is not just a belief that comes to be labelled delusional but the person themselves. For Janelle, her belief "I am dead" was identified as delusional, and this also rendered Janelle herself as delusional. As a result, neither Janelle's belief nor Janelle as a person are seen as warranting substantive engagement. The delusional label meant that she was ignored by those around her and was unable to discuss the matters that were most significant to her. However, Janelle considered her belief that she had died to be related to significant loss in her life, which would suggest a need for compassionate inquiry. This, however, was not explored. She explained:

Janelle: It was just having everybody against you and there wasn't any care there. I've never done anything violent or I've never sworn anyone. I'm not that bad, but there just wasn't like, "how are you going?" Or just care. Yeah.

Hamilton: There is a large amount of people who are hurt similarly. They don't always get together to talk about how angry we are, but the anger is still there.

Janelle: I had my baby die in me full term, and I saw him. No one wanted to talk about that. No one wanted to talk about what it was like to pick your coffins for your babies ... No one wanted to hear me. It was like I was just crazy.

Here, Janelle expressed that she was only able to be seen through the lens of delusion and was "just crazy". As an interviewer, in observing this testimonial injustice, offering specific questions was not my primary focus. Instead, in this moment I adopted a stance that recognised the injustices within the mental health system, and this allowed Janelle to further reflect on her personal experiences of injustice.

Bethany, who held the belief that she (and others) is under covert surveillance, reflected this too.

Hamilton: There was a kind of persistent disbelief of you inside of health systems, but also outside of health systems. Am I seeing that in the same way that you've experienced it?

Bethany: People go, oh, well you're mentally ill, therefore nothing you say is true. You are hysterical or you are whatever. But even in other social situations, people don't believe you.

As an interviewer, checking to see if my understanding fits with Bethany's experience enabled us to discern more about this concept and how it related to her specifically. These examples demonstrate that not only are people disbelieved about their specific "delusional" belief but that all their beliefs and expressions become subject to being viewed through a delusional lens when a person is positioned as uncredible.

The second concept Fricker (2007) offers is "hermeneutical injustice", which refers to individuals lacking the support or opportunity to understand or express their own experiences. This form of injustice, along with testimonial injustice, is regularly experienced by people with unusual beliefs and those labelled as delusional. Despite often having a desire to explore their experiences, individuals are frequently denied the opportunity to do so. For instance, Michael had been labelled as delusional countless times over the past 20 years and was seldom given the chance to explore or understand his experiences. This lack of opportunity further marginalises and isolates individuals, preventing them from better understanding their own experiences.

Hamilton: You said that people didn't really ask about your beliefs and experiences very much, which I find sad.

Michael: The question we should ask is not "what's wrong with you?", but "what happened to you?" What happened to you? And that's a question that mental health authorities have not asked really carefully and caringly.

Michael's reflection reveals a supposed truism of the "helping" professions: the importance of exploring an individual's life and what has happened to them. However, Michael's extensive experience shows that this exploration is often absent, even though it would be welcomed. My research found that any attempts to explore people's beliefs were appreciated, and individuals frequently commented that in the past, they were either not asked questions about their beliefs, or they were asked the "wrong questions". People overwhelmingly valued the opportunity to discuss their beliefs and found it to be useful.

Towards epistemic justice

The prevalence of epistemic injustice in psychiatry and mental health contexts has been extensively explored (Bueter, 2019; Crichton et al., 2017). While existing literature suggests strategies to address this issue (such as participatory action research in Mooney et al., 2023 or the use of advocates in Newbigging & Ridley, 2018), there has been limited focus on specific practical strategies for supporting people with unusual beliefs or who are labelled as delusional. So how can we create possibilities for epistemic justice?

Epistemic justice involves recognising individuals as knowers, ensuring they are heard fairly, and supporting them in making sense of their experiences. Despite its fundamental importance, participants in this research and others (Grim et al., 2019) suggest that such practices are uncommon.

Skelton et al. (2024) have provided useful suggestions for addressing epistemic injustice. Their research sought to honour the contributions of people living in poverty who choose to offer support to their peers, whom they referred to as "activists". I believe their approach can be adapted for mental health contexts. Skelton et al. (2024, p. 94) emphasise the importance of "breaking silence to speak about trauma in a way that frees activists to honour their own experiences and construct their own thoughts". I propose that this is similarly relevant in a mental health context: we can support epistemic justice by creating contexts for people to break silences in ways that honour their own experience and support people to construct and explore their own thoughts. People with very unusual beliefs often lack opportunities to discuss them, and such opportunities are essential for achieving epistemic justice.

Allowing people to break silence and speak openly, while being genuinely listened to beyond the label of "delusional", is foundational for doing testimonial justice. When individuals are listened to, it fosters opportunities for hermeneutic justice and creates an environment in which persons are not confined to a single label (delusional) but can freely share, discuss and make sense of their unusual and often distressing experiences.

It is also crucial to recognise that the label "delusional" is a constructed identity marker, which, while functional, often does not align with individuals' perspectives or desires. This label can be totalising and limiting. Therefore, it is imperative to look beyond this label and to acknowledge the other identities individuals may hold, such as friend, worker, parent or artist.

Providing individuals with the opportunity to speak can be liberating. Conventional psychiatric practices often avoid exploring or questioning beliefs (Zangrilli et al., 2014). However, in this research, individuals like Amanda expressed gratitude for the opportunity to break their silence. They found value in having a space where they could openly discuss their beliefs. This opportunity to speak and be heard is essential for addressing epistemic injustice.

Amanda: In an odd way, I've really enjoyed the process, and I think I've learned from it and perhaps got a better grip on what I'm going through, what I've been through, by thinking about it and taking it apart. Stepping outside of it and thinking about it has been really good.

What narrative ideas should we consider?

Narrative therapy, and its practices of valuing and exploring personal stories, provides further means to foster epistemic justice for individuals labelled as delusional or those with unusual beliefs. Specific practices include externalising the problem, situating beliefs within the broader contexts of people's lives, offering people naming rights over their experiences, and listening from a position of not knowing. These practices are complemented by aspects of peer-support practices (as discussed in Kennedy, 2019), such as acknowledging one's lack of expertise about a person's experience or being willing to admit uncertainty as how to respond immediately. Together, these practices and principles form a foundation for honouring the stories we hear. Given the prevalence of epistemic injustice, it is crucial for narrative practitioners to actively reflect on and develop responses to unusual beliefs or those labelled as delusional.

Externalising the problem or experience

When we exclusively view these most unusual beliefs through the lens of pathology (as explored in Bortolotti, 2022a) or as products of faulty psychological mechanisms (as explored in Miyazono, 2015), we situate the experience or problem firmly within the brain and/or mind of the individual. However, as Fisher (2009, p. 37) has argued, "it goes without saying that all mental illnesses are neurologically instantiated, but this says nothing about their causation … this requires a social and political explanation". If we externalise experiences, we can acknowledge that beliefs are generated by the mind but occur substantially in response to or in relationship with external factors. This perspective places the problem, at least in part, as external to the individual.

This perspective is supported by people's own experiences of unusual beliefs, as they recognise them as being internally experienced but necessarily informed by external factors. Externalising these beliefs in our response is crucial to avoid viewing individuals solely through the totalising lenses of "delusion" or "pathology".

Externalising conversations involve genuine explorations into the social conditions (external factors) that have supported the existence of problems. They are collaborative and often accompany people's own search for meaning. For instance:

Amanda: I say I've had bad luck, bad luck, bad luck. Don't just take my word for it. There are things that just simply do not make sense that I've got in my records that show that I've got a reason for saying it hasn't been great.

Amanda looked externally and queried why various and distressing events consistently happened to her. In doing so, she revealed a logic behind her beliefs, attributing ongoing difficulties to something unusual happening in her life. She at times called it "the conspiracy", but as above, at other times she called this "bad luck". This reflected how her relationship with this ongoing problem was in a constant flux. Our conversations about this also highlighted her proactive responses to the problem, such as keeping records to better understand and address these challenges. From here, we could further enquire about these specific challenges and how they might be addressed. This is radically different from assuming that this problem exists solely within Amanda's mind.

Externalising conversations resonated similarly with Michael, who had originally begun to develop beliefs that he was under observation and evaluation after attending acting school. Acknowledging the significance of these external factors was meaningful to Michael:

Hamilton: Sounds like something really important happened, not just like you remember it and it was a bit unusual, but something quite significant. Is that right?

Michael: It was the way that they assessed me and observed me that made me feel creeped out … and so they carried on into my – when I left the workshop, they carried on into my everyday life where I thought that they were observing me. I thought that people were observing me and so on ... so if I hadn't attended acting school, if I hadn't worked with them for a couple of weeks, the whole story of my entire belief system might've been very different.

Michael explored his experience of being observed and assessed at an acting school, illustrating how his beliefs had been constructed in tandem with the developments in his environment. It's not just that Michael holds the unusual belief that he is under observation and assessment; rather, he is actually subject to observation and assessment, though the boundaries of this experience are unclear. When we invite discussions that consider the external context rather than solely focusing on the unusual nature of the belief, the situation becomes more understandable. These beliefs have a storied connection to the external that can be enquired about. In my research, people's unusual beliefs were found to be connected to true and meaningful events in people's lives. For Michael, it was the real challenges faced in the environment of near-constant observation, and for Amanda, it was the true and seemingly constant series of health care complications. If such external contexts are neglected or dismissed by others, I believe it limits the options for understanding.

Giving people naming rights over their experiences

Labelling individuals as delusional is correlated with increased stigmatisation compared to allowing individuals to name and describe their own experiences (Cuttler & Ryckman, 2019). Many participants in my research experienced this firsthand. Providing individuals with the opportunity to name and label their own experiences is crucial in addressing hermeneutical injustice. To address this, there must be a process of supporting people to define, name and articulate their experiences.

In my research, participants reported that being labelled as delusional often resulted in being perceived solely through the lens of delusion. This led to hesitancy in seeking support when needed. For instance, Michael found that health care workers were unable to view him as anything but delusional, which overshadowed other aspects of his identity and experiences. Similarly, Bethany refrained from sharing her experiences due to fear of the stigma associated with being labelled delusional

Michael: My psychiatrist keeps on referring back to it, and I told him, "It's eight years old, it's more than eight years old".

Bethany: The social stigma around delusional thoughts stopped me from telling her. It stopped me from seeking help.

Supporting individuals in naming their own experiences is central to narrative practice. This approach emphasises the importance of supporting people "from the earliest possible moment ... to regain their sense of control over their lives ... To name is to regain a little control; naming is taking the initiative, imposing a chosen identification on something" (Payne, 2006, p. 42). While this practice is common in narrative therapy, it presents an additional challenge when participants have received a stigmatising label and the belief itself can seem unusual to the practitioner.

Offering individuals the direct opportunity to name their experience can be a simple yet powerful contribution to hermeneutic justice. Asking, "If it's not delusion, then what do you call it?" or "Do you have a name for this?" grants them explicit naming rights and the opportunity to express their own perspective, initiating a process of reflection and understanding of their experience.

For example, when I asked Michael if he had a name for his experience, he responded with, "Have you heard of pronoia?" Pronoia is the belief that people are conspiring to support you (as opposed to harm you). Here, we learn that unusual belief and experience might at times be useful! If I had not given Michael this opportunity to name the experience, we would not know of its actual impact. These experiences, however, can seldom be confined to being either positive or negative. While Michael at times experienced periods of *pronoia,* he also named experiences of *monitoring* and *surveillance,* which provoked periods of *paranoia.* In discovering this, further questions could then be asked to learn about the context of the beliefs and what might contribute to them being supportive or challenging. For instance, by asking Michael, "What was happening to you, what was occurring at the time?" both in relation to experiences of pronoia and paranoia we may be able to uncover what supports preferred experiences.

Situating the beliefs in the broader context of the person's life

Some traditional approaches to responding to unusual beliefs or delusions downplay the importance of the content of these beliefs and may avoid exploring their background altogether (Aschebrock et al., 2003; Federico et al., 2013). This dismissal implies that the content of beliefs is irrelevant, contributing to epistemic injustice.

In contrast, narrative therapy places emphasis on the social, cultural, political and economic contexts that shape individuals' lives, recognising their profound influence on identity and experiences. This recognition is crucial, as these contexts significantly contribute to the formation of individuals' beliefs. Doing so not only promotes understanding but also establishes a foundation for individuals to resist the challenges they face. This approach aims to deepen comprehension of experiences and beliefs, alleviating shame and suffering. Further, it enables individuals to articulate and contextualise their experiences within a broader framework that is resonant for them, addressing both testimonial and hermeneutical injustices.

In Janelle's case, her beliefs were influenced by a religious context that shaped what she considered possible. This involved discussions of epistemology and theories of knowledge. This is a complex topic, as it considers questions such as whether we know things, and if we do, how we came to know them. However, within research and/or therapeutic conversations, such ideas can be readily understood by people through questions such as "how did you come to learn or know this?" As I sought to understand how Janelle had formed theories about her life, I asked whether and how religious ideas had contributed to her life.

Hamilton: Did you have a faith at the time?

Janelle: I had finished a degree in Anglican theology, and I had grown up in a very religious environment, and my husband [did] as well. My faith always comes and goes, but I would say we were part of religious community. At the time both of my babies died was around Passover, Easter time. So, we had celebrated both and they are about death, and they're about – the Easter is rising from the dead. And I just remember that it would've contributed to it … Growing up in religious communities, they didn't have that

> barrier of death as permanent, because death you keep, your soul keeps on living, and there's the concept of the afterlife. It's not you die and that's it. I had grown up with that my whole life, so I guess that would contribute to my development of this.

When a person lives in a context where "they didn't have that barrier of death as permanent", it opens the possibility that being dead is not the end of someone's life. Such attention to cultural and religious contexts also opens possibilities for bringing other religious ideas to bear in responding to the beliefs. However, without exploring the context of the person's life, this context is lost, leaving the belief almost incomprehensible and difficult to respond to. Inquiring about context is essential to addressing hermeneutical injustice as it provides individuals with the opportunity to make sense of and understand their own experiences.

Understanding the context of Amanda's unusual beliefs about the influence of a particular family over her life involved a more rigorous approach. Amanda and I agreed to conduct independent research in between our meetings on the family she believed exerted significant power over her. This acted as an informal secondary research project, asking

- Who is the family?
- What do they do?
- What specifically is informing this belief?

Our discussions between sessions involved sharing our findings.

Through her independent research, Amanda uncovered compelling evidence that highlighted the significant political and media influence wielded by this family. Soon after, we both discovered further evidence confirming that this family was among the most influential in Australia. The capacity of such a small yet powerful group to exert disproportionate control over many lives became evident. This was a broader social reality that could be confirmed by research. Joining with Amanda in conducting this research was an attempt to redress the hermeneutic injustice of Amanda having to hold on to these beliefs alone with limited to no support in making sense of them. Rather than assume an internal faulty psychological mechanism, we looked externally. What we found demonstrated the role context has in the development of beliefs and how enquiring about this context can be significant.

The process of co-investigation was considered useful by Amanda and participants. Michael reflected on this and hoped others might join in this shared curiosity:

> If they had good conversations like we're doing, it would level the playing field a lot, and it would make things much more comfortable for me … If you're asking really good questions and you try to understand the person's point of view, that to me is a really good sign.

Listening from a position of not knowing

Foundations of narrative therapy emphasise "ethical particularism" (Byers, 2019), which involves tailoring actions and responses to the specific individuals involved. This approach contrasts with more generalisable forms of ethics and therapeutic responses. In practice, this means responding to each person uniquely, taking into account their individual context and needs. This principle applies equally to beliefs that may appear similar to those of others and to those that are markedly different. It also applies when a belief is held with significant intensity or conviction.

However, there is a generalisable stance or position that practitioners can adopt: listening from a position of not knowing and refraining from positioning themselves as experts on someone else's experience. This is informed by the work of Harry Goolishian, who describes how "the therapist exercises an expertise in asking questions from a position of not knowing rather than asking questions that are informed by method and that demand specific answers" (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992, p. 28). This approach positions the person/client/participant as the "knower" in relation to their experience, and positions practitioners as observers and enquirers.

We look to support people from the position that we are not the experts on their experience; they are the experts on their own experience. This means resisting making assumptions or conclusions about the meaning of what is shared. This can help to shed light on the gap between our understanding and the person's perspective. This concept is similar to "listening from a position of not knowing" (Mead, 2014), a skill drawn from Intentional Peer Support that is often quoted but insufficiently documented. Through either approach, we listen as though we genuinely do not know about what is being shared. By resisting assumptions, we can remain open to radical possibilities for making meaning and sense.

The question below attempts to resist the assumed knowledge that a delusion is always fixed, and allows for reflecting on the experience in general.

Hamilton: Do you sometimes doubt what you believe or do you not doubt it at all?

Amanda: Yeah. Oh yeah, I doubt it. And in an odd way … you think, is it bad for my mental health or isn't it? On the one hand, yes, it is bad … especially if you say it is really happening. But even … if it is purely a delusion, yes. But then on the other hand, having someone to blame everything on – it really does free up your mind.

Bethany and I initially discussed the purpose of our meetings, and she wondered whether our conversations would "fix" the distressing beliefs. Listening (and responding) from a position of not knowing, I let her know that I wasn't certain what specifically needed fixing, and that even if we knew what that was, I wasn't certain we could. Months later, towards the end of our conversations, Bethany reflected on the notion of fixing her experience:

Bethany: Some part of me wanted the experience to fix me. Do you know what I mean? Because my thoughts make my life hard in some ways. There's situations that I avoid or it's unpleasant to feel surveilled in some ways. It makes my life hard. Participating has forced me to think about my thoughts, to examine them. Previously, I just accepted them, and that has made me realise that in some way, I actually don't want to be fixed.

While it may seem counterintuitive to approach unusual beliefs from a non-expert/not-knowing perspective, it creates the conditions for reflection that would be suppressed by more rigid approaches that assume certain meta-considerations such as that the belief is always fixed, always bad or requires repair. If we approach people without these assumptions, and refrain from asking questions "that demand specific answers" (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992, p. 28), we can create opportunities for people to make sense of their own experience in ways that are consistent with their own desires. This is a further example of working in a way that supports hermeneutic justice.

The effects

This kind of practice has led to a number of positive effects for the research participants. For some, it provided an environment where they were able to discuss their beliefs in depth for the first time ever. Some effects were general, such as the appreciation of being able to discuss their beliefs, while others were more specific, such as finding strength and perseverance through their resistance and realising new ways of responding to and accepting their beliefs. There were also positive effects for me.

In the most general sense, participants appreciated the opportunity to discuss their beliefs and experiences with me. This is significant in the context of seeking epistemic injustice. Having the opportunity to discuss their experiences without them being denied or dismissed was valuable for people. This was exemplified by Amanda who, as seen earlier, now feels she has "got a better grip on what I'm going through".

The conversations uncovered "sparkling moments" or unique outcomes (Gonçalves et al., 2009) that reflected both old and new skills. People were able to demonstrate these skills in the face of the impacts of these beliefs and the impacts of psychiatry. Amanda said, "You're not going to get me to crack, back off", demonstrating her renewed efforts to keep living life despite her experiences with unusual beliefs. It may not be possible to eliminate the fear that these beliefs can cause, but Bethany demonstrated her commitment to living life despite that fear. She highlighted this by saying, "It doesn't stop me from having a road trip because the overall benefit of that road trip to my child and I for our life experience and mental wellbeing overrides my knowledge that there are cameras everywhere". These moments of resistance were uncovered by enquiring about how participants' beliefs affected their lives. Because our conversations resisted an assumption of total disability or impairment and avoided questions that demand a specific answer, Amanda, Bethany and others were able to articulate the effects of the beliefs themselves.

For Michael, whose beliefs and experiences with psychiatry are ongoing, we discussed how he would continue to cope. Demonstrating an acceptance that exceeds what many might think possible, he said, "I'm not going to complain about my life because I'm going to live it within the constraints that I've been given".

The conversations in this research have made a significant impact on me as a researcher and worker. Although I attempted to position myself as non-judgemental, I still held assumptions about the experience of delusion. They were informed by my past work and personal experiences. However, after spending so much time learning from people, the differing experiences of delusion seem to have little inherently in common. What unifies them appears to be the label and the often-unhelpful responses of others, including in the mental health system. It confirmed to me that delusion is a construct that encompasses many different phenomena.

This research has also reinforced the importance of not succumbing to the nihilism that sometimes accompanies experiences that are called delusions, psychosis or schizophrenia. These experiences are not “paradigmatic instances of incomprehensibility and meaninglessness” as they are sometimes considered (Ritunnano & Bortolotti, 2022). Or at least, it cannot be presumed that they are. There is value in listening to and asking about these experiences.

While it is uncommon in conventional mental health services, some contexts such as peer-support work or practice informed by narrative therapy acknowledge that delusions are a construct and consider that these experiences can be real and significant for people. However, it is different to embed this concept into practice. It is challenging to suspend judgement because some of the beliefs are very unusual, and we may have immediate emotional or cognitive reactions to them. We might even think “that doesn’t make any sense”. In response to this, I might say, “Yes, it doesn’t make any sense, so we will ask about it and listen to what the person has to say”.

Reflections

Some beliefs may stretch what we consider possible; however, this alone is not a reason for us to abandon narrative principles or disregard the real significance of these beliefs. Currently, the definition of delusion is so broad that it could seemingly apply to any belief that is novel, genius, revolutionary or lacking universal consensus (Kapusta, 2014). Notably, we rarely share the same beliefs and contexts as the people we work with. This serves as a reminder of the importance of particularism, whereby we recognise that the people we work with necessarily believe differently from us. It is this recognition of difference that allows us to respond uniquely, thoughtfully and respectfully. This underscores the necessity of understanding each person within their specific context. By acknowledging and respecting these specificities, we can create an environment in which people can speak openly, feel heard and understand experiences, which is crucial for fostering epistemic justice.

While it may be appealing to engage in discussions about whether specific beliefs are literally “true” or not, doing so can reduce our conversations to arguments and obscure the impact and importance of the person’s belief. As Amanda noted, “Sadly, it’s a very human tendency to just not believe because it’s outside of their realm of [one’s] own experience”. This does not mean abandoning rational inquiry altogether, but it requires acknowledgment that some expressions resist clearly defined epistemologies. Some beliefs and expressions contain degrees of truth, they resist a binary true/false conclusion. Further, some beliefs are enmeshed with feelings, and it makes little sense to consider someone’s feelings as either true or false.

For example, the deeply held beliefs “I am a bad person” or “I feel something bad is going to happen” may be considered true by someone, but these beliefs themselves, their origins and their impacts resist neat categorisation as “true” or “false” because they are more experiential. Even with more specific claims or beliefs, elements of them may be true, creating a belief informed by both subjective and objective experiences. Understanding the origins and impacts of these beliefs has proven more useful in this research than focusing on their epistemological status.

We may wish to be non-judgemental but may find ourselves drawn into wanting to negate or dismiss some beliefs because of their perceived unusualness or inappropriateness. Conversely, we might entirely abstain from commenting in pursuit of being non-judgemental but may risk being non-influential. I have said to many people, “I don’t know”, “I don’t believe that to be true”, “I don’t understand where you are coming from”, “That doesn’t make immediate sense to me”. Yet this can be coupled with an attempt to understand, saying “I don’t know, BUT can you help me understand why you feel that is occurring” or “I don’t believe that to be true, BUT it seems like it is evident for you. When did this first become apparent?” Unusualness is not a sufficient reason not to enquire about someone’s experience. Certainly, the most significant events in people’s lives are often unusual. Resisting assumption-making, or worse – a nihilism in which the beliefs are considered to have no value whatsoever, resists epistemic injustice. There is an opportunity to provide people with an environment to discuss and attempt to understand their own beliefs. Of the participants in my research, few, if any, had previously experienced this.

Conclusion

While individuals' experiences are idiosyncratic, people are not alone in their experiences. Many people both suffer from similar fear or sadness. Many resist this and find a way to thrive in the face of such significant beliefs. This realisation underscores the potential opportunity to connect individuals with shared experiences in future work. Peter Bullimore's National Paranoia Network[2] provides a model for such connections, which could be extended beyond paranoia to encompass other beliefs and experiences. Despite the extraordinary nature of stories about unusual beliefs that have been labelled delusional, there is no need to treat them as fundamentally different to other stories. All storytellers are entitled to epistemic justice. This is the right to be heard and to be supported to understand one's experience. It may be the case that beliefs or mental states are "neurologically instantiated" (Fisher, 2009, p. 37). However, their causation and explanation remain far less certain. Joining with people in explorations of the histories, contexts and explanations of unusual beliefs can create possibilities for understanding, hope and change.

Notes

[1] Pseudonyms are used throughout.

[2] https://nationalparanoianetwork.org/

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When Grief Arrives:

An oral history of grief and death within queer, trans and Black, Indigenous and people of colour communities

by Anne-lise Ah-Fat

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Abstract

When Grief Arrives is a narrative therapy and oral history project aimed at re-storying narratives of grief and loss within queer, trans and Black, Indigenous and people of colour communities. The project documents multi-storied accounts of grief that resist the individualisation and isolation of grieving that is common under settler colonialism and capitalism. By honouring overlooked landscapes of experience, the project seeks to generate solidarity and interconnection through shared knowledges. This article discusses the project's methodology, ethical considerations, and the transformative potential of collective storytelling in fostering solidarity and healing within marginalised communities.

Key words: grief; bereavement; tragic deaths; LGBT; queer; trans; transgender; Black; Indigenous; People of Colour; oral history; collective document; narrative practice

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"When Grief Arrives: An oral history of grief and death within queer, trans and BIPOC communities" is a narrative therapy project encompassing an oral history initiative. It includes a published book that shares stories of our loved ones who have died, along with insider knowledges of death and grieving. The impetus for the project stemmed from my personal experiences with the deaths of loved ones, which served as a catalyst for deeper inquiry into how queer, trans and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and people of colour) communities respond to death, navigate grieving and persist amidst pain and hardship. Within our context of settler colonialism and capitalism, grief often finds itself pathologised, individualised and detached from collective practices. This project has sought to explore: my personal context; grief and death under settler colonialism and capitalism; community as a site of healing; and oral histories as an antidote to the positioning of therapist as expert. In this paper I address power dynamics within the project and examine the narrative oral history interviews. The project has made use of the narrative practices of double listening, the absent but implicit, re-authoring, externalising, re-membering, naming injustices and outsider witnessing. In alignment with rich traditions and histories, the project positions queer, trans and BIPOC communities as sites of justice and healing, and it centres the lived expertise of people who have experienced tragic deaths.

My context

Philippe – my pa – died in May 2020. He was a brown man who experienced a lot of suffering and injustices in his life, and he died young. While I do not want to reduce the aliveness of my pa's life or diminish his life into his dying, I also do not want to soften that he died a premature Black and working-class death. My pa died during the COVID-19 lockdowns, and due to restrictions, his last days were with immediate family and friends and his funeral had attendance limits. We went into another lockdown in July 2020, and it was a time of profound solitude in grieving.

My close friend Alex died in March 2023. A group of us found out he had overdosed when we were down the coast together on Gadubanud Country. Close friends and I organised for loved ones, comrades and family to be together the Friday of the week he died. We shared photos, memories, ate together, cried, made space for rage (which there was a lot of), sadness, love, connection and care. Contrasted to what happened when my pa died, it was a remarkably different and healing experience for me.

Over the last few years, many friends and family members have died young from suicide, overdose or health issues. Vikki Reynolds (2016) described "tragic deaths" as being distinct from deaths that are part of life through ageing. Reynolds (2016) shared that death as part of living can be meaningful and dignified, whereas tragic deaths are difficult to respond to.

In order to explore skills and knowledges about grieving tragic deaths, an outline of my aims was distributed via text message to friends and extended community and through my personal social media. Engaging in single conversations, I spoke with both individuals and groups about their experiences with tragic deaths. Eleven of these conversations were recorded and transcribed, with consent, to form the oral history project. I collated the stories into a book titled *When grief arrives: An oral history of grief and death within queer, trans and/or BIPOC communities* (Ah-Fat, 2024).

Grief and death under settler colonialism and capitalism

When Grief Arrives comprises narratives of tragic deaths ranging from overdose and suicide to murder, rare conditions, working-class death and chronic illnesses. These deaths are often attributed to manifestations of capitalism and its related institutions of violence including white supremacy, the prison-industrial complex, cisheteropatriarchy and colonialism (Wingard, 2011). Reflecting on these tragic deaths prompts us to question which lives society deems worthy of grieving and what defines a grievable life (Butler, 2003; Out of the Woods Collective, 2020). Mbembe (2019) extended this concept to describe "death-worlds": environments where people endure life conditions that relegate them to the status of the living dead. Here, on this continent, Aboriginal deaths are often hidden, excluded from public grieving as Indigenous people are dehumanised. Similarly, in occupied Palestine, settler violence dictates who matters and who is disposable.

Tragic deaths are frequently accompanied by anger and pain as they evoke a profound sense of unfairness. Navigating the aftermath of tragic deaths raises profound questions about the nature of grief and its significance when some of us are closer to death from the beginning. Due to the nature of tragic deaths, these deaths become politicised.

B, a participant in the project, reflected on S's experience:

> I often come back to the structural oppression that she had to fight. I believe that structural violence is what is responsible for tragic deaths. (B. "My loved one's name is S. She died by suicide in January this year.")

Grief under capitalism and settler colonialism necessitates critical examination. Michael Dennis reported that in the 20th century, particularly in the West, dominant discourses on grief in psychiatry advocated for closure, distance and detachment from the dead (2012). Concepts such as moving on, letting go, replacing the connection with the dead with a new connection with the living, and severing ties with the dead persist as mainstream practices that prioritise swiftly resuming one's life (Wingard, 2011). Spade et al. (2022) have argued that life under capitalism, white supremacy, settler colonialism and heteropatriarchy exemplify a quick return to capitalist notions of normality.

J, a participant in the project, illustrated the effects of grief under capitalism:

> And it pisses me off so much when I look at the fact that there is a medical diagnosis for prolonged grief disorder. And it's like, how long is too long? Who the fuck are you to tell me that I'm not allowed to so be sad? Get fucked. No, I will not take more SSRIs about it … And also, I'm sad and angry that that is the marker that represents culturally and socially an idea that grief is a process that has to finish quickly, or finish at all. And also, it's the patriarchal imperialist capitalism system once again, being like, oh, well, you're too sad to work? Oh, no. Have some fucking Prozac and get back to work, get back to doing the thing. Make more money for somebody else. (J. "My loved one's name is B. She died eight years ago last Thursday by suicide.")

I asked M, "Are there aspects of your culture's ways of responding to grief and loss that are significant to you and/or do not fit so well for you?"

> What stayed with me was the part on this being a death-denying society … We just don't talk about death, and we try to avoid it as much as possible. It's a sign of the broader disconnection between humans and the earth. Our ancestors were more connected to the cycles of death and life because they were living in communities. Death was not kept in hospitals and morgues. When a person died, the body was there for people to process it. That is why people have ritual and religion and the practices that humans have done for millennia … We can learn from people that are still connected to that or Indigenous wisdoms. People that are not separate from every other living being. Everything lives and dies, and there is no life without death and no death without life, they are totally connected. (M. "My loved one's name is A. He basically collapsed in the bathroom and my aunty thought it might have been suicide.")

These stories stand in stark contrast to the prevailing neoliberal, individualised and normative responses to grief and express a strong desire and necessity to establish space for collective and shared grieving.

Community as a site of healing

When Grief Arrives has been shaped by rich traditions and histories that situate communities as sites of justice and healing (Dang, 2018; Hung & Denborough, 2013). Neoliberalism has led to the professionalisation of local skills and knowledges, fostering pathologising discourses that undermine the significance of community (Bracho, 2000; White, 2006). Such discourses have empowered mental health professionals to construct othered identities, consequently placing people on the margins of knowledge (Baretta et al., 2010). Adalberto Barreto and Marilene Grandesso (Baretto et al., 2010) described this exclusion and diminishment of local skills and knowledges as contributing to psychic misery. I have noticed that queer, trans and BIPOC friends and communities have been recruited into totalising and harmful ideas about who we are, and deficit ideas about our contributions to each other and to the world (Sakutukwa, 2021). Further, Bracho (2000) stated there is a rescue narrative in the history of community work, in which communities are treated as having nothing to offer. The pervasiveness of therapist as expert has led to the expectation that individuals experiencing hardship should primarily consult a therapist for healing, instead of valuing the skills and knowledges that are located within individuals and communities.

During the oral history conversations, I asked, “What were the ways that members of your community responded? Any particular responses that stand out? What did others do that have made things a little lighter?”

F: K, who I imagine had been through a lot of grief at the time, they lost friends to AIDS and shit. Their ability to talk about grief was one of the first experiences that I had of someone being really on to it. We were all in the house and it should have been a circle, but there were so many people – maybe it was 60 people – and anyone was able to share something about this person. And K was kind of pushy in a way that I actually think is important, because of this thing where people are afraid to take up space. Then the people who are really fucked up by it often don’t want to share right in that moment, so then if no one says anything, it’s often the people a little further away that are able to say something and start a bit of a conversation. It was good that K was quite pushy about trying to get people to speak … Almost everyone was crying and almost everyone spoke. (“My loved ones are my dad and my friend M. My dad died of lung cancer and M died of suicide.”)

JA: That thing you organised at Catalyst was really sweet. That was a really nice thing that you organised. I think that was very crucial, very, very crucial. And it was really beautiful. At the funeral, the singing of his favourite songs and all those cute things that people thought of to do. All the photos. I stole one of the photos you brought, and I have this little thing here on the top of my bookshelf that I look at. (“My loved one’s name is A. And the other injustice of course is the drug use and, yeah, the overdose.”)

Anne-lise: Does this way of showing up for friends have any connections to political or movement histories?

J: The way that I met all these friends is through activism and histories of queer family. I think the concept of queer chosen family has been very meaningful to all of us. I think having a sense of responsibility for one another, and an understanding that nobody else is coming to save us, so we have to save ourselves and each other.

A: It’s reaffirmed how important it is to honour community care as something that’s historically been such a big part of the queer community and community care to each other, when there is no other better resource or knowledge base on the trans experience. (“My loved one’s name is B. Once she gets to that point, which is looking likely to be in the next couple of weeks, we can deprescribe her what is essentially assisted euthanasia because of how many life-sustaining medications that she’s on and considering how unpredictable this whole condition has been.”)

These stories stand as examples of communities collaboratively building and sharing resources, ensuring that community therapy is not only useful, but also situates communities as uniquely equipped to envision and build creative approaches to the complexities of grief.

Oral history as an antidote to therapist as expert

Wood et al. (2015) shared that colonising practices have resulted in the exclusion and diminishment of local skills and knowledges. Rewriting histories that are primarily written by dominant groups holds significant potential for individual and community healing (Jackson, 2002a). Jackson (2002a) has argued that oral histories place the power to heal in the hands of those experiencing injustices, positioning storytelling as a powerful tool for justice-doing. Further, oral histories, when created by and for marginalised communities, hold potential to significantly contribute to collective action and resistance against systemic injustices (Jackson, 2002a).

In this project, I held on to dual intentions: 1. to use narrative practices to therapeutically respond to people’s experiences of tragic deaths; 2. to adapt collective narrative practice as a means of contributing to oral histories containing multi-storied accounts of grief, which bear witness to people’s responses (Denborough et al., 2008; White, 2006). When Grief Arrives also builds on Heng Yim’s (2022) stance of witnessing stories without being extractive. In the project, oral history meant positioning participants as co-authors, and situated me as narrator rather than an expert interviewer. The participants were authors and experts on themselves and their experiences (Heng Yim, 2022; Jackson, 2002a; Nestle, 2003; Wood et al., 2015).

Drawing on the work of Jackson (2002a, 2002b) and Nestle (2003), When Grief Arrives connects to movement histories that contribute to liberation struggles. Oral histories form part of the radical left; they story resistance, challenge the idea of the expert, create an archive based in community knowledges and are used to highlight the lives of communities who are silenced or erased. Oral histories fit well within narrative therapy, as living documents and archiving of solution knowledges are existing practices (Newman, 2008). I hope the links between oral history and narrative therapy are taken up for further exploration in future papers.

Addressing power

The dynamics of power within this project are complex and multifaceted. Throughout, I have held a commitment to remaining attuned to how power has been operationalised both in conversations and in the project as a whole (Gaddis, 2004; Raheim et al., 2004; Waldegrave et al., 2003; White, 1995a). During the compilation of the book, I regularly contacted all the participants, providing updates and opportunities to edit, change or rescind their oral history stories. Some participants chose to not be part of the book publication, and it was deeply important to me that I respected what was useful and significant for people.

Referring to queer, trans and BIPOC communities, it is important to clarify that there is no single community that can be neatly summarised or represented. Communities are not unified, and due to the mechanisms of capitalism, many experience alienation and isolation. I value friendship and community as a mode of struggle, recognising that it requires cultivation and to be actively sustained. These unlikely connections, often formed in less-than-ideal circumstances, extend across difference and time. Within this imperfection, I do hold a thinking that groups and communities can work against individual pathology and provide a space for collective healing, enabling contributions and social action (Denborough, 2008). Jackson (2002a) maintained that while history is worth preserving, a more important question to ask is who is in charge of the preservation of it. Nestle (2003) further pointed out that largely marginalised people have few opportunities to research or write about our own lives. Because of this, the ethic of invitation through friendship and community networks rather than through a “worker-client” relationship was meaningful for me in joining with friends and community to explore individual and collective responses to tragic death (White, 2003).

Bearing witness to these stories has helped me heal in ways that I could not have predicted. The conversations offered me an aliveness and I am hoping the stories do the same for others.

Narrative oral history interviews

The project has been influenced by the work of Vikki Reynolds (2014) in structuring enough safety for collaboration, informed by a decolonising stance. It draws from the work of Michael White (2007) in adopting a decentred but influential stance, and adapts re-membering, externalising, absent-but-implicit and re-authoring practices to elicit oral histories. The project has emphasised the use of double listening: bearing witness not only to stories of pain, overwhelm and distress but also to how people have responded to the death and dying of their loved ones (Yuen, 2009). The use of documents (White & Epston, 1990), archiving of solution knowledges and sharing these knowledges between people were central to this project (Denborough et al., 2006). Moreover, this work recognises that friends and family already perform community therapy and aims to reinvigorate the value of this role while fostering networks of solidarity, collective responsibility and ways of linking people’s lives to the lives of others (Andrews, 2001; Baretta et al., 2010; Dang, 2018; Denborough, 2008; Epston & White, 1992; White, 2003, 2007).

Double listening

Throughout this project, I have engaged in multiple roles: participant, facilitator and final editor of the oral history narratives. Drawing on my own insider knowledges, I positioned myself as a context for the project, driven by a personal desire for a resource like this for both myself and my friends. M shared that “uncared for and unhealed grief leads to problems for our shared communities”. As facilitator, I conscientiously embraced the ethic of not retraumatising people in therapy, aligning with the principles outlined by White (1995b). The practice of double listening created a space for the exploration of double-storied accounts (White, 1995b). This involved not only listening to the experiences of trauma, but also attending to contrasted and subordinated experiences of what people gave value to (White, 2000). Through double listening – despite the pain, sadness, anger, hardship and madness of grief – people shared stories of collectivity, friendship and survival, along with multiple acts of care and resistance.

Participants were invited to richly describe their experiences, emphasising a move away from single-storied narratives. As White (2006) suggested, understanding what a person values serves as a foundation for meaningful conversations about the history of these values, skills and knowledges to be generated and significant relationships tied to them. This approach was crucial for reinvigorating a sense of self, offering an antidote to the disabling identity conclusions that people had come to hold about themselves.

Re-authoring: Resisting single stories

Experiences of tragic deaths and their effects have drawn people to this project, and the oral histories draw heavily on the ways in which people and communities have responded to the deaths of their loved ones. Narratives about grieving have a profound impact on queer, trans and BIPOC communities. Queer, trans and BIPOC peoples are up against many single stories that are presented as universal truths (Denborough, 2014; Sakutukwa, 2021). Frequently, these narratives depict distress, a sense of failure, unworthiness and disconnection. Re-authoring and the exploration of alternative storylines proved useful in bringing forth stories of community healing, preferred ways of being, life purposes and commitments.

Throughout the conversations, I was drawn to the idea of magnifying the unnoticed and quiet stories in people's lives, which are often hidden by the single story (Adichie, 2009; Madigan, 2011). I asked about individual and collective responses to tragic deaths, the shaping of life purposes and skills, and knowledges of grieving.

Anne-lise: Has S's death shaped any life purposes or commitments?

B: S did a lot to change and fight for the rights of sex workers, particularly in the Northern Territory because she worked in Garramilla. The main reason that she died is because of structural oppression: because of racism, abuse, sexual violence, misogyny. I think she experienced injustice from so many different angles, which is really difficult.
I felt this before she died also, but I feel motivated to continue fighting against those things that made her life so hard.
At the moment, this looks like staying in touch with her community in Garramilla and continuing to educate myself. Even if it's conversations with people who are outside of her community and how I speak about her world to others … But at the moment, it's maintaining connections with people in her community, that is where I am at right now.

I found that asking re-membering questions provided another pathway into exploring unique outcomes.

Anne-lise: What do you think B would say about what she valued about you?

A: She's been incredibly dedicated and detailed in telling me the things that she values and appreciates in me.
My dedication to my values, my dedication to my loved ones, even when things are incredibly uncomfortable and difficult. Consistency in those moments and also the ability to kind of hold all kinds of shades of emotions as they pop up. She tells me that I'm really amazing at making her feel safe and cared for and considered really deeply.

Anne-lise: How do you find your own ways to grieve?

M: This society we do the opposite, and it really says a lot about the values and practices of a society that denies death, it means we do not live. Ruth Wilson Gilmore talks about death-making institutions and life-making institutions, so that is a more academic way to talk about it (2022). In terms of capitalism, if people are thinking about death, if people are cognizant about death, aware that death is happening and are not denying it, that radically changes the kind of conclusions you come to, the decisions you make and the priorities you

> have. We just wouldn't be silent, consume and die. The awareness of death and the respect of death enables us to be fully alive.

B, A and M strengthened alternative storylines that emphasised care, connection, social contribution and valued skills in relationship building. Re-authoring practices played a crucial role in supporting people to move away from narratives of failure (Drahm-Butler, 2015). Instead, re-authoring facilitated richer descriptions of what people stand for in their lives: maintaining connections with communities, continuing to fight for sex worker rights, dedication to loved ones, relationships of care and reciprocity, and shifting the normative paradigms of grief towards living a life that is fully alive. Through this process, participants reshaped their narratives, arriving at new identity conclusions. The deconstruction of single stories is vital, as dominant belief systems can otherwise reinforce narratives that diminish and reduce people and their communities (Drahm-Butler, 2015). Re-authoring practices also serve as a resistance against what bell hooks (2004) referred to as the "white-supremacist capitalist cis-hetero patriarchy".

Absent but implicit: Pain as testimony

Michael White (2000) developed the concept of the absent but implicit, drawing inspiration from Jacques Derrida (1978). According to Derrida, the meanings we derive from texts are contingent on the distinctions made between what is presented to us – privileged meaning – and what is left out – subjugated meaning. White (2000) emphasised that our understanding is not only shaped by what is explicitly stated but also by what is absent yet implicit.

In this project, I was mindful of exploring multi-storied and rich descriptions of grieving without intending to undermine or diminish feelings of pain, anger or resentment arising from tragic deaths. Engaging in absent-but-implicit practices allowed for the acknowledgment of pain while also illuminating neglected parts of people's stories, reinforcing narratives aligned with people's preferred identities.

To navigate these expressions, I posed questions such as:

- What has been negated that gives rise to this anger?
- What values are you unwilling to relinquish that are reflected in this resentment?
- What is this pain a testimony to?

I engaged in a conversation with E and took an approach centred around exploring what was absent but implicit in their resentment.

E.	Later on, when I'd see posts, I would get a reaction, and I couldn't deal with it. So, every time her anniversary comes along, it hurts. And when people posted that they went and made a little shrine for her in a park, and they did a whole ritual and ceremony there, I felt resentful. It feels too painful. My heart is on the verge of breaking.
Anne-lise:	This resentment you feel, what is it you believe has been ignored or negated?
E:	At the time, what was making me mad was that we weren't making it overt – the conversation of psychosis and drug use. But I wanted to respect the parents and the family, and I didn't want the attention to get pointed towards R. I feel that there are people in that scene, active in organising spaces, who brought drugs into R's life. She told me that she did drugs because other people gave them to her. She always saw the best in everyone and found herself in difficult situations because of that. It is how the psychosis happened. I'm sure she wasn't on drugs for that long.("My loved one's name is R. I was so mad because she died by suicide, well, she died by psychosis.")

In the conversation, that which was absent but implicit in E's discernment of resentment was richly described; that is, experiences of life that are read as examples of concern for their friend, hopes for open conversation in community around the relationship between psychosis and drug use, and respect for R's family. Considering expressions of resentment as testament to what was held precious, preferred and valued offered a re-storying of E's experience (Feliciano, 2022; Freedman, 2012).

Externalising: Negotiating with guilt

According to Charles Waldegrave, Taimalieutu Kiwi Tamasese, Flora Tuhaka and Warihi Campbell from the Just Therapy team, the effects of colonisation and neoliberalism obscure the structures of inequality often associated with the struggles for which people are seeking support (Waldegrave et al., 2003). Additionally, we see that structural inequalities become located within the individual, often resulting in totalising lives and identities (White, 2007). Guilt after suicide and overdose were common themes in the conversations. G said

> I feel that guilt is almost worse than grief. I think there's survivor's guilt. I think there's guilt of not doing enough. There's guilt of a missed moment. I feel so much guilt.

I focused on externalising guilt by asking:

- Has guilt, shame or blame visited you in response to their suicide?
- What have you found helpful in negotiating with guilt?
- Is there something that has helped in speaking back to guilt?
- If you were to pass on a message to other people going through a similar experience to what you've gone through, losing someone from suicide, what would your message be to them?

The following conversation with J appeared to provide an antidote to internalised guilt.

Anne-lise: Is there any message you would share with someone who is also negotiating guilt?

J. Something that has helped me a lot is actually developing more of my political consciousness. Understanding that it is not me, or B's housemates, or her friends, or whatever individual who failed her. She saw a doctor two days before she died and was distressed and was unable to get mental health care … It was a series of social and collective failures. I think broadening the responsibility diffuses the kind of pressure on any one person … I think that learning to respect her and her choices that she made and understanding, there is a kind of power in that. I feel complicated about it because I would never want to stop anyone's efforts to prevent someone from taking their life. There is a really good essay by Kai Cheng Thom in *I hope we choose love* (2019). I have recommended it to so many people … I suppose also acceptance of the guilt, instead of fighting it. Accepting it will always kind of be with me in some form because trying to deny it makes it stronger. And yeah, looking at it in the eye instead of trying to deny it.

Engaging in externalising conversations created a space for people to experience an identity that was separate from the problem. This separation allowed for greater visibility and accessibility of options for problem resolution, including making peace with choices – though limited – surrounding suicide

Legacy: Re-membering

Legacy is at the heart of this project. Dominant ideas about grief and loss have us thinking we need to "say goodbye" or "move on", often resulting in profound sadness, overwhelm and feelings of isolation. According to Hedtke and Winslade (2017), people do not usually miss and yearn for someone who they do not value; their sadnesses can be interpreted as a reflection of important parts of themselves.

Re-membering practices are a way to "say hullo" again to a loved one who has died, and to honour their life through our own (Voght, 2017; White, 1988). Myerhoff (1982) used this term to draw attention to the people who belong to our life stories. Re-membering is not a passive recollection but a deliberate re-engagement with significant people in our lives by exploring two-way contributions: the contributions our loved ones have made to our lives, and the contributions we have made to their lives, and the lives of others (White, 1988).

The following are some of the questions I asked, drawn from Michael White's re-remembering conversations map (White, 2007, p. 139).

Memory and missing

- I was wondering if we could begin by you introducing me to your loved one who's died? What they meant to you and maybe a special memory that you shared together?
- What are some of the things that you miss the most in relation to your loved one who has died? Why?

Places

- Are there particular places that you go to that bring comfort in relation to loss?

Legacy

- Are there stories about your loved one you think they would want to see passed on?
- Were there any wishes and desires concerning your future?

Contributions to each other's lives

- What difference did your loved one make to your life?
- What has this made possible in your life that would maybe otherwise not have been possible?
- How do you think this person would feel knowing this?
- In thinking about your relationship with your loved one who has died, do you get a sense of what that meant for them? Whether it made a difference to how they thought about themselves and their lives?
- Has your loved one's life and death shaped particular life purposes?

The below comprises brief excerpts from the oral histories.

Anne-lise: If C were here, what would she say about what she valued about you?

K: I think she would value the way that I've chosen to fight for her, and for injustice. I think she would think that I was brave and really admire some of the choices that I've made to live the life that I want to live despite the pressure to live differently. I think partly because my feeling is that she felt quite trapped in her life in some ways, and I think that she would love that I have chosen the path that I have, in the sense that I'm doing life on my terms. I think that she would really value the way that I am in relationship to my friendships and my chosen family, and I feel I get that from her in some sense. ("My loved one's name is C. She is my mum and she was murdered.")

Anne-lise: Has J's life and death shaped particular life purposes?

G: A lot of my career choices have come through all my experiences growing up with J and visiting her in hospital and not understanding any of it. She had anorexia and bulimia, and I just always felt so helpless and never knew how to support her, not to say that I couldn't solve problems or challenges … I wanted to educate myself and find ways to feel useful or practical with other people experiencing not necessarily the same, but similar challenges with mental health and drugs and alcohol … I'm an OT now, an occupational therapist in mental health.("My loved one's name is J. She died by suicide when I was 16 and she was 20.")

Anne-lise: Are there things A saw in you or knew about you that you sometimes found hard to know about yourself?

JA: I do know that my existence in this world does make a difference to other people's lives, but because I am constantly comparing myself to other people in this horrible way, I undervalue myself and the impact that I have towards community and people around me. When I first started making the documentary, there were so many people who were not interested and thought it was stupid, but A from the start, he was one of the very few people that thought it was fucking sick. Truly no exaggeration at all. throughout me making the film, A thought it was valuable and important having a historical record and a way to reflect important shit that we are all doing.

Anne-lise: Are there particular values, dreams, or ways of being of A that you wish to continue?

M: The way that he loved and he was so respectful. He was so extremely respectful. There is just no one in the whole world that he would look down on, even the people that did what they did to him. That really matters to me because it's a choice he made. When you've had that many things happen to you, I think it would be justified to be a horrible and violent person … I can see it in my life. It is the same kind of thing that has motivated me. The language has changed throughout my life, but it feels like the same thing. I want to do revolution in a way that dedicates my whole life to love.

Re-membering practices acknowledged the significance of cherished relationships. The questions appeared to play an important role in amplifying the aspects of the relationship that people wished to highlight. Re-membering practices also provided a thickening of preferred stories: of career choices, of living with intention and ethics, fighting against injustices, and shifting from negative identity conclusions to valuing the contributions made to the lives of others. Overall, these stories collectively paint a rich narrative of two-way contributions and how people's lives and deaths have shaped identities, purposes and life trajectories.

Naming injustices

In the context of Aboriginal deaths, Barbara Wingard (2011) emphasised the significance of naming and acknowledging injustice in tragic deaths within settler colonialism. Throughout the oral history conversations for this project, I witnessed a shared commitment among participants to transform the conditions of injustice that contributed to the deaths of our loved ones. Therefore, within the context of tragic deaths, I found it important to ask "Are there any injustices you would like to name in your loved one's life and dying?"

G: I'm angry about all of the times my parents tried to seek support and were turned away. I can think of one example where her alcohol intake was not good, but she couldn't get into a detox facility to reduce her alcohol use because of her eating disorder, and people are not able to get into an eating disorder place because of alcohol use … She got kicked out of the detox place within 24 hours because she started bingeing and they would not deal with her, so she came back home and things really fell apart. I definitely think that's a continued injustice, and a lack of education around eating disorders.

JA: I think one of the really big injustices was how invisibilised his disability was and the impact that Addison's was having on his life. I remember at the time researching it and other people researching it and in all these ways we just kind of wrote it off as him being shit… A and I bonded a lot over neuro divergency and that also plays into why people do drugs, do crime and can't live the lives that the world expects us to live. I think it's an injustice in general, in the world where people who suffer from these problems end up dying prematurely because they belong to these groups."

The act of naming injustices brings attention to the social and political aspects of people's experiences (Dolman, 2011). This approach facilitated acknowledgment of these injustices; including inadequacies within the medical industrial complex, invisibilised disability, the impacts of the criminalisation of drug use; and family violence perpetrated by men within dominator culture. Wingard (2011) shares that the naming of injustices and their effects makes healing more possible.

Outsider witnessing

According to Denborough (2008), definitional ceremonies are crucial in integrating aspects of meaning-making, enabling contribution, identity-formation and social action. Myerhoff's (1982) work affirms that definitional ceremonies serve as a platform for people to be acknowledged, their histories and identities validated, and supports the ongoing process of shaping identities and lives.

In this project, I asked queer, trans and BIPOC peoples to witness the stories of the oral history project. Participants, friends and extended community were invited via text message and through my personal social media. Responses were shared back to participants whose stories were witnessed.

Anne-lise: How have you been moved on account of being present to witness these expressions of life?

AT: The expressions about individual responsibility, systemic oppression and fighting injustice – I want to try to hold on to some of that. Maybe we can't individually fix everything, but continuing to work against the injustices is actually doing something, honouring people. Reminding myself of this might also help to not jump to fixing or avoiding and be able to sit with people in the depths of pain and talk with people about grief.

P: Thinking about difficult experiences I've had in my life (e.g. relationship violence, migration, body shame/anti-fatness) and

> how relationships and friendships have sometimes been difficult to maintain. To me the expressions expressed this clear desire to want to be wanted and cared for, and the want to show others they are wanted and cared for. I think this is something I have felt embarrassed to admit I want – like to belong or for others to want to get to know me or for me to show interest in other people – but it is something I do want and am grateful for.

Witnessing of the oral histories facilitated AT and P reflecting on their own lives and experiences, taking them also to preferred selves and ethical preferences. Outsider witnessing appeared to create a context where knowledges about grief and preferred ways of being in community could be circulated among friends and community (Epston, 1999; White, 1995b).

I asked participants what it was like for them to be part of this project and the publishing of the book:

> Such a deep honour to be a part of this… What a beautiful and deeply moving collection. I'm so awed by everyone's love and connection with their people and with their grief. I feel really honoured to be part of this - thank you. Even though I don't know a lot of the people who participated in this collection, I feel so close to them (and to their loved ones) in some way. And I learnt so much about different grief practices too, and ways of being with loved ones who have died - and of being with loved ones who are still here (in bodily form). Hugely thankful to you Anne-lise, and to those you have lost who are so much a part of you, and this project. (K)
>
> Thank you so much for holding space, for the book and for me being part of the project. (G)
>
> Thank you so much. The parts I have read so far, have been incredibly moving and beautiful. (M)

Conclusion

Through this project, I have considered how individual and collective narrative practices combined with oral histories can re-story narratives about grieving tragic deaths within queer, trans and BIPOC communities. When Grief Arrives co-researched and documented multi-storied accounts of grief and loss (Epston, 1999; Reynolds, 2016; White, 2007), with the hope of linking participants with others in their histories and communities and resisting individualisation and isolation (Denborough et al., 2006). The work honours landscapes of experience that were previously overlooked and lacked acknowledgment (Epston & White, 1992). I aspired to utilise these knowledges to generate a sense of solidarity through interconnection. My hope for this project is that friends, family and community members could offer those experiencing grief with an alternative perspective of themselves, rather than just the experiences of the hardships and struggles they are facing (White, 2007).

Acknowledgments

When Grief Arrives took place on the stolen lands of the Wurundjeri & Boon Wurrung/Bunurong peoples of the Kulin Nation. Sovereignty was never ceded, and this is and always will be Aboriginal land.

I would like to honour Aboriginal skills and knowledges in grief practices, from communities whose many deaths are unjust and often unacknowledged. Re-membering practices have been central to this project, and while in narrative therapy they can be attributed to Barbara Myerhoff (1982) and Michael White (2007), re-membering also accurately describes practices found in ancestral Aboriginal traditions (Dumaresque et al., 2018; Wingard & Lester, 2001). Part of this project took place in Mauritius on my ancestral lands. Re-membering practices are ancestral practices in my family, where the dead are honoured and continue to live within and through the living.

I would like to dedicate When Grief Arrives to all the people who took part in it, and all of their loved ones who have died. This project is also for Alex, Calum, Popefred, my pa, and my uncles Jean-Francois and Nichola who all died in the last three years. All of whom I love deeply.

When grief arrives. An oral history of grief and death within queer, trans and/or Black, Indigenous and people of colour communities is available to buy here:

https://incendiumradicallibrarypress.bigcartel.com/product/when-grief-arrives

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We are a spider's web:

Friendship in times of mental health crisis

by Frankie Hanman-Siegersma

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Abstract

Community responses to those experiencing mental health crisis and distress are important. However, in Australia and many other colonised countries, responses to distress have become highly medicalised, punitive, individual and privatised. Exploring friendship responses to mental health crisis may increase the possibilities for building on community connectedness and local support networks. The work described in this paper aimed to make visible the acts of care, solidarity, friendship and mutuality that friends and members of the community have taken up in response to someone close to them experiencing distress. The work was guided by intentional peer support and narrative practices including re-authoring, collective documentation and outsider witnessing.

Key words: friendship; solidarity; trans; queer; LGBTQIA+; peer work; intentional peer support; narrative therapy

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The context of individualism and the response of solidarity

Years ago, a close friend who I was living with at the time came into my room one evening with a very concerned look on her face.

I looked up from my book. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s Alex. They are having a really hard time. Everyone is very worried about them.” My friend showed me a series of messages from Alex, which told of the different ways they were being called to end their own life.

The nature of these calls was not unfamiliar to me. Although I didn’t know the exact quality of Alex’s suicidal thoughts and ideas, I knew about the weighty presence such thoughts can take up in our lives. Just the year before, I had found myself in a similar predicament, making similar plans, sharing my life with an over-stayed visitor known by some as “die thoughts” (Kennedy, 2018). A close ally to die thoughts was isolation. In my experience, they worked closely together, often increasing in strength when combined. In that year, I was very isolated; the rest of the world felt so far out of my reach it was impossible to touch. What assisted in the possibility of one day touching the world again was friendship and connection. When I linked with my friend in her concern for Alex, I held this in mind.

From that evening on, a group of friends joined with Alex in their resistance to the suicidal thoughts. Alex’s responses included continuing to study for their exams even when die thoughts told them they wouldn’t make it out alive. Alex invited us to conspire against die thoughts’ lethal plans by having sleep overs, cuddling their dog and chatting with family members as a “buffer”. I shared with Alex how alone I’d felt during my own struggles, and how a partner had sat with me in silence for hours not knowing what to say but passing me tea and avocado toast. Alex and I ate potato gems together. While Alex was resisting these commands to die, they invited us to be witnesses and advocates when interacting with police and paramedics, clinicians and nurses. Our collective response against suicide looked like sharing memes into the morning, visiting the hospital for games of table tennis with Alex and other members of the community, and later, visiting the residential service where Alex was honing their skills on the electronic drum kit. The organising of this response was immediate, driven by a deep and resounding love for our friend. It was based in political values of solidarity, rather than rescuing or providing charity. As Uruguayan journalist and writer Eduardo Galeano said,

> I don’t believe in charity. I believe in solidarity. Charity is so vertical. It goes from the top to the bottom. Solidarity is horizontal. It respects the other person. I have a lot to learn from other people. (as interviewed in Barsamian, 2004, p. 146)

Our collective response filled a space that did not exist in mental health services: one of solidarity and friendship. As Bryn Kelly said,

> Solidarity is an act, a series of acts, a lifetime of choices and self-education, a deeply felt human compassion. (as quoted in Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2019b)

Before writing this paper, I interviewed Alex about their experience of this time.

Frankie: In what ways have you been sustained by friendship in difficult times?

Alex: At the time I met you, you were helping with a lot of the practical support and admin, because I was working my way through the mental health system. There was also a sharing of similar stories and experiences, which is probably what helped me the most. You had been through your own intense crisis the year before. I found those peer relationships, whether they were through friendships or through a peer worker in hospital, helped me realise, “Oh, you’ve had lived experience, and you came out the other side and you’re alive”. It literally helps you survive, hearing you’re not the only one, just knowing that you’re not alone … Because it’s the aloneness that is the most piercing, you know?

It was while collaborating alongside Alex to work through the mental health system that I was asked, “Are you a health professional? Are you sure you are qualified to be doing this?” This comment had me thinking of Dang’s (2018, p. 6) statement that “friendships are under-theorised and under-valued, and friends are rarely included in therapeutic ‘interventions’”. Mental health systems are steeped in the idea that responses to distress must be administered by experts with proper training (Kitzinger & Perkins, 1993, pp. 73–105). Friends are no longer deemed to be qualified to respond to the distress of their loved ones. Friends can't deal with "big feelings". I believe this exclusion of friendship is a practice of privatising social suffering (Jackson, 2013).

Each person involved in the collective response to Alex's distress held diverse qualifications of insider knowledge. These included having their own relationship with suicidal experiences; experience of familial conflict or struggle or financial insecurity; skills and knowledges of care obtained through histories of friendship; having a sense of what increases shame or loneliness and what enables closer connection; and inviting humour and silliness into difficult situations. All of us, alongside our friend Alex, also shared an experience of "not-knowing" and uncertainty, which located us in a perfect position to be comrades against suicidal experiences precisely because we weren't "experts". We knew our friend was always already responding to the suicidal experiences, and we could be alongside them in this resistance.

I have personally felt the devastating effects of the discourses of qualification and the professionalisation of care. These discourses leave individuals, their friends, families and communities stripped of skills and knowledges in taking action against the problems we are experiencing. The most popular responses to people who experience mental health issues are filtered through Western, colonial, individualistic frameworks that privilege pathologisation and othering (White, 1995b). Devaluing the support of friends only contributes to this. The challenge of "isolated individualities", which Michael White (1992, p. 38) described as the outcome of a "denial of community" through the project of essentialism, has created such strife and pain for so many of us. The strife of isolation can create a sense that we are severed from meaningful connection in times of distress. These isolated individualities shape psychology and psychiatry. They bring us the idea that "people who are disturbed need to be removed, put somewhere to be fixed or amended, and then and only then can they be brought back into society" (Volden, 2007, p.17). Although I have indeed benefited from treatment provided by psychiatrists and psychologists, friendships and solidarity and community are what have kept me alive.

The work described in this paper combined individual narrative therapy, collective practice and community organising to explore and document the contributions of friendship, community and solidarity in times of crisis.

Social location and relationships

It is important that I locate myself as a descendent of Dutch, British and Irish settler ancestors. I live in Narrm Melbourne on Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung lands that are part of the eastern Kulin Nation. Birrarung, the sacred river songline that runs through this Country, has shaped the friend, partner, poet, daughter, sister and peer narrative practitioner who authors these words. I thank the custodians and Elders who have taught me about reciprocity, community and mutuality, which have been central tenets of this work. I am committed to anti-oppressive decolonial practices, not as metaphors but as material actions rooted in land return and justice-doing (Reynolds, 2019; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

I come to this work as an insider practitioner (Sather, 2021). I hold similar and vastly different lived/living experiences of mental health and crisis to the community members who chose to participate in this work. I bring an ethic of queering as a critic of professionalism in being with a process that is emergent, messy, shifting and full of possibility (Hoff, 2022). Queering helps me to question how power operates, who has the authority to make declarations about people's experiences, and what the effects are of those declarations (Hoff, 2022).

The community members who participated in this work had lived and living experience of mental health challenges. Some were my friends; others were colleagues in the lived experience workforce. Our stories spanned ages, spiritualities, religions, cultures, countries, genders, sexualities and experiences. Our lineages are from the lands, waters and skies of Aotearoa New Zealand, Rwanda, Portugal, Australia, Vietnam, Angola, Hong Kong, India, Ireland, the Netherlands and England.

I work as a mental health peer-support worker, using my lived experience of mental health challenges and as a user of the mental health system in my conversations with people navigating that system. Peer work shares ethics with narrative practice, including co-researching and examining with curiosity the problems that are affecting our lives, valuing people as the experts on their own lives, and double listening or listening for the untold story (Kennedy, 2018).

However, this work did not take place within the paid realms of peer narrative practice, but in a local community context. Brazilian narrative therapists Baretta and colleagues (2010) invited practitioners to take up responsibility as citizens in responding to distress and suffering we see in our communities. The way that I experience community is through my fluid, life-sustaining friendships. Charlie, a collaborator in this project stated:

> Friendship doesn't have the traditional ties with family or blood, romance or sex. It's one form of relationship that isn't codified. We don't have the same scripts attached as intimate partnerships or parent–child relationships. There's a deep revolutionary love that's possible in friendship. We intentionally choose to have that bond in our lives.

And what is possible with revolutionary love? Perhaps friendship is a place where we can stand together against discourses of power.

A friend made at the guesthouse

During an experience of profound darkness that wound up with me staying at a "guesthouse for distress", as I have come to affectionately call it, I met a person called Renee. At the time, my experience of reality was very slippery. I had very loud voices commanding me to die.

After a dinner of spaghetti bolognese, Renee approached me and said, "Do you want to come outside and smoke with us?"

Those of you with insider knowledge of the mental health system as a "patient", "consumer" or "service user" might be familiar with the advice clinicians give against friend-making. I've pondered this strange practice for a long time. Perhaps it's a cultural phenomenon from the assumption that people who wind up in such guesthouses aren't in their "right minds" to form new relationships? Maybe it's a way of having clinical control over the intimate lives of those living with mental health issues?

Despite these precautions, Renee and I developed a very significant friendship over the course of three weeks together at the guesthouse. Upon leaving, I wrote a letter to her detailing how her friendship during that time had shaped my decision to stay on this earthly plane. Renee wrote in response:

> Recovery and moving forward with tides
> and healing of your experience.
> Is something I'm so proud to have witnessed
> and take whole heartedly the magic of your
> existence.
>
> I'll introduce you to a song by Billie Holiday
>
> "I'll be seeing you" and I hope this for some day.
> x

My experiences of responding to friends in distress, and receiving support from community members and friends in my own dark times, planted the seed for this project.

Crisis as a response to structural violence

It was my hope that this project would be community building and dignifying of the ways we come together as friends and in solidarity (Denborough, 1996, pp. 215–220).

In the spirit of co-research (Epston, 1999), I enlisted the help of two friends in the design of the interview questions. Both had been involved with coordinated community responses. I also spoke with a dearly beloved friend in relation to an experience of "crisis". They said it was difficult to choose just one, because for a period of their life, mental health crises were perpetual within the queer communities they were part of. Talking in this way about crisis, as one isolated emergency after another, brought pain, as these crises sometimes ended friendships. It also had the effect of collapsing crisis on to people's identities and ignored the effects of colonisation, homophobia and transphobia on people, friendships and communities. We came to agree that the person, the friendship and the community are not the problem. The problem is social and should be located as such (White, 2007, pp. 219–260). There can be a great diversity of crises; they can be profoundly personal and at the same time not individual or isolated. Crises are always embedded in broader relations of power. This dearly beloved friend said it was important to see crisis as a response to structural violence. The violence both causes and perpetuates crises.

This conversation had me thinking about how I could move away from holding "simple" stories of mental health crisis. I wanted to look further than the single-voiced, dichotomous and totalising idea of crisis (Decter & Buckley, 2006, p. 6). Looking beyond this single story, there was possibility of richer, more complex understandings of people and their actions (Decter & Buckley, 2006, p. 6). I shaped the interview questions to focus on actions people and their friends had taken in response to a crisis, rather than the situation of crisis itself. The questions focused on the strengths and skills suggested by the responses (Wade, 1997; Yuen, 2009). As I was asking people to share very personal details about their experiences of crisis, these questions were also a way of avoiding this being retraumatising (White, 1995a).

The following interview questions were based on the re-authoring map (White, 2007, pp. 165–218); collective narrative practice (Denborough, 2008, pp. 26–49); resistance to sexual violence through friendships (Dang, 2018); the policing family violence project (Caulfield, 2021); collective responses to mental health stigma (Kalisa, 2022); Brazilian community therapy projects (Baretta et al., 2010); the OPROMAMER mental health advocacy group in Rwanda (Haragirimana & Denborough, 2019); and stories of collective resistance during COVID-19 in India (Anonymous, 2021).

- What does friendship mean to you?
- Has there been a time when you have been there for a friend during a time of mental health crisis? And/or a time when a friend has been there for you during a time of mental health crisis?
- What name would you give your/your friend's action?
- What does this action say about your/your friend's values, knowledges or ways of being?
- Were your/your friend's actions connected to, or supported by, broader groups or practices that you/they are part of? That is, are there cultural practices, family histories or particular social movements that supported you/them to take the action you/they did?
- Was there a song, poem, resource, religious text or piece of advice that was significant at the time?
- What meaning did your/your friend's actions have for you or what difference did they make in terms of their/your healing journey? In terms of your sense of belonging in community?
- Were there any things you would do the same next time? Anything you might do differently?
- Were there any things you learnt about friendship from this time of response to crisis?

Beginning with the question "What does friendship mean to you?" invited people to consider friendship as a relationship of sustenance. This allowed them to come into the process of storytelling from a "riverbank" position (Kaseke, 2010). From this safe place, they could look at the river of experiences of crisis in their lives without having to jump into the water (Kaseke, 2010).

Mandy shared this story:

> When I was 15, I was homeless. I came out as a lesbian, and my older siblings, who were looking after me, didn't want anything to do with me because they were very anti that. So I had to make do on my own. My friends that I developed along the way have been my family more than my blood family have been. My friends are my bloodline. They are my life.

Mandy described how cultural practices shaped her friendships:

> I'm somebody who identifies with my Māori culture, and the concept of whānau, which is family, which is really anyone. So my brother, my sister, my auntie, my uncle are not the only ones in my life. My family is not just blood family but kindred spirits as well. I have a lot of kindred spirits – like, a lot. In Aotearoa we have lots of gangs. I call my friends my gang. And you are in arms with each other. When one falls or one slows down, we say, "let's pick them up".

The two-part question about the meaning of a friend's actions was designed to rupture neoliberal discourses of "self-management" which emphasise "personal responsibility" for mental distress (Brown, 2019, pp. 155–158). Waari, a dear friend and participant, shared this in response:

> When I moved to this country as a migrant, I had to in lots of ways start all over again, and I could not take family with me. I learnt to shed a lot of those ideas that were culturally imposed – like that friendships are not important. I met kindred people, like-minded people with whom I sort of merged friendship and family into one thing. I think that's something that a lot of queer people do as well. Perhaps, we can't rely on nuclear family structure or the kinds of things that one is meant to.
>
> I think this place [Australia], compared to the societies I came from, is more atomised. Everyone's just a bit more apart ... whereas

> back at home, which is India for me, there's a lot of community involvement in everything and everyone's just sort of up in each other's business. The friends that I have here are conscious of not getting divided by capitalism. You've got to strive to be in each other's lives and show up for each other in a way that it seems "not natural", but actually, it is that you're trying to be as natural as you can in unnatural circumstances. The event which really defined friendship for me was the [COVID-19] pandemic. I think it really consolidated an idea of what showing up for one another would look like.

Friendship reflected people's actions towards "trying to be as natural as you can in unnatural circumstances". As a result of asking people to locate their experiences in relationship with others, and within culture, stories of standing against dominant society emerged.

Structuring safety, ethics and attention to power and privilege

Practices of cultural humility, such as avoiding assumptions of universal knowledge, engaging in self-reflection and inviting accountability, strongly guided this work (Dominguez, 2017). I wanted to co-create conversations that were "safe-enough" with the friends and community members I interviewed (Bird, 2000, 2006; Reynolds & polanco, 2012). Rather than the binary of "safe" or "unsafe", I approached my conversations knowing that power is constantly at play, therefore transgression is always possible, even with my social justice ethics (Reynolds & polanco, 2012). I was not interviewing my friends as a "therapist" positioning them as "clients", but as an insider practitioner (Sather, 2021), friend and community member. At times, my hope that friends would have a positive experience in the interviews, or experience the project as mutually enriching, invited self-doubt. In other moments, overwhelm settled in between myself and the person I was speaking to as I struggled to navigate the multiple relational responsibilities I was attending to.

Because of the responsibilities I held in my relationships, I was invited into accountability to repair after ruptures. As narrative therapist Julie Tilsen said in an interview (Hoff, 2022) about working with queer and transgender young people, these multiple relationships with people build in safety because you are accountable to community. In this context we are constantly negotiating and talking about how power is operating, rather than pretending it doesn't exist (Tilsen in Hoff, 2022). I was conscious to make space so that nothing went unquestioned. The feedback I received from friends has deepened my attention to power, and I have taken any ruptures as opportunities for reflection and growth in my practice.

It was my hope that through my seeking ways to resist replicating dominance and being open to a critique of the practices I was using, people would feel respect and care throughout the relationship. I did this by sharing the questions before the interview, and when in conversation, asking how it was going for them and creating a context where people could story their experiences of friendship rather than having me impose my idea of the kinds of stories that should be told. Reynolds' stance of imperfect solidarity and allyship (Reynolds, 2010; Reynolds & polanco, 2012) made possible practices of accountability in this realm. This included ensuring people could meet at a time and place that felt appropriate to them, giving them choice about whether the interview was recorded or not, allowing them to determine the length of the interview, allowing for a conversational style, and providing opportunities for adding to and making changes to their transcripts and stories.

Connection to histories of social change and transformative justice

I situate my work within rich lineages of community-based responses that hold a commitment to exposing social and political injustice and their effects on people's lives and relationships: the Fireweed Collective (2022); Project LETS (2023); Wildflower Alliance and Intentional Peer Support (Davidow, 2018); the Soteria model (Mosher et al., 2004). These lineages include peer support, collective narrative practice, community organising and campaigning, and transformative justice projects. There is a rich history of community-based efforts led by First Nations communities to respond to distress, harm or violence. These include community patrols (Yunupingu & Mununggirritj, 2007), police accountability, campaigning and justice matters (Ironfield et al., 2021; O'Donnell, 2022).

Consumer ex-patient survivor advocate and founder of intentional peer support (IPS) Shery Mead (2021) described peer support as a culture of healing that happens when we build mutual respect and trust. As peer support becomes more integrated into clinical services, Mead says that we must not forget that peer support was never about making services more effective: it was about social change (2014, pp. 3–4). When queried about what she imagined social change to look like, she answered,

> I have always thought that IPS had the ability to change conversations and therefore relational dynamics … I had hoped this would eventually have an impact on my neighbours, so rather than wanting to send me to a hospital when I told them I was feeling suicidal, they might ask me what that meant for me and what had been going on. (Kennedy & Mead, 2019, p. 51)

The relational aspect of social change holds strong resonance with transformative justice practices (Dixon & Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2020; Herzing, 2018; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2019a, pp. 136–149). Martina Kartman described the everyday practices of transformative justice:

> It might mean that we sit down and actually have the hard, vulnerable conversations with our friends about what it looks like for me when I'm going down a bad path, whether that's a shame spiral or mental health support that I might need. It means that if someone is having a hard time, that I'm showing up in whatever way that person has self-identified that they need. So, it might be not talking about it at all but I'm coming to do the dishes or I'm driving your kids to school. (Barnard Center for Research on Women, 2020)

These everyday practices of transformative justice might seem incredibly ordinary. However, in the words of a collaborator in the project, often this solidarity and connection is actually "providing care in what might be seen as an extraordinary way in Anglo-Australian community". In the cultural context of colonial Australia, which privileges individualism over community and collectivism, we are pushing against dominant culture when we turn towards, strengthen and expand our networks of support. As Ejeris Dixon says, "violence and oppression break community ties and breed fear and distrust" (2020, p. 17). When we look towards our friends and community instead of an overreliance on professional or institutional response, we ask each other,

> What is the world we want? How will we define safety? How do we build the skills to address harm and violence? How do we create the trust needed for communities to rely on each other for mutual support? (Dixon, 2020, p. 17)

As with many transformative justice projects that are small, bold experiments, the Alternative Community Mental Health Project (ACMHP) carried out by Dulwich Centre is a rich example of community-based responses (Sue et al., 1997). The ACMHP brought together individual counselling conversations and community work, and challenged dominant ways of understanding mental illness. It sought not to locate the problem within the person, but to consider the impact of social and political contexts (Sue et al., 1997, p. 9).

Why does it matter to name, acknowledge and carry these legacies with me, with us? Because it is by being connected with these histories and ongoing struggles that I bring justice to the work that I do within the communities that I live alongside, and those communities where I hold membership.

A queer coven and trans solidarity

Alongside every problem story or experience of crisis is an alternative story, a *strong story* (Drahm-Butler et al., 2015). This strong story tells of the ways that a person has stayed connected to what's important to them and found ways to look after themselves and others. As I spoke to Judith, she told me about the ways she had found comfort and care within a queer coven at one of the most difficult times of her life.

> Mom was gathering money from her uncle, grandmother and people from church in Hong Kong to send me to university in Australia. But when I told her that I was trans, she had a period of disowning me and withdrawing her financial assistance. I was in a really horrible place for a while. The only thing that I really had to lean on at the time, and the only place where I felt truly safe and accepted, was in my queer coven.
>
> That was a space where I was able to just wear whatever clothing I wanted, and people would not bat an eyelid. I could present or say anything I wanted in that space. We had the idea of unconditional positive regard. There were other trans people there too, so I felt seen and held by that.
>
> I remember this one instance where we went down to the beach to do this ritual. There were

> no clouds in the sky. It was super late at night. I could just see the Milky Way above me and all of these stars, and the ocean was roaring, and you can scream and no one can hear you because it's masked by the sound of the waves. And I just screamed harder than I ever have. I burst into tears. Everyone was like, "Oh my god, are you okay?" I was weeping and trembling, screaming and crying, and everyone just held me. It was so beautiful. It showed me that there were people who would stand with me even when I was at the absolute worst.

Judith's story of a queer coven that would stand with her had me realise that friendship can be a witnessing and solidarity to stand in contrast to family disownment. As bergman and Montgomery (2017, p. 58) have written, "friendship and resistance are interconnected: when we are supported, we are more willing to confront that which threatens to destroy our worlds". Friends can "be the basis for community accountability and political action" (Dang, 2018, p. 5).

Billy described their experience of an accountability process to help a friend who was in distress:

> I was supporting a member of my community who was suicidal and was also someone who had used harm in his relationships. At this time, I noticed that our community responded with either a denial of his actions or a total rejection of him. This is how Pākehā punitivism teaches us to respond. Deny or dispose. A binary that dishonours all those involved when violence is being used and experienced. I was friends with the people who he had caused harm to. It was for these friendships that I showed up for him.
>
> We had conversations that were challenging and hard as well as allowing for softness and care. He stayed at my house before he was admitted to hospital. I was a person he could message or talk to when he was feeling like he wanted to die. I would be there to respond and just chat through the dark feels without freaking out, needing to fix or collude, just someone to be there and listen.
>
> I felt a sense of solidarity with him as a trans person, as a survivor, as someone with complex mental health and as someone who has been recruited into harmful ways of relating. I understood the shame associated with using harmful behaviours when we are living out of our wounding. You know, human dignity always matters. No matter how people are behaving or the violence that they're using, their life is important and deserving of care.
>
> When I look back on that time, it makes me think of the Te Ao Māori principle of manaakitanga, which is like caretaking for the mana of a person. Manaakitanga is when you hold someone's mana and you bring them in. The white translation of that would be hospitality. Manaakitanga is taking care of someone's mana. And it's active. Mana comes from the ancestors; it comes from our atua. Everyone has mana. And it's intrinsic to all beings. You can't destroy someone's mana, but you can degrade it. Sometimes we have to support people to feel into their mana – whakamana them, you know? You ever see a person rise when they are offered respect and belief? That's them feeling and accessing their mana.

Billy's story had me thinking that manaakitanga can be offered through trans solidarity. Friendship continues and strengthens cultural practices.

We are a spider's web: Collective documentation

After a series of individual narrative conversations, stories were put together through shared themes. The "We are a spider's web" collective document is double-storied, collectively recounting a variety of hard-won knowledges and skills alongside a rich acknowledgment of the contexts in which these had been developed (Denborough, 2008, pp. 26–49). My hope for the document was that people could experience the know-how they used, and witness the knowledges and skills being used by other people across different contexts and countries. Using collective documentation invited some important practical and ethical considerations. These related to:

- transparency about my intentions for the document, including public circulation
- issues of privacy
- providing collaborators with opportunities to provide edits and feedback, including of this paper, which includes extracts of the collective document.

Enabling contribution between participants felt especially important as this linked people around trans and queer solidarities, Rwandan and Māori cultural practices, AIDS activism, and creating and sustaining community. The stories in the document were organised around the following themes:

- Friendship is this rock that's there to share the journey
- Responding to concerning times
- Alchemical processes: giving what we were not given
- Holding a spirit of friendship in all our relationships
- Honouring our seat at the table
- A collectivist way of responding: what we have learnt and where we would like to go.

These titles were words spoken by the people I interviewed. The choice of language and phrasing is important. Savouring people's expressions in this way was my attempt to join people in their experiences of the world, to see their insider knowledge as distinct and valuable (Ishikawa, 2014). It was important to honour the poetry in their expressions and meaning-making (Penwarden, 2020). This practice reflects my commitment to honouring how each person names their experiences of friendship and of concerning times in words that were "experience-near" (Freedman, 2012). This commitment is also reflected in the title of the collective document. Waari reflected on the support offered to them at a difficult time:

> I would say she, with so many other people in the community, that network, that spider's web, really saved me ... it was lifesaving. Absolutely. No doubt about it.

The image of a spider's web stayed with me. I asked Waari whether it would be okay if we used their expression for the title of the collective document. They were pleased with this idea. Paying attention to expressions, documenting them and then sharing them back through definitional ceremony made room for a re-experience of the alternative storylines (Newman, 2008).

Regenerating some kind of life force: Inviting outsider witnesses

It was important to create a context in which collaborators could experience the re-telling of stories they had told about friendship in times of crisis. We brought together a small group online and performed a reading of the document with participants in Aotearoa and Australia. This ritual of definitional ceremony, which included outsider witnesses, was intended to acknowledge and further develop alternative narratives about the actions people and their friends had taken (Myerhoff, 1986; White, 2007, pp. 165–218). As Michael White wrote,

> Definitional ceremonies provide people with the option of telling or performing the stories of their lives before an audience of outsider witnesses. These outsider witnesses respond to these stories with retellings ... It is through these retellings that people experience their lives as joined around shared and precious themes in ways that significantly thicken the counterplots of their existence. (White, 2007, p. 178)

As I read out each person's story, there was a sense that this re-telling created a "forum for the creation of a social memory of resistance and sustenance" (Dang, 2018, p. 6). I invited outsider witnesses to offer a response to each person's story, based on the following questions:

- What particular words or phrases struck you?
- What is it about your own life that made these words stand out to you?
- What difference will remembering this make to your life, or your friends or community?

During this outsider-witnessing practice, Renee, shared:

> The friendships that you forge purposely, over those who may be connected to you by blood, are actually super imperative and super important. However brief or long those moments of friendship are, there is no judgement or ridicule in that time, there's just boundless unconditional love.

Another participant, Billy, shared:

> I held a big sadness around some of the friendships that I've shared in crisis. There was loss and pain surrounding those times. This project kind of helped me to reflect on actually just in those moments, how beautiful those moments of unconditional love were. Through this project, I remembered that after one very dark part in my life, where I had to navigate a hospital emergency room alone, friends bought me a plane ticket back home to Aotearoa. Remembering this has been very significant.

A friend, Leanna, was invited to respond to the collective document. Her response was read out to the collaborators at our gathering:

> The metaphoric spider's web image really resonated with me: beautiful, wonderous, natural, organic, yet engineered specifically for strength, protection and to offer sustenance. They're so common that sometimes we don't notice them. But if we pause to specifically look for them, we can see that they are everywhere. As I go about my daily, pedestrian activities at home, I observe myself looking with a fresh perspective at the many spiders' webs around my house and on my deck. These usually mundane activities are now extraordinary, sustaining and spiritual reminders of the strengths and unique shapes of my friendships and relationships. They represent my hopes and intentions for my friendships and for building more communities based on friendship.

Upon hearing this response, one of the participants said:

> It's really amazing to have our stories honoured. And to hear others share what they have been through too. So often those stories of friendship aren't celebrated, but here we are today, celebrating them.

I have gone on to share the document with many people, across lived experience workforces, those working in mental health crisis response, friendship networks and community. Amelia sent this response:

> Dear Spider's Web participants,
>
> I work in a lived experience position as a research assistant. I have been doing some academic research and to read something that continually refers to people as "one of us" rather than talking about "respondents" or "participants" finally made my eyes stop glazing over and made me want to pay attention.
>
> The phrase "temporary moments of unconditional love" has stuck with me. Remembering our own shared experiences makes me so proud and grateful, as being able to collaborate and respond (in an imperfect way) to a loved one in need feels so meaningful and purposeful in a way that is regenerative of some lifeforce in a world that is quite exhausting and extractive.
>
> I feel like some of the greatest lessons learnt have been forged out of these collaborations between friends to support each other.
>
> I resonated so much with J talking about how healing it is to give people what you wished you'd received. Once you have moved through some of the necessary grief around that, you realise that the support web is reciprocal and that it is not too late to ask for what you wish you'd received.
>
> The depth of experience and understanding from navigating crises is what grows our capacity to hold space in a way that feels truthful and respectful. We are always learning, but the cumulative experience makes me trust in each other further each time.

It is exciting that the spider's web of people's stories continues to be woven. I hope the practices shown through this project will assist peer workers, counsellors and therapists to re-honour friendships as places of sustenance, healing and justice. I also hope these stories spark new commitments for future friendship initiatives in your own communities and networks.

Now, you might remember my dear friend Renee from the guesthouse. Well, we did indeed see each other again. In fact, I invited her to take part as a participant in this project. I experienced our friendship as a site of resistance to oppressive systems (Dang, 2018). Renee reflected on our friendship and what it meant to her at a difficult time:

> When you're inside these institutions of mental health, like on inpatient units, they're always strict about "no making friends", but making connections and friends within such a vulnerable space can actually serve to promote collective healing and comfort and lights to the end of the tunnel of a hospital bed, of where the lives of those people could be after exiting that space. Because, as any hospital, it is not a place of residence but a sliding door. The friends that you make from there can be for understanding, for love and grounding in what collective emotions can bring anyone to that space.

The impact of the telling of the collected stories on the author

The telling of these collective stories had me reflecting on the ways that people within my friendship network and community are responding to "individualized and isolated positions" that reinforce "debilitating conclusions of individual responsibility, blame, and shame" (Lee, 2023, p. 5). In speaking to close friends and my partner about ways we had moved towards community participation (Bracho, 2000) in times of crisis, I felt more connected to and enlivened by shared precious commitments, beliefs and values. Through these conversations, I had the experience of making visible the significant actions people had taken in shifting to "being with a community or group rather than alone as an individual" (Lee, 2023, p.7). These conversations have sparked future friendship initiatives, which are enabling opportunities for us to turn up in imperfect solidarity for each other (Reynolds, 2013; Reynolds & polanco, 2012), and for us to join with others in similar projects, for example through meal trains, solidarity care networks, informal peer-support groups and mutual aid.

These collective stories had me reflecting on what it takes to locate ourselves in relation to each other through solidarity, rather than charity, by drawing from our lived experiences, rather than professionalism, to address the problems and struggles we are experiencing. The stories of my friends have reminded me that people's closest chosen community networks are in fact highly qualified to respond in times of crisis. My vision to radically change society involves joining, building and sustaining mass movements that are nourished by our friendships and community. As we seek to transform systems of domination, we will be the ones who keep us safe (INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, 2007; Norris, 2020).

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The Read Everything Michael White Published Project

by Will Sherwin

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Abstract

This paper tells the history of The Read Everything Michael White Published Project, in which I read all the works available to me that were published by Michael White, the co-originator of narrative therapy. I describe the reading project's conception, its effects on my work, some practices that Michael White believed were useful for therapists, tips for others considering a reading project of their own, and new initiatives this project was generative of in my work.

Key words: Michael White; reading; self-education; professional development; narrative practice

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Statement of commitments and purposes

In this paper, I am committed to not paraphrasing or trying to summarise what Michael White, the co-founder of narrative therapy, wrote. Instead, I discuss specific quotes from his writings. My first purpose is to share how the project of reading all of Michael White's published writing came to be and how the reading affected my work. My second purpose is to entice others to start a Michael White reading project of their own.

I first became enthusiastic about narrative therapy through reading. In 2010, I was studying the exam preparation material for the California marriage and family therapy license, and it had five intriguing pages on narrative therapy. As I read them, I thought, "These are good questions!" I remember one of the narrative therapy principles it included: "People are profoundly influenced by the discourses around them" (AATBS, 2009).

All the other modalities had assertions about what caused problems, but the narrative therapy section discussed what influenced problems. Influence stood out to me as a more humble verb than "cause". Thinking of influences rather than causes freed me from having to confidently identify the underlying determinant of a problem. Instead, I could enquire with others about the problem's influences and play a part in creatively shifting their relationships to those influences.

From there, I read *Maps of Narrative Practice* by Michael White (2007). Reading that book changed the trajectory of my life. It lit up an inquiry that led to the deconstruction and depsychologisation of much of the "modern problem speak" (White, 1995c) that had constituted my thinking before. Narrative therapy didn't just take things away; it helped me construct something else that was creative, lively and versatile. I developed a sense that I was becoming more effective in my efforts at work. I worked as an early childhood mental health consultant at a time when much of the clinical discourse in my role was around attachment styles, positive reinforcement, and encouraging everyone to be more aware of their triggers and to regulate themselves. I started to speak up more in clinical meetings, offering alternative possibilities like making certificates for "peaceful problem-solving" for teachers to give to parents in front of their kids, recording parent voices to play to their kids in early childhood centres, and shifting from diagnostic speculation to creatively brainstorming what to do with kids who really want to move their bodies a lot or who have "big feelings". I heard from friends and colleagues things like, "You're really starting to come into your own", "How are you so creative?", and from my mom, "It's like your ideas are coming from some other place". I'd tell them, "It's this narrative therapy stuff I've been looking into".

In those first few years, I read about a third of what Michael White published. But somewhere around 2015, I began reading less in general. I was excited by the potential of other media like podcasts, video courses and videochat discussion groups. I loved getting a sense of people through their voices. I started my narrative therapy podcast, BANTR.[1] These were wonderful ways to connect with others while learning, and they've enriched my life greatly. However, I think there's something special about reading that I was missing. When I got back into reading substantially in around 2020, I felt its benefits return. When I'm reading something I find genuinely meaningful, I feel a better sense of focus, more facility with words. I have more things to talk about with others, and I think I'm less susceptible to bleak thoughts about the future.

In 2023, I was thinking of ways to develop a rigorous learning practice. My friend-colleague Marcy Anne Rivas mentioned that she and a friend had read everything Michael White had published, and I thought, "I want to join that club". The more I thought about the idea, the more I liked it. What would it be like to read the remaining two-thirds of Michael's writing? I said to myself, "When I finish, I bet I'll have learnt some things". I got a bibliography from the Dulwich Centre website, put it into a spreadsheet and started the project. I gave myself a generous 20 years to finish, with a possible 10-year extension if I needed more time. I also permitted myself to quit if I was not having a good time with it. I invited others to join me in a Facebook group as I shared two or three quotes a week from Michael's writings.[2]

Early on, I read the article "Journey metaphors" (White, 2002). In it, Michael wrote about expectations in relation to "opportunities to be transported to other places in life in which I might become other than who I was at the outset of the journey" and to "think beyond what I routinely think" (p. 12). I took along those two purposes for my reading journey. These expectations made the reading project more poetic, more of an adventure. It satisfied something in me to be living my life in adventurous and poetic ways.

I finished[3] the remaining two-thirds of Michael's writing in six months, reading an average of half an hour a day. I estimate that at my reading rate, reading everything he published would take roughly 135 hours.

Two descriptions of relative influence questions

To give an evocative sample of what I came to value upon returning to Michael's writings after 10 years away, here are two descriptions of relative influence questions: my best attempt at a summary and Michael's original text:

My description of relative influence questions	Michael White's description of relative influence questions
Relative influence questions can be used to inquire into a problem's influence in a person's life and that person's influence in the life of the problem. These questions can give people some distance from the problem, emphasise their sense of agency, and develop an alternative relationship to the problem.	"By inviting persons to review the effects of the problem in their lives and relationships, relative influence questions assist persons to become aware of and to describe their relationship with the problem. This takes persons out of a fixed and static world, a world of problems that are intrinsic to persons and relationships, and into a world of experience, a world of flux. In this world, persons find new possibilities for affirmative action; new opportunities to act flexibly" (White, 1988b, p. 5).

How would you describe the difference between Michael's description and mine? I first only evaluated mine in terms of inferiority to Michael's. However, if I'm intentionally generous with myself, I'd describe mine as shorter, more accessible and maybe more user-friendly. I have found it useful to have a simple version of narrative therapy to think from. However, reading Michael's version reminds me that the simplified version does not fully encapsulate narrative practice. Reading Michael's version helps colour my version with possibility and richness when I go to ask a relative influence question to someone I'm working with. Reading everything Michael White published helped to "exoticize the domestic" (White, 2004, p. vi) version of narrative therapy that I had settled into over the last 14 years. I think that taking persons into "a world of experience, a world of flux" is an intriguing way to look at what it is that narrative therapy can do.

Metaphorically speaking[4]

I was asked to write about the difference this project made in my practice. After considering it for a while, I'd like to speak metaphorically about the difference.

What I feel best about saying is that doing all this reading has made me *sharper*. Reading Michael White was like sharpening a dull blade into one that cut through things more easily. I could think more clearly. Words and creative initiatives came more easily to my mind as I read for 30 minutes a day. Also, when I stopped reading for a while, I could feel my thinking get a bit more dull.

I've also heard a metaphor used about learning narrative therapy: that it's like jazz – before you can improvise, you have to learn the scales. I've been studying jazz guitar for a couple of years now, and I thought, "So what are the scales in narrative therapy and what's the routine to practice?" Maybe reading Michael White is like practicing scales. When I've been practicing scales regularly, I feel more relaxed, playful and pleased with my music-making. When I've been reading Michael White regularly, I feel more relaxed, playful and pleased with my therapy conversations. In both cases, it feels good to have a regular practice to sharpen my chops and develop my skills and understanding.

Developing statements of assumptions, commitments and purposes

While reading, I had a special eye out for projects that I could take on based on Michael's words. For example, Michael's (1988a) article, "Assumptions and therapy"[5] starts with this:

> I believe that it is entirely useful for therapists to develop an explicit statement of their assumptions about the experience of persons seeking therapy and about the requirements of a therapy to satisfactorily address this experience. These assumptions largely determine therapists' interpretation of events in the world and in them can be seen the operation of our beliefs, attitudes, values, premises, presuppositions, and so on. Although it is not possible for us to avoid having assumptions, it is possible for us to avoid awareness of them and to avoid formulating them as an articulate statement. (White, 1988a, p. 7)

Michael went on to list 20 of his assumptions about therapy. For example, one of his assumptions was that "a therapy of merit" invites persons to "redefine the problem in the vernacular, rendering it accessible to their problem-solving resources" (1988a, p. 8). In another article, he writes for two and a half pages on assumptions he does *not* hold when working with communities before he lists the assumptions he does hold (White, 2003). I thought for a while about what it would be like to write explicit statements of my assumptions. Then I thought, "Instead of thinking about writing down my assumptions, let me just start writing some down and see what happens". I gave myself 20 years to come up with a comprehensive statement of my own assumptions, and so far I have five:

1. People seeking therapy are often nervous before their first visit.
2. Bringing in ways of working that are friendly to visual thinking can often help us focus and can give people something to take with them after the session ends.
3. Any assumption I come up with may not be true for all people.
4. "People are profoundly influenced by the discourses around them".
5. Critical reflection can lead to feeling more room to work rather than less.

I plan to add assumptions to the list as I think of them. I've shared this early draft of my assumptions with several other colleagues and with the Facebook group and other people have shared their assumptions with me. I notice that all our assumptions so far are different from Michael's and from each other's. This makes me think we're all emphasising different principles or wording similar assumptions slightly differently, which has different effects on our work. It makes me think that this practice of sharing our assumptions may be a way to see some of the diversity among those of us whose practice is informed by narrative ideas. Writing my assumptions has given me more of a sense that I have a particular foundation to my work.

In the interview article "Passion, commitment, and common sense" (Duvall & Beier, 1995), Jim Duvall asks Insoo Kim Berg[6] and Michael White,

> What would you say to a therapist who was just starting out in the field, or who might want to hear something that you have to say? If you could speak to that person what would you say to that person? (1995, p. 79)

Insoo Kim Berg answers:

> That's a wonderful choice that you've made. I think that it's enriching. Your life is going to be full of mystery, journey, and wonder and amazement, and a journey of discovery about how we do the kind of work we do; it's a special privilege to work with the clients and I think that that's the discovery of it. (1995, p. 80)

Michael White picks up on the privilege theme and adds:

> Another piece for anyone coming into this field is to think about ways to acknowledge the privilege. That's a very important question. Find ways of acknowledging and acknowledging that privilege. It is important when you are coming into this field to think about the context of your own work and how can it be structured in a way that supports the acknowledgment of that privilege. To think about a working context that contributes to inspiration of the therapist. To try and figure out for people who work in this field to start to exchange their own statements of commitments and purpose for doing what they are doing and to have those statements honoured. (1995, p. 80)

In response to these suggestions, I've drawn up a rough draft statement acknowledging the special privilege of working with clients. I have been sharing my statements of assumptions, commitments and purposes with my friend-colleagues and have been inviting them to share their own; it's made for rich, interesting conversations. I noted that Michael didn't write that others should adopt his assumptions, commitments and purposes. Instead, he encouraged readers to explicitly write out their own and share them with others, as he did.

Similarly, in the introduction to *Maps of Narrative Practice* (2007) Michael wrote:

> I will emphasize here that the maps of this book are not the maps of narrative practice or a "true" and "correct" guide to narrative practice, whatever narrative practice is taken to be. (2007, p. 5)
>
> On occasion, in teaching contexts, I have been asked why it is necessary to have maps for therapeutic practice. My response: "It is not at all necessary." However, I believe that we all refer to guiding ideas of some sort in the development of therapeutic conversations, although very often these guiding ideas have become so taken for granted and accepted that they are rendered invisible and unavailable to critical reflection. I believe that this is a hazardous development, for it has the potential to restrict us to the unquestioned reproduction of what is familiar in terms of therapeutic practice, regardless of the consequences on the lives of the people who consult us. (2007, p. 6)

In all of my Michael White reading, I didn't find any statements with a tone of "you should do it this way". Instead, I read ethical arguments, critiques of the status quo ways of doing things; offerings of creative alternative practices; and encouragement to critically reflect on my assumptions, commitments, purposes, consequences, privilege and guiding ideas. And to share these with others. This led to another major effect on me.

Feeling more room

Michael refuted an interpretation of poststructuralism that suggests that it means "anything goes". On the contrary, Michael wrote, "Rather than contributing to an 'anything goes' sentiment, poststructuralist inquiry contributes to a 'nothing goes' sentiment — nothing goes without question" (White, 2000, p. 115). I thought about that and about why I feel more room after all this reading, and I reframed this idea positively as "critical reflection can lead to feeling more room rather than less". When I've critically reflected on a practice, and when I've considered others' critical reflections about the practice, a lot can work; a lot can be helpful; a lot can be possible.

Over the years, I heard others say things about Michael White like "he only used questions, not statements" and "he only uses a client's own words". Those practices felt a little restrictive when I imagined applying them to my conversations. But I respected and wondered about taking those positions. However, upon reading more of Michael's work, I was heartened to see exceptions that told me he didn't fully restrict himself to these practices. Michael shared a graph to illustrate what a woman might typically expect in a journey of breaking from abuse (1995a). He gave multiple copies of an article on gaslighting to a woman to read and leave in her former therapist's waiting room (1995b). I also realised that in his letters to people he consulted with, Michael would express admiration for steps they had taken, introduce metaphors, editorialise about their story up to that point, urge people to not go too fast in their initiatives, and report back what his colleagues had said about their steps (White & Epston, 1991, pp. 150–154). Hearing these exceptions to "only" asking questions made me feel more relaxed about the various ways I occasionally introduce visuals, quotes, song lyrics and art references into therapeutic conversations.

I don't see narrative therapy as a container that I try hard to stay within. I don't hold it as a big long list of "don't do these things, and don't use these words" that feels tight and confining. Instead, I see it as an inspiring ethics-based therapy with lots of creative ideas that, compared with what I was doing before, provides me with a foundation to see more possibilities and enquire more interestingly into the worlds of others. I feel more room in the therapist's chair than I did before this reading project. When I had a blurrier image of the key ethical arguments, I think I was more likely to imitate what others seemed to do. I think having a sharper picture of the ethical arguments Michael offered has helped me to feel more room in the therapist's chair and has prompted me to try more things.

Reading everything Michael White published helped "exoticize the domestic" version of narrative therapy I had settled into. It helped me feel sharper; gave me a regular practice routine akin to practicing musical skills; inspired me to write explicit statements of my assumptions, commitments and purposes and to share them with others; and made me feel more room as a therapist.

For all this, I am grateful.

Tips for others considering reading everything Michael White published

- My reading focus improved greatly when I printed out articles instead of trying to read them on my computer.
- The best time for focused reading for me was first thing in the morning with my phone away from arm's reach.
- Reading Michael's writing every day made his language and style significantly easier to follow after about three weeks.
- Giving myself permission to move on if I didn't feel like I quite understood certain ideas kept me from getting too discouraged. Michael would often talk about a similar point or principle in a different article in a different way and sometimes that would help me get clearer about it.
- Posting the quotes that I was moved by on The Read Everything Michael White Published Project Facebook group helped the project feel more collective. It was motivating to sense that I was accompanied by others and that I was helping to circulate interesting quotes out there in the world. Also, asking questions to the group on topics I was confused by was helpful.
- Readers can contact me if they run into obstacles in their own reading project.

Possible future projects

- I wish there was a way to get continuing education credit for reading. I am looking into options for doing this through being a continuing education provider myself. Please contact me if you're excited by the idea of reading and discussing articles as a form of continuing education, and I'll let you know where I'm at with the development of it.
- Since Michael developed so much from his own massive reading project, I was thinking of starting The Read Everything Michael White Referenced Project or at least reading one thing by each author Michael cited.
- I might re-read everything Michael published again. It could become my regular practice of keeping myself sharp, like using a knife sharpening rod or a regular musical practice routine.
- I'd like to be available for others when they finish reading everything Michael White published. I envision others contacting me when they complete the readings and we set up a video chat meeting inviting the community to be an audience to the accomplishment. The reader could share their favourite quotes, musings and initiatives in whatever ways they'd like.

Final point: If you are looking for a rigorous, substantial, low-cost learning project that you can do at your own pace, in your own time, The Read Everything Michael White Published Project is something you could consider. Especially if you are looking for "opportunities to be transported to other places in life in which I might become other than who at the outset of the journey", to "think beyond what I routinely think" (White, 2002, p. 12), and to learn some things.

Notes

[1] BANTR: A Narrative Therapy Podcast: https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/bantr-a-narrative-therapy-podcast/id1632676221

[2] The Read Everything Michael White Published Project Facebook group: https://www.facebook.com/groups/811538933806423

[3] Actually, I could not get copies of nine articles between 1979 and 1986 despite asking around various communities I'm a part of. So it's more accurate to say I read everything available to me.

[4] Listen to the interesting narrative practice podcast *Metaphorically Speaking*, which inspired the subtitle: https://www.metaphoricallyspeaking.com.au/category/podcast/

[5] An easy way to get this article and others is through Dulwich Centre's website: www.dulwichcentre.com.au Some articles are free, and others require a Reading Room subscription. Papers can be requested on the "Hard-to-find Michael White writings" page.

[6] Insoo Kim Berg is the co-founder of solution-focused brief therapy.

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Body as A Picture Book:

A tool for narrative conversations inspired by tattoos

by Paul Graham

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Abstract

This article introduces a tool for narrative therapy conversations with young people using tattoos as a point of entry. It is inspired by trauma-informed tattooing and discusses how elements of narrative practice can be adjusted to use in conversations about tattoos, whether real or imagined. Narrative practices of externalising, re-authoring, re-membering, the absent but implicit and outsider witnessing are demonstrated. By using a template that invites the person to imagine tattoos or body paint, conversations about tattoos are made available to people who have not been tattooed themselves, including young people.

Key words: tattoos; externalising; re-authoring; outsider witnessing; documentation; narrative practice

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Having spent most of my professional life working with young people, I have found that the key factor to successful outcomes is my ability to build rapport with the young people and their families. This can often be a balancing act, with the conversations and language I use with young people not resonating with their parents, or even appearing to position me against them, and vice versa.

In my current work in early intervention to prevent youth homelessness, it is common for young people to talk to me about tattoos. If "cool", as defined by Pountain and Robins (2013, p. 19), is the "permanent state of private rebellion", tattoos can embody this by nature of their permanency and their use as statements against the status quo. One can see how this act of visibly decorating a body might hold allure for young people who are still forming their identities (Bell, 1999). Young people talk to me about the tattoos that family members or celebrities have, along with what they would like to get when they're older. Through these conversations, which often seem to happen as I am driving a young person somewhere, I began to think about other ways in which talking about tattoos could be used to build rapport and about whether tattoos might provide entry points to therapeutic conversations.

When I started working with young people and their families, tattoos didn't seem to be an acceptable topic of conversation in this context, particularly with parents. Perhaps this was due to tattoos being associated with high-risk behaviour and delinquency (Peterson, 1997). In my experience, this has begun to change as more people in Australia (where I live and work) are getting tattooed (Fell, 2020).[1] In recent years, it's been increasingly recognised that people sometimes use tattoos as a response to trauma. For Santibañez (2020), tattooing is social work. The process of permanently marking the skin can draw comparisons to self-harm. However, as Claes et al. (2005) note, self-harm and tattooing are separate phenomena, and tattoos can represent a form of self-care and even a means to prevent further self-harm. Tattoo artists regularly conceal scars, create markers for survivors of cancer and apply memorial tattoos. Tattoos can be powerful statements declaring the person's ownership of their own body, reclaiming their body from trauma, recording history, defying expectations, expressing pride in culture, resisting assimilation, and more broadly, allowing the person to look how they want to look (Santibañez, 2020).

There is a growing body of work that explores how tattoos can help turn stories of suffering into stories of survival (Crompton et al., 2021). I thought that adapting these ideas into a narrative therapy framework might open up additional ways of enabling these kinds of transformation through conversations about both real and hypothetical tattoos.

Cultural considerations

As I started thinking about how I might use tattoos as entry points to therapeutic conversations, it felt important to consider how tattoos might be understood differently by people coming from cultural contexts different to my own. Having been part of punk and hardcore music scenes, I had often thought about tattoos as expressions of subculture or rebellion (Jeffreys, 2000). Despite their increasing acceptance, they're still often associated with the "other" in dominant Western cultures (Bell, 1999). This is clearly not how tattoos are understood in other contexts. As I read more about this, I found that tattoos are dense with meaning across the different cultures in which tattooing is practiced, carrying traditional rituals, historical resonances and evolving ideas (Ankirskiy, 2014; Bell, 1999; Cairns, 2003; Cole & Haebich, 2007; MacFarlane, 2019; Oches, 2015). Their meaning can change over time and between generations (Bell, 1999; MacFarlane, 2019). In the West, modern forms of tattooing were heavily influenced by Islander nations (Ankirskiy, 2014; Oches, 2015). Western culture's suppression of tattoos has therefore been connected with colonialism (Cole & Haebich, 2007).

The practices described in this paper might not be appropriate for use with people connected with religious groups with prohibitions against tattooing (Rohith et al., 2020), or cultural groups for whom tattooing has been used against people's will as a way to deny their humanity (Bloch, 2022). Particular care would be needed in using these practices with people from cultural contexts in which tattoos have great significance, for example with Māori persons who have or are interested in tā moko (Cairns, 2003), and it may be relevant to engage with cultural advisers.

The Body as a Picture Book

As I primarily work with young people, who rarely have tattoos, I wanted to develop a practice that was relevant to people who had not been tattooed and were not necessarily planning to get a tattoo.

I looked to what other narrative therapists had written about engaging with tattoos. Temporary tattoos have been used in Singapore in group work with families with young children (Mui, 2017). The act of marking the skin (albeit in a temporary way) was joyous for the children, and this account made me think that, as narrative practitioners, we should seek to undo dominant ideologies that view tattooing as negative. Mui (2017) noted that the children engaged in this work with laughter and enthusiasm, and the process of having temporary tattoos applied led to a positive therapeutic space.

Johnston (2018) described work with a man named Peter who had made a personal vow that he wanted to get tattooed on himself. Rather than move straight to getting the tattoo, Peter was encouraged to draw the proposed tattoo as part of a collage to act as a placeholder until he was able to afford to have the tattoo inked on his skin. This act of creating a hypothetical tattoo allowed for many of the positive elements that come from obtaining a tattoo without going through the process itself.

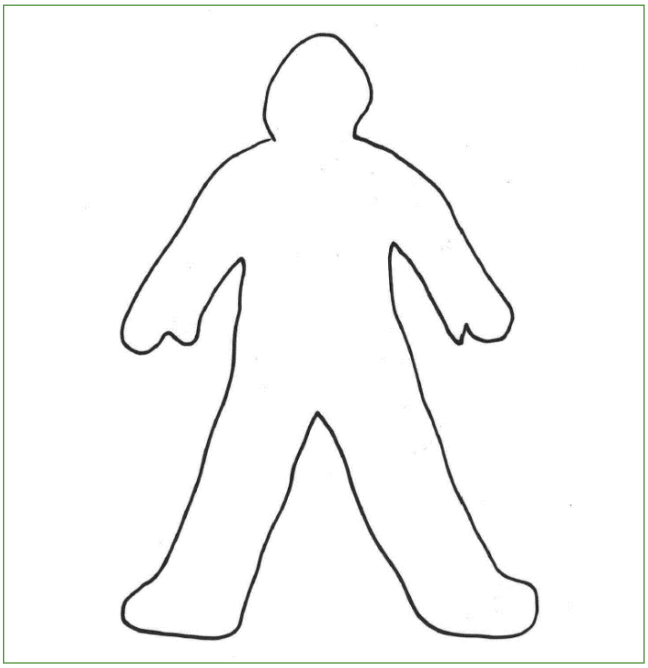

Figure 1. Body as a Picture Book template

I decided to try using an outline of a human figure as a template that young people could use to explore hypothetical tattoos (see Figure 1). Using pens or paint, they could apply designs to the figure, allowing us to use the prompts outlined below to begin a narrative conversation. If their family had expressed reservations about tattoos, we could refer to the designs as "body paint" instead. I began to introduce this as an activity that I like to use because "it reminds me of tattoos".

In order to remain decentred and collaborative (White, 1997, pp. 192–214), this approach is best offered when the person we are working with has mentioned tattoos in some way.

The advantage of using this template is that it invites playful consideration of hypothetical tattoos: I can ask about whether the designs might "move" to different places, change size or become bolder. This template can be used to represent the front or back of a person, and due to the simplified design, other features like hair or glasses can be added if the person wishes. It is important to note that the human figure is intentionally left abstract so as not to further discourses on body image or invoke feelings of body dysmorphia.

I'll share some of the kinds of therapeutic conversations that have taken place around this "Body as a Picture Book" template, using narrative therapy practices.

Externalising

This Body as a Picture Book template is best introduced after externalising conversations have taken place, and experience-near namings of problems and preferred qualities have been established. This enables us to consider tattoos as representations of externalised qualities that we wish to hold close to us. In this context, the placement of an imagined tattoo on the body becomes an important consideration: a tattoo applied to the back would be less accessible to the person than one on the arms, legs or hands. Placement is also significant to how we wish to express ourselves to others, with tattoos in visible places suggesting what we would most like others to see in us.

To draw on Bourdieu's theory of habitus (Lizardo, 2004), the way a person presents themselves to the world may imply not only the values and ideas that the person holds close but also the culture and history of their communities. If our appearance asks the question of what communities and values we choose to display on ourselves, then tattoos can become one of the most powerful visual expressions of our habitus when it comes to defining our identity. Beyond this, tattoos can become visible learnings that stand in opposition to ideas such as "depression" or "anxiety" (Boucher, 2003).

When I invite young people to consider hypothetical tattoos through drawing on the template, I can begin to ask questions about their design choices. These can work to further embed externalised qualities into storylines:

- When did this design first show up in your life?
- How has it changed since it appeared?
- What has been added or covered over?
- What has made the design fade or blur?
- What influenced the design?
- Can you tell me about why you chose that size or colour for the design?

Tattoos can also be used as tools against problems once they have been externalised. For example, Sostar (2020) described how a tattoo that reminded the wearer that they only need to “outlast” anger allowed the wearer to access the skills and strategies they had used in the past to deal with the negative effects that showed up when anger was around. Sostar (2020) noted that the person had the tattoo inked across their knuckles, and such a placement could suggest openings for interesting questions that could be explored. The wearer explained that anger caused them to get violent. By placing the tattoo across their knuckles, the lesson was made immediately available when anger suggested lashing out with a fist.

Re-authoring

Tattoos have great potential for use in re-authoring questions, particularly when it comes to tracing values. They can offer potential to examine stories of resistance in a person’s life and assist people with tracing a preferred storyline in their lives: “Hey, I’m Indigenous. I have Indigenous tattoos. They tell a story. We’re still here. We survived. Our story survived” (Isaac Murdoch, as interviewed in Ore, 2022).

Boucher (2003) shared some questions that are helpful in constructing re-authoring conversations about tattoos. For example, Boucher asked of a tattoo, “does it symbolize or stand for anything in particular?” (2003, p. 58). This provides a way into discussion of values that a person holds close. If we ask, “what led to your decision to get that tattoo?” (Boucher, 2003, p. 58), we may hear stories about taking a stand against dominant narratives in society (views of tattoos as influenced by religion or conservative culture). This can be explored further by asking what having tattoos in general (or living as a tattooed person) means in terms of actions they have taken to resist dominant ideologies.

Moving to a landscape of identity question (White, 2004), it can then be helpful to ask what a tattoo says about who a person is and what they consider important, or ask how the tattoo has helped redefine their relationship with a particular skill or problem (Boucher, 2003, p. 58).

Yuen (2019) shared the story of Sidney who explored how her tattoos re-affirmed her values of love and connection to her siblings as opposed to hate and oppression. Her tattoos became sites of resistance to the idea that she was a bad sister, and she was able to identify her refusal to question the love of her siblings.

Story of practice: Jake

Jake was a 15-year-old boy who was referred to our program after repeated bouts of homelessness with his family. Despite the continual difficulties associated with his housing situation (including missing school and struggling to maintain friendships), he came across as a friendly and polite young man. Jake was concerned about his “anger” and “anxiety” and how he responded to them. Jake and I completed some externalising work around these themes, noting that he knew when anger and anxiety were close when he would feel his heart begin to race and his fists clench. Jake noted he would often begin to yell and struggle to express himself. We explored strategies he had already used to help him with his anger and anxiety, and Jake recognised that he generally went for walks or listened to music to help him calm down and reduce the influence of anger and anxiety. Together we agreed that Jake had already developed some great strategies for helping him deal with these emotions.

Jake was moving with his family between short-term houses and motels but remained committed to attending school and completing his homework. After I had been meeting with Jake for two months, he and his family were able to secure rental accommodation. Jake talked about how he wanted to set up his room and began expressing more hope about the future.

Jake had asked me about my tattoos, so I asked if he would be interested in doing the Body as a Picture Book activity. He agreed. Jake said he would like to one day have tattoos on his arms, and drew these in (see Figure 2 on following page).

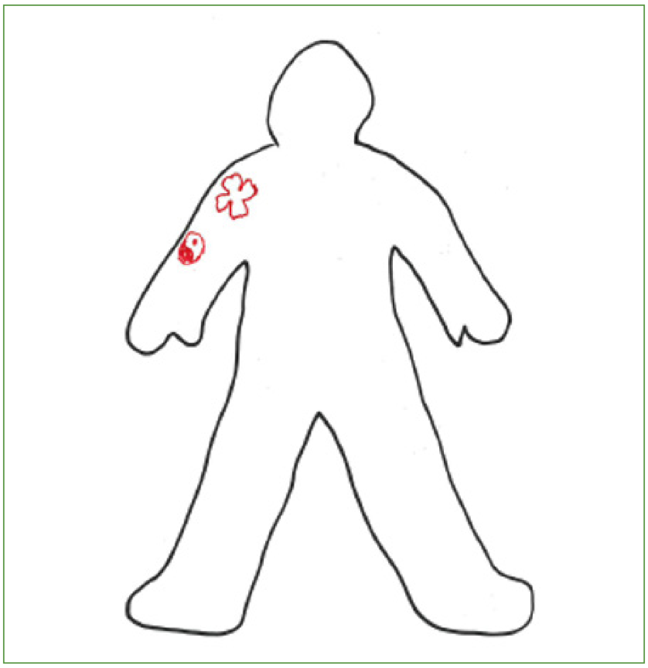

Figure 2. Jake's hypothetical tattoos

Jake drew a yin-yang symbol and a four-leaf clover.

I asked Jake to tell me about the yin-yang symbol, and he told me he had been introduced to the symbol a few years earlier in a mindfulness course he'd done at school. Jake said he liked the symbol because it reminded him to practice mindfulness, and it also spoke to him about the flow of life: that there are good times in the bad and bad times in the good with neither state being permanent.

I asked Jake if this was an idea he held on to – that when going through bad times, they weren't permanent. Jake said, "yeah, definitely" and spoke about how when his family didn't have a place to stay, he would remember having been in that situation before and how they had got through it. I noted that it sounded like this idea had been something that had sustained Jake through these difficult times and asked if there was anything else the symbol brought to mind. Jake said that while it wasn't exactly what the symbol was about, he also associated it with the idea of balance. Jake noted that he found balance to be important and spoke about how he felt he had always been "quite physically fit" and so wanted to ensure he also worked on his brain. Jake said seeking this balance made him work "really hard" on maths and English. I asked Jake how he felt balance had contributed to his life. Jake noted that when he was working on trying to maintain that balance, he would be focusing on "a lot of different things", which meant that he would worry less about not having somewhere to stay. Jake explained that when he was seeking this balance, he would go for lots of walks and do lots of homework, and these practices helped to keep him hopeful.

I asked Jake if by standing for balance in his life, that said anything about what he stood against. Jake said he wasn't sure but then spoke about how important he felt learning was, and his hopes that he would do well at school, get a good job and then be able to help his family. We discussed the values associated with looking after his family before moving on to discussing the four-leaf clover.

When I asked Jake what the four-leaf clover meant to him, he answered quite bluntly: "Well, luck obviously!" I asked Jake what engaging with the idea of luck had been like for him. Jake said that alongside balance, he felt that luck was the "other thing that has really helped me". Jake spoke about how when his family found a new home, there had been a lot of other people applying but his family managed to be successful in their application. Jake then spoke about how he doesn't believe in "a god or anything like that", so he didn't pray, but he would "reach out to luck".

I asked Jake if there were times in the past when he had been able to "bring luck closer to him" or "make it more active in his life". Referring to the template, I asked if he had ever been able to make the four-leaf clover bigger or smaller.

Jake spoke about how he tried not to think about luck too much; instead, he had a "bit of a process". This involved hoping for luck but trying not to focus on it. If he began thinking "too much" about how luck would get him through difficult times, then he could start getting anxious or angry. Jake said that he "hopes for a bit of luck" but then just moves on to "focus on other things".

Through the activity of imagining possible tattoos, I found openings for re-authoring conversations with Jake, with a particular focus on values across Jake's lifetime, including balance and caring for his family. This also allowed us to work on externalisations of "luck" and "balance", which Jake had drawn on during the more difficult periods of his life.

Creating chapters

Tattoos are frequently used to mark "chapters" or transitions in people's lives (Boucher, 2003; Ferreira, 2014). Ceremonial tattooing has been a way of marking entry into adulthood (Cote, 1997). Tattoos can enable a person to ascribe value to their ways of living while also giving space for a person to move their body into an ongoing project that invites agency (Ferreira, 2014).

Practitioners can help to thicken preferred storylines around these chapters and transitions. They might draw on definitional ceremony (White, 2007), or the migration of identity map (White, 1995). Enquiry about what occurred during a particular chapter can move between landscapes of identity and action (White, 2004). This can be accomplished by asking what the person is working towards in their new chapter, while also choosing what previous lessons they would like to take into each new chapter. This can support people to effectively move through the process of separation, liminality and re-incorporation that may accompany the ending of one phase of life and the beginning of another. We can ask of these transitions, "what makes this chapter unique or separates it from the last chapter?"

Re-membering

Re-membering can be particularly relevant in relation to memorial tattoos. Sather and Newman (2015) and Tilsen and Nylund (2009) have explored the different ways memorial tattoos can be expressed, including as portraits, metaphorical representations (a dove escaping a cage) and replicas of a loved one's tattoos, including a tattoo that covered a Holocaust camp tattoo.

Memorial tattoos allow a person to visually document the membership of their "club of life" on their body, according certain people special honorary life membership (Russell & Carey, 2002). Ore (2022) shares the story of Aeden Corey, who had tattoos on her face that mirrored those of her great-great-grandma, after whom Aeden was named. Of note about the use of prominently visible tattoos is that these lessons and learnings become readily accessible every time the person looks in the mirror.

When people are interested in memorial tattoos, we can ask:

- How did this person contribute to your life that made you choose to honour them in this way?
- What would it mean to that person to know you have honoured them in this way?

Narrative practitioners have documented re-membering conversations about tattoos. Wever (2009) alluded to a re-membering conversation about a tattoo that was related to a client's grandmother, though the details of the conversation were not recorded. Denborough (2006) discussed a man who lost his twin brother to violence at a young age. The man used a tattoo to enlist his deceased brother in his efforts to free himself from violence, pulling his brother as close as possible into his club of life by wearing his image over his heart. Millham and Banks (2006) described the memorial tattoo that Natalie had done of her grandmother. This was placed on her back. Re-membering questions were used to explore what Nan would think about the tattoo as well as how Nan might be more active in Natalie's life moving forward. A common thread across these descriptions of re-membering practice in relation to tattoos is wearers saying "I carry them with me wherever I go".

Story of practice: Victoria

Victoria, a 14-year-old girl, was referred to our service with "anger issues" that were causing trouble both at school and at home. Victoria was an insightful young person with many hopes and dreams for the future. By our third meeting, Victoria had determined that anger showed up when she felt powerless in making decisions about her own life. Anger was present at school because she wanted to pursue education through a different institute, and it also showed up at home when Victoria felt she was being unfairly denied reasonable requests.

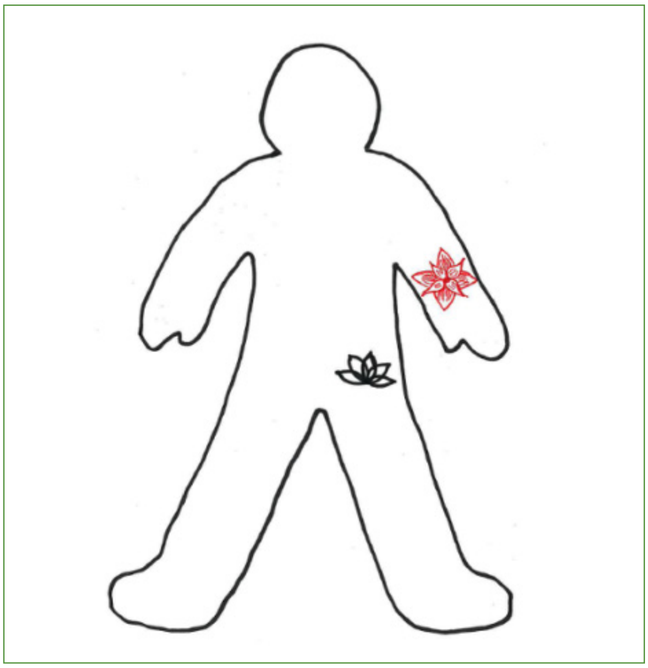

Figure 3. Victoria's imagined tattoos

I worked with the family for six weeks, attempting to create an environment that enabled Victoria to take more control of her life, alongside building up an externalisation of anger, which appeared to her as a red mist in the shape of a person. At this point, I introduced the Body as a Picture Book activity. Victoria drew two designs on the template: a flower on the wrist and a lotus on the hip (see Figure 3 on previous page).

I asked Victoria which design she would like to tell me about first. Victoria began by telling me about the flower. Victoria said that she had been taught how to draw the design by her friend. Victoria had begun to use this flower as a tool for resisting anger. When anger was present, she would draw this design on to her wrist. She would tell herself that she could only "act" on what her anger wanted once the design had faded. Victoria explained that by the time the design had faded, she was usually able to ignore what anger wanted from her more easily. I asked about what effect this design had on anger, and she said it would make it "freeze in place". By freezing the anger in place, she was also more easily able to move away from it.

I asked Victoria about the placement on the wrist. Victoria said she had two reasons for this placement. One was that it was easily accessible for her to see. If she began to feel anger getting closer, she could easily look to her wrist to stop anger where it was. The other was that she was right-handed, so she could only draw it on her left arm.

I then asked Victoria about the lotus design she had drawn near the hip. Victoria told me that she had learnt how to draw this from her great-grandmother. When she was younger, she had spent most weekends at her great-grandmother's house but now only saw her once every few months. Victoria said that her great-grandmother "always" drew the lotus, describing a notebook near the phone that her great-grandmother had filled with doodles of the flower. Victoria said her older sister and she had each agreed to get the design tattooed on them in the next few years, as their great-grandmother had "gotten sick" and wasn't expected to be alive for much longer.

I asked Victoria what she thought it would mean to her great-grandmother to be honoured in such a way, to know that this drawing of hers was something that had become so meaningful. Victoria laughed and said, "well, she would probably say you are stupid for getting that done, but I love you very much".

Victoria laughed about this, saying her great-grandmother often spoke this way. She had responded similarly when Victoria's dad (her grandson) had Victoria's name tattooed on his knee.

I said it sounded like her great-grandmother had a funny way of letting people know what she was thinking. Victoria agreed saying that she loved the way her great-grandmother was always "really honest". I asked Victoria if that was a value she held on to as well and she agreed. Victoria said that like her great-grandmother, she would tell people what she thought but remained able to "have a laugh about it" and accept people who thought differently to her. I asked Victoria if her own valuing of this honesty helped reenforce those values for her great-grandmother as well. Victoria was silent for a second but then said "yeah, I guess I did", and spoke about how they would always have a big laugh together when she said something "brutally honest". I noted that it seemed like Victoria had brought her great-grandmother a lot of joy in these moments.

So, from the two drawings Victoria had placed on the template in a single session, we were able to thicken a strategy Victoria had developed for resisting anger and engage in a re-membering practice around Victoria's great-grandma. Victoria's practice of not acting immediately on anger bears striking similarity to the strategy Nathan (in Sostar, 2020) had developed for their own anger. While Nathan had used the concept of "outlasting" anger, Victoria's strategy involved waiting an indeterminate period of time before acting on anger's demands.

The absent but implicit and outsider witnessing

Absent but implicit questions can be brought into conversations about tattoos and in relation to choices to appear a certain way within communities. For example, someone may see their tattoos as expressing a rejection of mainstream society (Jeffreys, 2000). This can be explored through questions about what the person choses to value over the expectations of mainstream society. For tattoos that commemorate a memory or a particular time, we can ask about whether there is something from that time that the person misses (Freedman, 2012). Through "double listening", tattoos can suggest openings to identify and contrast values. In this vein, further questions we can ask include:

- Why is it important that you express this on your body?
- Does expressing yourself in this way say something about what you stand for or against?

The therapist can also adopt an outsider-witnessing position in conversations about the meanings of a real or hypothetical tattoo, engaging in retellings and inviting a “retelling of the retelling” (White, 2007). The tattoo can be reimagined as a form of documentation of this process. Despite being thought of as permanent, tattoos may change or fade over time, offering an evolving and ever-changing story for us to reflect on.

Story of practice: Jenny

Jenny was referred to my service by her school. Jenny had been the victim of an assault on the schoolgrounds the year before and said she was struggling with her “anxiety”. I found Jenny to be an incredibly dedicated young person who was completing an apprenticeship alongside finishing school. Jenny had been steadfast in seeking justice in relation to what had occurred and had engaged lawyers by herself to hold the school to account. Jenny completed the Body as A Picture Book activity in a unique way (see Figure 4). Jenny decided to use writing rather than imagery. She also decided to split the template in half, with the section on the right detailing what she felt was making the anxiety worse, and the left side recording what was helping to ease the anxiety.

Figure 4. Jenny’s Body as a Picture Book image

We began by exploring what she had written on the right side, starting at the top. Jenny spoke about how the colour pink could be triggering for her because her assault occurred on pink day (the school’s anti-bullying day). I said to Jenny, “I notice you are wearing a pink shirt at the moment?” Jenny said she had been making conscious efforts to take control back from her triggers. This included walking past the area where the assault occurred.

As Jenny moved on to discussing the left side, I noted that it included a lot of people. Jenny described the people she had reached out to after the incident and the different ways they had helped her. I asked whether the colours she had chosen represented anything and she said, “mmm, I just wanted it to look a bit better”.

After discussing the different elements Jenny had placed on the template, I described outsider-witnessing practices to her and asked if she would like to use the process. Jenny agreed. To offer a retelling of the story she had shared, I drew on White’s (2007) categories of inquiry: expression, image and values, resonance and transport. I described being struck by the ways Jenny expressed her efforts to overcome her triggers and her ability to reach out to others to assist with this. I shared that this invoked an image of Jenny as someone who was not going to let this injustice impact her life and her commitment to improving her life. To explain why these elements of her story resonated with me, I spoke about how I had needed to rely on friends when I was in difficult situations and how I had pulled in a team around me. To address transport, I spoke about how Jenny’s story had reminded me of the importance of remaining defiant in the face of injustice and the importance of reaching out to people when going through difficult periods.

When Jenny was invited to engage in a retelling of this retelling, she noted she had never thought to view herself and her actions as inspiring. Jenny was glad to hear that other people shared her view of injustice as people had mostly ignored the assault. Jenny said she often felt that because she made so much effort to overcome her issues, people would assume she was “fine” and not offer help. Jenny responded to a question about resonance by re-membering the people who had helped her so far (the names on the left-hand side), and affirming that she knew she had these skills. When asked about how this conversation had transported her, Jenny said she felt more confident going forward knowing she did have skills that she hadn’t thought about before.

I asked Jenny how she found the process of using the Body as a Picture Book template and outsider witnessing. She said she had enjoyed the process and felt “lighter” having spoken about her experiences in this way. This practice allowed us to thicken alternative storylines from Jenny’s experience and bring to the fore the skills and values she had used to survive to this point.

Limitations, alterations and considerations

I have used this tool exclusively with young people aged between 15 and 17 years, and only during a single session. Further insights may have been achieved had the tool been used across multiple sessions. Different possibilities could emerge when working with people who already have tattoos, including the potential for exploration about how the hypothetical tattoos play-off their existing tattoo work.

Despite drawing from a trauma-informed approach to tattoos, my work with the Body as a Picture Book template does omit some key elements of the process of tattooing: particularly the difficult process of acquiring them. Drawing tattoos on a template cannot replicate the powerful healing effects that can accompany the painful tattooing process, nor does it invoke the care that is required for weeks after to ensure a piece heals correctly.

I had imagined that the Body as a Picture Book exercise would focus on the recording of preferred qualities that had been externalised. I didn’t think people would want to imagine marking themselves with problems or “negative” qualities that we had externalised. However, Jenny’s approach showed that this is not always the case.

Conclusion

I am increasingly interested in the ways narrative practice can inform a wide range of activities. I hope that the work described in this paper might assist tattoo artists and therapists alike to embrace the therapeutic qualities that are possible within tattooing practice and empower people to bring to the forefront the rich meanings their tattoos (or hypothetical tattoos) are imbued with. Through undertaking this work, I have seen that tattoos can offer an exciting form of narrative documentation that will grow and change with a person, while helping to provide a visual representation of unique learnt skills, acts of resistance, as well as deep personal and cultural histories. I hope these stories and artworks will be documented and shared, providing a way for people to discuss their personal and collective identities, while acting to reduce the stigma around a practice that has been prevalent within many cultures.

Note

[1] 25% of Australians now have at least one tattoo (Fell, 2020).

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Response to “Body as A Picture Book: A tool for narrative conversations inspired by tattoos” by Paul Graham

by Jacob Tumanako

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Paul Graham's paper "Body as A Picture Book: A tool for narrative conversations inspired by tattoos" leans into the art of creating space for conversation, utilising tattoos as an opening to narrative yarns with young people. I feel a connection to this paper as I'm interested in expanding the realm of narrative practice and finding new ways to push boundaries beyond current practice. I also work with young people, and understand the need to walk alongside, looking for doorways. The keys to these doorways are held by the young people we work with and are only available when we make space for what's important to them. I am also a Māori man with tattoos, or tā moko as I call them. Each and every line within my tā moko has meaning, and it is this meaning that makes my identity visible.

Tattoos are like a time capsule, sharing a story located within a specific time in history. The meaning we place on this form of documentation can shift depending on where it's placed, and according to the condition. Paul shares a story about a young person who used a fading temporary tattoo as a marker, a metaphor symbolising the idea that anger can fade. Once the tattoo is gone, so too is anger. This also conjures the idea that there is a set of skills and knowledge associated with a fading tattoo, opening a doorway into a story of hopes and dreams.

As a result of reading Paul's paper, the way I see documentation has shifted. I never thought of the idea that tattoos are a form of documentation; how documentation can be shifting; how our relationship with documentation can influence the stories we tell ourselves; how a fading tattoo shifts the way we interact with the stories in relation to it. Documentation can be dynamic, an evolving story, and our relationship with that story can also shift.

Another aspect of the paper that stirred something in me is the idea that tattoos can be acts of resistance. When considering Western societal norms, getting a tattoo can be seen as an act that counters the views of those who buy into negative discourses about tattooing. This is something that holds a place within my life, as someone subject to assumptions and bias because of the positioning of those wearing tattoos as antisocial. Paul's writing prompts me to see the power in a tattoo, the courage behind it: the tattoo as an act of resistance.

This paper is a great example of finding ways to open doors for narrative discussions, being decentred and being open to walking alongside a young person as they make meaning of their world. What stood out for me was the way in which dominant societal stories influence our own stories. However, when we think of dominant ideologies, which ones are we talking about? Within many cultures there are differing perspectives, histories and stories that influence the relationships people have with tattoos. For me, tattoos are a reflection of my purakau, a story that exists before and after my time. Being of Māori descent, tā moko has deep spiritual and cultural meaning; however, when I am away from my lands, they have different meanings. They help me to remain connected to my people, my land, my ancestors, both in the past and in the future. Tattoos are doorways within the scope of time, providing an opportunity to expand the boundary of identities.

Paul has devised a way to engage young people that speaks their language. This is important. We all have bias, we all have assumptions, but through the use of tools such as this, we allow space for a young person to share their story, retell it and make meaning of their world. In the end this is our role, right? To find ways to open doorways so that we can sit alongside the people we are privileged to work with as they make meaning and reshape dominant storylines.

Nga mihi

Jacob Tumanako

Re-authoring identity conclusions in borderline personality disorder

by Alicia Bruzek

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Abstract

This paper describes the use of narrative therapy with people who had been given a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder. In a context of significant stigma against persons with this diagnosis, perpetuated both within and beyond mental health systems, this paper shows how concepts of identity developed in narrative therapy were used to resist totalising identity conclusions and uncover possibilities for hope.

Key words: borderline personality disorder; identity; trauma; diagnosis; narrative practice

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The diagnosis of borderline personality disorder (BPD) comes with a lot of stigma, including within mental health systems. This can influence the identity of persons who are given this diagnosis: they often feel hopeless about the possibility of change because the problem has been located within them. As a narrative therapist in private practice, I have been interested in how I might use double listening to help people with a BPD diagnosis find new ideas about identity that differ from the story of hopelessness that many carry.

I have been applying narrative therapy principles and practices to my therapeutic interactions with two people who had been given a diagnosis of BPD, Levi and Dani[1], whom you will see quotes from throughout this paper. Dani and Levi are both straight, white and cisgender. In this paper, I describe how I worked individually with Dani and Levi (who did not know each other) to deconstruct some of the stigma associated with a BPD diagnosis. I introduce narrative understandings of identity as relational, distributed, performed and fluid rather than fixed and essential. And I show how these understandings opened possibilities for identifying preferred identity stories that had been obscured by narratives of BPD.

Borderline in the mental health system

In a collective document about BPD, the contributors wrote, “Borderline Personality Disorder is a diagnosis that can flatten a person’s story down to a single note” (Sostar, Thomas, & Nault, 2020, p. 5). This single note often suggests that people with this disorder are “crazy”, “overly emotional”, “irrational” or “dramatic”. In relation to resources produced for and about the BPD community, the BPD Superpowers group stated, “So much of what is available includes harmful stories about what kind of people have BPD, and how difficult and even dangerous it is to be in relationship with them” (Sostar et al., 2020, p. 4). Such discourses around BPD are perpetuated in counsellor education, professional development, within conversations among health-care providers, and in the broader culture in North America, where I live and work. Lester (2013, p. 70) observed that “clinicians generally detest working with borderline patients”. During my own training, I was presented with extreme examples of what it might look like to work with people with BPD.

Attitudes like these drew me to using narrative therapy with people given this label. My experiences with people with a BPD diagnosis have been very different from what my education led me to expect. It often seemed that the effects of painful experiences they had been through had been mislabelled as something wrong with them. Dani was on state insurance, which often carries stigma in the US, and she had experienced many injustices in accessing medical care due to her diagnosis and insurance. She had a history of being subjected to gendered violence and had experienced unsupportive relationships that contributed to her distress. Levi had a history of invalidating and abusive relationships that contributed to the experiences that had been labelled BPD. When we centre the context of a person’s life and the history of problems they are experiencing, it becomes possible to see how the injustices the person has been subjected to may have contributed to the problems they’re facing. The idea that the person’s problems are defined by some internal characteristic becomes less convincing.

I believe that some of the apprehension about working with clients labelled with BPD can be attributed to the description provided in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM). The DSM-5-TR uses words such as “instability”, “frantic”, “intense”, “imagined abandonment”, “reactivity”, “inappropriate, intense anger” and “sudden and dramatic shifts in their view of others” to define BPD (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). However, the DSM’s language contains “judgments about appropriate ways to respond to abandonment or express anger” (Lester, 2013, p. 71). From a poststructuralist perspective, “concepts like ‘pathology’ and ‘normal’ are seen as social constructs derived from those beliefs and values that prevail in a particular context, determined by those who have the authority to ‘name’ these things as such” (Druker, 2014, p. 17). Many people given the label of BPD experienced trauma and/or invalidating environments growing up, yet these experiences become obscured by the diagnosis of BPD, which situates the problem within the person and not their history (Sostar et al., 2020). While these experiences can cause difficulties in the person’s life, there are also questions if these experiences are “wholly and singularly negative” (Lewis, 2023). Deconstructing these ideas allows room for both difficulties and strengths and skills that might be related to BPD.

Deconstructing the problem

The first step in my work with Levi and Dani involved deconstructing negative identity conclusions each had acquired through interactions with the systems and culture around us. Levi initially viewed himself as having something fundamentally wrong with him, which he saw as leading to judgement, hate and rejection from others. Both Levi and Dani had been invited into viewing themselves as not being good enough to be in relationships with other people. They both had ideas about what others are willing to do in their relationships, including statements by Dani such as, “no one can tolerate my anxiety” and “no one wants to put time and energy into me”, and statements from Levi such as “other people have all the power” and “I have to fit the mould for people to stay”. Both Levi and Dani used the words “inferior” and “failure” because they were different from how they had been told they were supposed to be.

What I often heard while deconstructing stories with these two individuals was hopelessness. Each had been told that BPD was part of who they were and that they would have to change who they were to have the things they wanted, like relationships and success in life. This led to many stories of not being heard, not feeling valued by others, and not believing they could ask for anything due to their “over-reactions”. When we started meeting, I heard many thin descriptions in which Dani and Levi each saw themself as the problem. This led to feeling defeated and unable to make changes in relation to the problem. Dani said, “I’m not the type of person that can keep people around”. Despite these discourses and experiences, they wanted something different for themselves.

Levi and I spent a lot of time connecting different ideas, beliefs and experiences through mapping them visually, through deconstructive questioning, and through metaphors. The visual map shown in Figure 1 shows factors influencing Levi’s idea that he was “not good enough”. As we were exploring these influences, I asked, “Are these ideas you have about yourself or are these coming from somewhere else?” This led to conversations that deconstructed dominant gender discourses that had previously had Levi judging himself negatively in relation to certain masculine norms. Levi responded that he was okay with himself and thought he had a right to be upset in abusive situations, but that discourses around gender (that men are supposed to be “unattached”, “unemotional” and “sexually motivated”) and others’ views of him in his past relationships brought in the “not good enough” feeling, which in turn, made him believe something was fundamentally wrong with him. He likened the “not good enough” feeling to a creature from the Harry Potter movies called a Dementor (Cuarón, 2004), which feeds on happy memories, leaving only despair. Levi said the problem “sucks the happiness from my life”. This experience-near description illustrates the way BPD can be viewed by people labelled with it: the effects of the stigma and judgement surrounding BPD can be more distressing than the symptoms listed in the DSM.

Figure 1. Mapping the “not good enough” feeling

A second theme of identity that was deconstructed with Levi was the idea of “being abnormal” or “doing things wrong”. We used the metaphor of a courtroom in which Levi was defending himself against what the problem and other people had to say about him. This courtroom image was drawn from the ways Levi described the problem. Keeping in mind the narrative therapy ethic of not taking an expert stance, I checked with Levi to see whether this image resonated with his experience with the problem. He agreed that it did and confirmed that he was willing to work with this metaphor. I asked, “I wonder what you did to deserve to be on trial?” and “Do you agree you should be there?” Levi thought about this for a bit and said he did not think he had done anything to deserve it. This seemed like a turning point for us: a shift away from fighting against the problem, and towards a focus on Levi stating his case, and through this reducing the amount of space the problem was taking up in his life. This fit with Michael White’s (2007, pp. 31–34) ideas about using metaphors that don’t invoke conflict or combat with the problem. Instead of battling the problem, Levi was defining and articulating who he knew himself to be outside of the problem story. Alternative metaphors might include “reclaiming one’s life from the effects of the problem, escaping the effects of the problem, revising one’s relationship with the problem, educating the problem, negotiating with the problem, organising a truce with the problem, taming the problem, undermining the problem” (Carey & Russell, 2002, p. 80).

Levi and Dani each also felt they had to fight for acceptance or belonging within their communities. Levi identified ideas about having to prove himself, and believed that if he did, he would be accepted, feel like he belonged and have a right to live. Dani said she felt like two separate people: one she had to be when pretending to be "normal" and one that reflected how she felt inside. We discussed many of the effects of these ideas. Both Levi and Dani were exhausted by the pressure to conform or "fit the mould". The problem had them avoiding relationships at times, despite wanting to connect with people, because they didn't think they were capable of relating adequately with others. This led to feelings of anger, hurt, frustration and sadness.

While asking deconstruction questions with people labelled with BPD, I have been conscious that it can be unhelpful to encourage the person to move away from the BPD label if they find it useful. The BPD Superpowers group wrote that "for many of us, finding the language of BPD was a moment of intense relief and validation" (Sostar et al., 2020, p. 14). However, as we deconstructed the effects abusive experiences might have had on their lives, I asked if there were other names we might want to give this problem besides BPD. So far, those I have asked this question have wanted to keep calling the problem BPD. They related to the criteria listed in the DSM, and didn't want to lose that understanding by calling it something else. Dani had been working on finding community, and having this label to use helped her find others online with similar experiences and provided opportunities to share her own story. I appreciate that through narrative therapy I can allow space for this self-identification, while at the same time seeking to thicken the story.

A narrative view of identity

Michael White (2001, 2004) described how negative identity conclusions can take over, leaving people feeling stuck. He offered ways to open space for the development of new identity conclusions. White wrote, "to claim one's own voice can be a powerful strategy in the face of the imposition, by others, of authoritative and negative accounts of one's identity" (White, 2004, p. 134). Pathologising ideas about BPD had my clients feeling stuck and defined by limiting conclusions about themselves. Dani and Levi had each received messages about their identity from many sources and experiences, which we began to deconstruct. Through this process, they were able to move towards having their own ideas about their identities.

Gene Combs and Jill Freedman (2016, p. 213) described identity as "a project we are pursuing" rather than a fixed set of qualities. The understanding of identity in narrative therapy can be understood as "relational, distributed, performed, and fluid" (Combs & Freedman, 2016, p. 213). The relational aspect of identity is shaped by how others perceive and respond to us and their expectations of us. An understanding of identity as distributed means the stories that constitute a person's sense of "self" are held in different locations, including "other people's memories" and "hospital records" (2016, p. 213). Performed identity focuses on action and agency. "With each action we take, we establish a scaffold from which other actions are possible" (2016, p. 214). Seeing identity as fluid establishes it as a process rather than a static trait. I drew on these aspects of identity to help Dani and Levi have more say in their identity.

Relational

For my clients with BPD, dominant stories of identity are often defined by traumatic experiences in past relationships or negative identity conclusions from the mental health system. One way I focused on relational identity with Levi and Dani was through thinking about the ways I was interacting with them in our sessions together. I recognised the impact that past abuse might have on their interactions, and that aspects of the problem may be associated with ways they responded to in order to survive. In our relationship, I was hoping to give Levi and Dani different experiences of themselves by both acknowledging the effects of abuse and treating them as people with knowledge about themselves. In the process of therapy, we are participating in the creation of identity conclusions, so I wanted to be aware of this in our work together.

One aspect of relational identity is the person's impact on others. Ideas about BPD suggest that people with this label are not capable of having positive or healthy relationships. Experiences of having a positive impact in relationships challenge the problem story. In one session with Levi, he talked about his sadness at a co-worker moving to a different job. I used this as an opening for a re-authoring conversation, asking about what Levi might have contributed to the relationship with the co-worker. He initially did not think he had contributed anything. Through further exploration, Levi identified some things that were special about the relationship and that he contributed to, such as talking about shared interests and seeking this person out. These were both ways of interacting that departed from his usual avoidance of relationships. Levi and I also explored ways he was caring in relationships, rather than letting the idea that he was a “jealous”, “clingy” or “anxious” partner take over the story, which was how past abusive partners had described him. He identified ways he had been there for his partners at times when they needed him. Finding unique outcomes related to Levi’s contributions to others helped to thicken Levi’s view of himself and suggested a storyline that might not fit with ideas about what relationships are like for someone with BPD.

Levi also had people who supported him along the way, and he developed different ideas about himself through reflecting on their interactions. Levi had two past therapists who had “fought for” him through “sharing the burden”, building trust, sticking with him through hard times, and allowing him to share anything without breaking the relationship. He also had an experience of an ex-girlfriend’s stepfather seeing the abusive ways she was interacting with him and standing up for him to his partner, as well as letting him know he deserved something different. This was meaningful in validating Levi’s experiences of the abusive ways of relating in this relationship and moved away from the idea that someone with BPD is always the problem in a relationship.

Distributed

For someone with a diagnosis of BPD, medical records may tell a very different story about the person’s identity than what we might find in other distributed identity stories. Dani and I worked through her medical records from another agency, and she stated her own ideas about what was said. To do something different, I tried to be open and transparent about what I was including in the records I kept, and I asked for Dani’s input. I use narrative language in my notes rather than pathologising or negative language. We also talked openly about the power structures at play in the medical system that might be supporting the stigma she experienced.

I asked questions to explore stories of skills and abilities that might be located in other settings, such as work, or in other relationships, such as friendships. Levi and I continued to explore the ways he felt successful and accomplished in the context of work, where he felt valued for his contributions. He said, “to me, I am successful” when it came to life outside of romantic relationships. He was able to lead a team and received positive feedback from supervisors and peers. This suggested that others held stories of his skills in building relationships and in leadership. In my sessions with Dani, we talked frequently of her different experience of herself as a parent in relationship with her children, compared to other relationships in her life. She was able to advocate for her children and worked to relate to them in ways that were supportive and protective. To extend stories about new identity conclusions into the future, we talked about how she might transfer the skills that her children would recognise to her other relationships. Ideas that others might hold about the person, whether it be their co-workers or their children, can provide openings to alternative stories about distributed identity.

In our early meetings, I created a document with Levi about the effects of the Dementor on his life and documented the stand he took against this. This helped us determine which parts of the problem weren’t working for him and what was important to him. For example, Levi said he kept to himself when the Dementor was present, which he believed was positive because it kept him safe. However, other aspects of the Dementor had negative effects on his relationships, such as feeling like a failure or thoughts of losing everything. This helped us to take a different approach to therapy. I did not make assumptions about what the problem was on the basis of his diagnosis. Instead, he was deciding what was best for his own life. We came back to this document from time to time to review what Levi wanted in his life that this problem was not supporting. By documenting this, we were creating a different view of himself and the problem.

Performed

To explore performed identity, I focus on the decisions my clients make and what these mean about their identity. I ask about the skills, knowledge and abilities that have made a difference in their life and how they view themselves. One part of this is putting the “symptoms” in the context of the person’s past negative and abusive experiences. I ask my clients about ways they resisted the effects of traumatic events or skills they developed. Reynolds (2020) has argued that we should assume that what people do makes sense, and that people are trying to be safe. These ideas can totally shift the perspective on BPD when compared to what the medical model might say. I applied Reynolds’s assumptions in my conversations with Levi and Dani about how they had used skills and knowledge to engage in acts of resistance and how the ways they responded made sense in surviving the situations they were in. This fits with the connection between BPD and trauma that is often seen. I had conversations with Dani and Levi about the effects of their traumatic experiences and how these experiences might have changed how they interacted with others or how they viewed themselves.

With Levi, we focused on how his actions in relationships had been responses to betrayals and abusive interactions, but these responses had been framed as revealing a problem within himself. We talked about how certain feelings he got were an indicator of something off in the relationship, rather than a problematic reaction.

Dani described the loss of important relationships in her life and how she had responded to these losses when she was younger, including through drinking alcohol and separating from things around her. We discussed how traumatic events could contribute to people trying to cope in ways like these, and we also discussed the steps Dani had been taking to move in different directions in her life, such as her efforts to stop drinking alcohol and begin taking care of her mental and physical health in ways that were important to her.

I ask questions about what steps the client is taking to make changes that take them in preferred directions. One example was when Dani recognised that even when the problem took over, she was able to keep herself safe from suicidal thoughts. She was able to reach out for help and hold on to important things in her life. Through many steps Dani had taken, she was now able to separate from suicidal thoughts and believed that she had things to live for. We discussed the ways Dani had prepared for the steps she had taken and what she had learnt about herself. In another example, Levi identified steps he had taken to feel better, including "having an open mind", meditation and having different experiences in therapy relationships. The problem story would not have predicted that they would be able to take these steps, and through exploring these exceptions to the problem story, Dani and Levi came to believe that new things were possible.

I ask about the person's stances and what these might say about what they value. Dani described an argument with her significant other and mentioned it being different to usual. As I asked more questions about this unique outcome, Dani explained that she had taken a stance in support of her anger after a history of being told that her anger was problematic. As we explored the effects of taking this stance, she described how it had moved her in a preferred direction that helped her accept herself: "I don't want to change myself". Diagnostic criteria suggest that any anger experienced by someone with BPD is problematic. I think taking a stance for anger was a helpful act in this case because anger can be a necessary response to stay safe or respond to abusive circumstances. Implicit in the diagnostic criteria are gendered discourses which suggest that female anger is not okay. My approach supported Dani to decide on her own reaction, to identify her own values and to back up her stance. Dani identified that she wanted "a zest for life back" and Levi identified that the problem was a "hindrance to my aspirations" and that he wanted to "stand against rejection and judgement". Dani was engaged in actively shaping her own life rather than being acted upon. She took a stand "for a life that has less pain". She had been experiencing health problems and previously had felt dismissed or unheard in medical settings. She decided that she wanted to take care of herself in a different way. This gave her ideas about herself as someone worth advocating for.

Fluid

Working with identity as fluid rather than fixed invites us to consider who we might want to become, rather than who we "truly are". I used scaffolding conversations to identify and explore what kind of people Dani and Levi might wish to become. This involved reflecting on the significance of actions they had taken. Dani advocated for her child who had chronic health issues. This unique outcome had her believing she could be an expert on herself and her children. Dani then began using these skills to also advocate for her own medical and mental health treatment. Advocating for herself helped her move towards a preferred story of herself as someone deserving of care. Stories and stigmas around BPD had previously kept Dani from speaking up about what she needed in medical and mental health settings, and she often said that she didn't want people to think she was "making it up".

In discussing Levi's relationship with his co-worker, it was meaningful to explore how he had felt safe in this friendship – an experience that would have not been predicted by the diagnosis of BPD. This opened up the possibility of considering that a romantic relationship might not be the only place he could feel accepted. This gave him a new idea that other types of relationships were possible, even if the problem still had a hold on some of his thinking.

Keeping these ideas front of mind while working with Dani and Levi allowed re-authoring conversations to happen that were really different from dominant ideas within the mental health system and society. They allowed Levi and Dani to identify that they did have skills in relationships and in survival that had served them well, while also identifying preferred directions they wanted to move in that fit with their own hopes for their lives. This moved away from the idea of the self as something static and towards an idea that identity is something you are actively crafting through your actions.

Intentional states

In considering all these aspects of identity, narrative therapists focus on intentional states, rather than internal states. Intentional states include a person's intentions, purposes, values, beliefs, hopes, dreams, principles of living, commitments and stances that are behind actions (Carey & Russell, 2003, p. 31).

Lester (2013, p. 75) stated, "What I find most compelling about my clients with 'borderline' symptoms is that they are still struggling to exist despite the deep conviction that they do not deserve to do so. And they are still struggling to connect with others, despite being told again and again that they are manipulative and controlling and difficult". This echoes the continued efforts I have seen Levi and Dani make to have the relationships and lives that they want. A focus on intentional states brought forward what kept them wanting to move in these directions.

In my work with Levi, we discussed his previous experiences of therapy and the work he had done since then. He identified various things that were different, such as no longer "struggling with existence", being more okay with being alone sometimes and feeling more "stable", which fit with the value he placed on establishing a romantic relationship. We discussed what these steps meant for him and for the directions he wanted to go, which was not having the problem take over his relationships and cause fears that led him to not show up in the ways he wanted to. He believed it was important to accept and understand your partner and was seeking to include people in his life who shared these values. These discernments represented a developing stance about the types of relationships he wanted, despite the problem inviting him to believe that these types of relationships weren't possible for him.

Dani's intention was to provide a different life for her children than she had growing up. She had taken steps to ensure she related to her children in ways that were not harmful. She valued her children's wellbeing and hoped that they would not have to face the problems she had faced in her life. This had led her to consider her own ways of interacting to make sure she was supportive and giving her children what they needed. She took a stance against abusive ways of relating to others in order to be there for her children in the way she wanted to be.

Accountability

In the mental health field, practitioners are given power to decide things about a client's life. We can decide if their choices and traits are healthy or unhealthy, right or wrong, good or bad. Through learning and using a narrative therapy worldview, I wanted to be more accountable for my effects on my clients with a BPD diagnosis. I have worked to abandon the approach of expert knowledge in favour of what Sostar, Thomas and Nault (2020) called "borderline wisdom". I have also tried to take up their call to:

- "question the assumption that BPD = bad, broken, dangerous, or irrational"
- assume the person is responding to real and valid situations and emotions
- "trust that individuals are experts in their own experience"
- honour the dignity and agency of the person
- check in to make sure what I'm doing is supportive
- act in solidarity with people with BPD in resisting stigma and harms perpetuated in health care settings, and support them in accessing preferred forms of help (Sostar et al., 2020, pp. 29–40).

These ideas take a stance against the pathologising ways of working that discourses in the mental health and medical systems can recruit us into.

Conclusion

The practices I have described in this paper have been helpful in resisting the stigmatisation of people with a BPD diagnosis. I think it is very hard to work with someone in a helpful way when you have ideas about them that are negative or that carry assumptions. Through the ways in which we did things differently in the therapy room, Levi and Dani began to feel more hope that they could make change in their lives. These practices have also taken pressure off me to have the answers. They allowed me to focus on what is important to the person rather than imposing ideas on them.

I have felt a more comfortable and open relationship with my clients using these ideas and have received feedback that they feel this as well, and that they appreciated having control over what happened in therapy. Eliciting feedback about directions that might be helpful enabled us to go in directions that I may not have picked up on otherwise. This allowed Dani and Levi to discuss the problem in an experience-near way and move in directions that fit best for their lives, rather than directions that were imposed on them.

Through this process, I was able to see the strength and resilience of Levi and Dani. Focusing on narrative views of identity when working with them opened up new possibilities about the directions they could go that were previously obscured by the stigmatised label of BPD. I hope these ideas can contribute towards a more hopeful and generative way of working with people given a diagnosis of BPD or any stigmatising diagnosis.

Note

[1] All names have been changed to protect the identity of the participants

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Response to “Re-authoring identity conclusions in borderline personality disorder” by Alicia Bruzek

by Tiffany Sostar

Tiffany Sostar is a narrative therapist and community worker living as an uninvited guest on Treaty 7 land (in Calgary, Alberta, Canada). Tiffany is bisexual, nonbinary, non-monogamous, neurodivergent and disabled. At one point they called their experience of neurodivergence “BPD”, though now they call it autism (and before either of these namings, they experienced significant invitations to feelings of personal failure related to the experiences and ways of being/doing that these namings seek to communicate!). Tiffany is part of the BPD Superpowers group. Hostility towards trans, nonbinary and gender nonconforming communities continues to escalate. For the next long while, Tiffany is undertaking a series of community projects to create a body of narrative responses in support of trans lives. This work includes their current PhD studies at The University of Melbourne. They love collective narrative practice and documentation. Tiffany can be contacted care of Dulwich Centre

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Key words: borderline personality disorder, gender, narrative practice, neurodiversity paradigm, neuroqueer

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I was excited to read Alicia Bruzek's paper "Re-authoring identity conclusions in borderline personality disorder", and I hope that this response offers narrative practitioners invitations to extend the explorations that Alicia introduces. In her paper, Alicia describes a narrative therapy approach to working with two people who had received a "borderline personality disorder" (BPD) label and who found elements of value in this naming.

Alicia maintains a particular focus on considerations of identity: touching on the effects of dominant discourses about the BPD community; deconstructing some of the negative identity conclusions that people can be invited into; creating a relational context within which new identity conclusions can be explored and strengthened; and double listening for unique outcomes and preferred stories of identity. The stigma attached to the BPD label can recruit people into negative identity conclusions that then become readily available to the person who has been diagnosed or who has identified with the label, and to the people around them.

Despite strong and ongoing personal attachment to the community of folks who identify or are labelled with BPD[1], I can't help but squint suspiciously at the label itself. After all, what does it mean to have a "disordered" personality? It doesn't get much more pathologising, internalising and totalising than that! Although personality and identity aren't the same thing, a common dominant understanding of BPD includes the idea that "identity disturbance … is one of the defining features of the disorder" (Whitbourne, 2021). In addition, the nature of the stigma attached to a "personality disorder" can strongly invite a person into negative identity conclusions, and can invite those around the person to accept these thin and totalising identity conclusions. Alicia's use of specific lines of enquiry to expand the territory of identity beyond the problem story, using the framework offered by Combs and Freedman (2016), has significant implications for other narrative practitioners working with folks who have been subjected to the identity conclusions that diagnoses like BPD can invite.

The stories told about us shape the narratives available to us, and I am interested in how BPD is understood in the social contexts around us, by the people we are in relation with as friends, partners, family, colleagues, medical and mental health service providers, and strangers. I am excited to see more narrative work that centres people's own knowledge and expertise, joining with Amy Druker's thoughtful (2014) article "What to do when the diagnosis doesn't fit?", which offers a practice for narrative engagement when the BPD label has been applied in a way that does not resonate and is not chosen by the person consulting the practitioner.

As Alicia notes, BPD is (and has been for many years) a contentious diagnosis. The psychiatric diagnosis of BPD has been critiqued by feminist, critical psychiatry and Mad scholars as "a medicalization of femininity and trauma" (Redikopp, 2018, p. 77).

And yet, as Alicia notes, and as the BPD Superpowers group identified when we undertook our project four years ago[2], the label serves a purpose for some people.

Redikopp (2018) wrote:

> I use "borderline" as a noun reflective of the experience, identification with, or subjectivity of being/having borderline. I also use it as an adjective to describe aspects of being/having borderline, for example, borderline knowing or borderline feeling. I also use "borderline" to refer to a person with borderline in an attempt to reclaim the borderline label. I use "BPD" to refer to the psychiatric diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder, which can be disempowering and epistemically violent. By differentiating between "borderline" and "BPD" I hold space to critically engage with the politics of diagnostic categories while acknowledging that some (fellow) borderlines may find solace and validation in the process of diagnostic labelling. The relationship between BPD and borderline then, is one of contention, negotiation, and multiple possibilities. (p. 78)

It is in these sites of contention, negotiation and multiple possibilities that I see invitations for further narrative practice.

Redikopp's particular differentiation between "borderline" and "BPD" is not the only engagement with naming and meaning-making possibilities in relation to the experiences that BPD/borderline/alternative namings seek to categorise.

Some scholars and community thinkers, including the BPD Superpowers group, identify the neurodiversity paradigm as a useful framework for engaging with BPD/borderline/alternatively named experiences.

"*Neurodiversity* is the diversity of human minds, the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species … The neurodiversity paradigm is a specific perspective on neurodiversity” (Walker, 2021, pp. 34–35). In the neurodiversity paradigm, neurodiversity is considered natural and valuable, the idea that there is a “normal” or “healthy” type of brain is considered a cultural construction, and the social dynamics related to neurodiversity include, among other things, dynamics of social power (Walker, 2021, p. 35). The neurodiversity paradigm is a response to and refusal of the pathology paradigm. It emerged from the autistic community.

Some borderline/BPD scholars are engaging with this paradigm in rich and complex ways, and in ways that I think might resonate with narrative practice, and might benefit from being approached with a critical, political and postructuralist narrative therapy perspective.

Francesca Lewis (2023) identified her “work on borderline experience [as] part of a growing movement of neuroqueer scholarship calling for neurodivergent experiences to be treated as valuable ways of knowing”. She wrote, “neuroqueering is not just about seeing madness more clearly but about seeing the world with fresh mad eyes” (2023).

The neurodiversity paradigm is already influencing narrative practice, such as in KJ Wiseheart’s (2024) video and associated collective document “How we deal with Autistic burnout”. I think there is rich potential for this engagement to continue in relation to BPD/borderline/alternative namings.

I am also excited to see narrative practitioners engaging rigorously and creatively with the social contexts into which BPD diagnoses or borderline/alternatively named experiences emerge.

For example, the differential application of a BPD diagnosis across cisgender experiences is significant, with “studies estimating a 3:1 female-to-male diagnostic ratio in clinical setting” (Sanchious et al., 2024, p. 196). This study found that “men” (presumably cisgender men, since the study conflates “men” and “male”) are more likely to meet diagnostic criteria related to “behaviors [that] can be captured by the inappropriate, intense anger, or impulsivity criteria, even though they are not typically thought of as ‘core’ symptoms” (Sanchious et al., 2024, p. 196). I am excited for narrative work that engages with the discourses and systems that are underlying these differential experiences of diagnosis. It is not a neutral or apolitical thing, after all, that “men” are more likely to fit the “anger” diagnostic criteria and “women” are more likely to fit the “self-harm” diagnostic criteria.

Gender diversity is another relevant area here. One 2023 study found that “clinical providers diagnosed BPD more frequently among [transgender and gender diverse] than cisgender patients” (Rodriguez-Seijas et al., 2023, p. 10) and that this disparity *did not* reflect group differences in the “personality domains that are thought to underlie the BPD disorder” (2023, p. 10). In other words, when two people presented with the same experiences and expressions of distress, the transgender person was more likely to be diagnosed with BPD than the cisgender person.

Erin Tichenor (2024) asked, “Which women and gender minorities are being diagnosed, how, why, and what does that diagnosis then do for or to them?” (p. 27). This is a question that offers rich possibilities for narrative practice, building on the history in this field of careful and critical consideration of both the sociopolitical contexts around a diagnosis and also the real effects of discourse and available narratives on the lives of the people who consult with us.

Merri Lisa Johnson (2021) questioned whether “BPD diagnosis [is] one of the DSM’s back doors for heterosexual and cisgender supremacy” (p. 635). This is another question that offers rich potential for narrative practice exploration!

I hope that narrative practitioners will also engage with questions of race and culture when co-researching with community members about experiences that might be called BPD or borderline or something else.

Munson et al. (2022) wrote that “the few studies that have investigated the presentation of BPD in non-Western cultures have found that the manifestations of BPD are varied between cultures, which is not accounted for in the DSM-5 diagnosis for BPD”.

What might narrative practice, attending to local context and inviting people to name their own experiences in their own experience-near language, offer to a more complex and multi-storied understanding of the experiences of distress that are being pulled under a BPD naming? How can we resist psychological colonisation in our engagement with BPD/borderline (and with other expressions of neurodiversity)?

In addition to culturally specific and relevant namings and ways of speaking about experiences that might be called BPD or borderline, I am also interested in how expressions of distress are interpreted. Are the effects of colonial violence being interpreted as “BPD” in an internalising, totalising and pathologising frame? What is lost, if so? Are the effects of racism being interpreted in this way?

An Indigenous BPD Superpowers participant shared, “One of the first definitions of BPD I saw described it as resulting from a ‘genetic predisposition’ and trauma. I immediately thought about my own family’s intergenerational trauma … I wondered how the history of colonial violence plays a role in my present-day neurodivergent experience” (Sostar, Thomas, & Nault, 2020, p. 3). This is still a relevant question, and one that I hope narrative practitioners will engage with.

In all of these areas and more, I am curious about the social pressures, expectations and discourses that might be influencing people who are assigned a BPD label and recruiting them into ways of thinking and acting that may be out of alignment with their own values and preferences. What avenues of expression and meaning-making are available, and which are less available? And I am interested in the social pressures, expectations and discourses that might be influencing psychiatric professionals and informing how they make meaning of the expressions of distress that they are witnessing.

The main thing I hope for in this small response paper, as you maybe can tell, is more! More narrative engagement with this community that I love so much; more engagement with the social and political contexts of borderline lives; more solidarity to examine and stand against unjust discourses and the harm they cause. I am excited for narrative practitioners to further co-research with community members the experiences that have been so pathologised, to invite a fresh viewing of these experiences and generate experience-near, resonant namings, and to work with community members to resist the individualising and internalising of hardship. I am excited to see further work that dignifies and centres the insider knowledges of people who identify with, have identified with, or do not identify with but have been labelled as BPD/borderline, and that brings an explicitly political lens to the social context into which BPD diagnoses emerge.

On a final note, it is significant to see the BPD Superpowers document out in the world, having an effect. As Kay, one of the original BPD Superpowers group members said in response to Alicia’s paper, “I am so proud of us! Reading someone else’s experiences echoing my own makes my heart hurt in a good way”.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Aakhil Lakhani for helping me think through some of the complexities around how expressions of distress are witnessed and interpreted within contexts of race, gender and perceived ability.

Notes

[1] I was part of the BPD Superpowers project that Alicia Bruzek cites, and I have found a community of shared experience with folks who have received or chosen this label. My relationship with the label has shifted multiple times over the years, and I currently understand my neurodivergence in other ways, identifying more strongly as autistic. I have the privilege of more easily making my own choices about this because I have never had the diagnosis coercively or permanently applied to my medical record. The fact that medical and mental health professionals who have interacted with me during moments of crisis have not coercively or permanently applied this diagnosis to my file speaks in part, I believe, to my privilege as someone who is white, educated, housed and employed.

[2] It is worth noting that I am not the only member of the BPD Superpowers group whose identification with the label has shifted over the last four years.

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Review Essays

Reframing trauma through social justice:

Resisting the politics of mainstream trauma discourse

Edited by Catrina Brown

Reviewed by Manja Visschedijk

Manja has a long history of responding to trauma in both unpaid queer and feminist activist collectives, and in paid social justice roles in feminist and community service organisations. Manja currently practices independently as a narrative therapist and is a member of the Dulwich Centre Faculty and a clinical tutor within the Department of Social Work at The University of Melbourne. Manja can be contacted care of Dulwich Centre.

Abstract

Manja Visschedijk reviews Catrina Brown's (2024) edited collection *Reframing trauma through social justice: Resisting the politics of mainstream trauma discourse*. Routledge. 356pp. ISBN 9781032459899, ISBN 9781003379591 (ebook).

Key words: trauma; feminism; poststructuralism; book review; narrative practice

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This book, part of a series on women and psychology aimed at human services workers, students, academics and persons with lived experience, will be of interest to narrative practitioners working with the effects of trauma caused by sexual, family, institutional and systemic violence.

Editor Catrina Brown has brought together multiple cross-disciplinary authors, offering a wide-ranging critique of the pathologising, universalising and individualising trauma treatments promoted in mainstream biomedicalised, neoliberal and "postfeminist" trauma discourse, advocating instead for "alternative feminist and narrative approaches" (p. iii).

These alternative approaches build on historical feminisms' contributions to the field, declining tendencies to "talk about trauma-informed work as if this were a new discovery … detached from the important historical work of the women's movement" (Brown & Tseris, 2024, p. 18). As someone writing this review from the perspective of lived experience and as a feminist narrative practitioner, this sentence resonated with me. In 1979 I joined the Rape Crisis Collective in Garramilla/Darwin, answering the phones and responding to women who had been raped. The role was grassroots women's liberation work, unpaid and community-led: "by women and for women" was our catchcry. This book is a testament to the ways in which, in the decades since this catchcry framed our work, intersectional, poststructural and embodied feminist theory and praxis have transformed the limitations inherent in those earlier feminist understandings that imagined that as (white) "women" we could casually speak for all women:

> When working with intersectional communities, primarily those who have not only experienced personal trauma, but collective trauma over the course of multiple generations, there is a need for validating the wisdom rooted in the collective understanding … Technologies of joy, gathering, mutual aid, care circles, storytelling and witnessing are intrinsic to Black queer healing justice spaces and have been handed down as sacred to survival … This form of care was not only birthed from our resilience, but is also rooted in the ancestral principles of Afrocentric teachings, which prioritizes an interconnected approach to life. (Turton, 2024, pp. 235–236)

Bundjalung/Goenpul writer Mareese Terare points to the necessity of continuing to interrogate the limitations of white feminisms' responses to trauma:

> Service providers also need to identify and reflect on positions of privilege that may impact on clients … First Nations women survivors of domestic violence need to be able to access human services that have a deep understanding of First Nation worldviews and the sociohistorical and political context that has impacted on First Nations people. (Terare, 2024, p. 231)

Both Terare and Nachshon Siritsky, a nonbinary, transgender descendant of Holocaust survivors, discuss the importance of addressing the structural issues related to intergenerational trauma, which continue to cause harm:

> The focus cannot be on individuals through labelling, diagnosing and providing pharmaceutical treatment within a mainstream individualized biomedical lens, but instead on culturally appropriate community-based support … deeper systemic justice is also desperately needed: the righting of historic wrongs through reconciliation and reparations. (Siritsky, 2024, p. 192)

Both these authors also argue that service organisations funded to respond to trauma must address the needs of workers with lived experience of collective, institutionalised, intergenerational trauma by

> demonstrating their ability to decolonize aspects of their service delivery … [and supporting] First Nations human service workers … reclaiming their tribal strengths from over 65,000 years. (Terare, 2024, p. 231)

The 18 chapters and 27 authors in this collection deconstruct various historical, political, economic and structural contexts within which traumatic violence takes place, including within "trauma-informed" therapy and psychiatric settings, addiction services, chronic pain treatment and (dis)ability services, birthing centres, homelessness services, criminal justice settings, and in academic and training centres.

The collection critiques the so-called "evidence-based" expert knowledges and biomedical solutions favoured by dominant discourse, arguing that the focus on individual deficit, or the failings of individual brains and bodies, depoliticises trauma. The alternative knowledges and practices offered instead are grounded in poststructural, intersectional feminist and narrative therapy approaches.

All of the chapters made for interesting reading, and I will highlight a few that stood out to me.

Emma Tseris, drawing on the testimonies of women who have survived psychiatric incarceration writes:

> Although we are living in an era of de-institutionalization, mental health service responses to emotional distress and differences continue to be shaped by coercion and carceral logics. (Tseris, 2024, p. 56)

When the only services available are "short-term, one-size-fits-all, decontextualized and biomedicalized" (p. 64)

> they are often retraumatizing and revictimizing … This means that not only do mental health services enact harm in the name of care, but also that women experience a further act of betrayal when they are advised that the service they have received is trauma-informed. (Tseris, 2024, p. 64)

Canadian authors MacDonald et al. interrogate ableist barriers within health care systems:

> The binary split between normalcy and abnormalcy, through a biomedical lens of what constitutes a normal body and a body with impairments, further keeps (dis)Abled persons trapped in internalized, neoliberal and structural webs of ableism where they are constantly being measured against biomedical standards of the ideal body, with the ultimate goal of returning them to as close to a normal state as possible. (MacDonald et al., 2024, p. 131)

Dupupet and Boileau (2024) ask critical questions about the social construction of motherhood embedded in the dominant patriarchal medical model, which can render birth trauma invisible.

The systemic structural inequities leading to youth homelessness, and the traumatic acts enacted on young people both prior to and after entering life on the streets, including being subject to discriminatory and racist policing practices, are unpacked by Karabanow et al., with the authors advocating for:

> an integrative and outreach-based model that speaks to deep client-based engagement … [including], community-based, supportive housing … prioritizing the voices of homeless youth means being responsive to their needs; respectful, knowledgeable and considerate of their situations; non-judgmental and accepting of differences; participatory and democratic; supportive throughout the long-term involvement; and non-bureaucratic and action-oriented. (Karabanow et al., 2024, p. 173)

Ross and Schumacher, arguing for community-based restorative justice practices, point out the limitations of carceral feminist approaches:

> The initiation of [pro-policing] policies was largely the result of advocacy efforts by mainstream White feminists who hoped carceral responses to domestic violence would ultimately lower the rates and increase public awareness of domestic violence as a serious and criminal offence. (Ross & Schumacher, 2024, p. 269)

Instead, these pro-arrest, pro-charge and pro-prosecution policies have largely proven to exacerbate the trauma experienced by racially, socially and economically marginalised populations – including women themselves being charged when they have called police after being subjected to violence – and often leading to the invasive involvement of child welfare and state statutory bodies in their lives.

Tod Augusta-Scott describes the feminist-informed, narrative group-work program he developed for working with men who have used violence:

> With the Safety and Repair approach, practitioners challenge both gender expectations and ideas that stem from past traumatic experiences. With this approach, practitioners support men not only to stop the abuse, but also to repair the harm they have caused. Clients are supported in repairing harm with both those who have hurt them and those whom they have hurt. (Augusta-Scott, 2024, p. 287)

However, exploring "the politics of emotions", Nicole Moulding queries the effectiveness of men's perpetrator programs, arguing that "such programs have been shown to have at best modest … to poor outcomes" (2024, p. 253), and that more attention needs to be paid to "the role of gendered, socially embodied emotions and affects as drivers of violent and controlling gender practices in everyday relationships" (p. 249). Moulding argues that:

> Gendered violence involves interactions between bodies that are profoundly visceral, intersubjective, embodied, socially situated and political. Yet the body – its sensations, desires, affects and emotions and its interactions with

> other bodies that are also in the grip of culture – have received surprisingly little attention from researchers. (Moulding, 2024, p. 254)

Editor Catrina Brown has offered this volume as an act of "discursive resistance" unpacking the ways in which expert-centred so-called "evidence-based" models, including a narrow, individualising focus on neuroscience, have turned the 1970s feminist principle that "the personal is political" on its head, into "the political is personal" (p. 2).

When I first volunteered for the Rape Crisis Centre phoneline in 1979, there was very little literature for me to turn to, and it's been interesting, as I have made my way through this book, to reflect on the explosion of research and writing across the decades. And while I haven't covered all the chapters in this inspiring volume – and no single volume could cover all the topics – I can see some important topics that are missing, including the *continuing* traumatic stress affecting persons subject to occupation or the violent conflict currently taking place in countries around the world (see Giacaman et al., 2011; Sehwail, 2005), or that suffered by the 110 million persons across the globe involuntarily displaced from their homes (Institute For Economics and Peace, 2024).

And while a range of community-led, alternative responses to trauma were outlined, there are other activist and community-led resources and perspectives that may be of interest to readers of this book, including transformative justice and abolitionist feminist contributions (see Crystal et al., 2024; Davis, 2023); First Nations narrative practitioners' work (see Drahm-Butler, 2017); and the plethora of freely available practice-based resources offered by Dulwich Centre, including courses on African-centred narrative practice; Sexualities, genders and narrative practice; and Feminisms, intersectionality and narrative practice.

The collective message of this book is loud and clear, and one with which I wholeheartedly agree: to resist neoliberal invitations to reduce persons affected by trauma into measurable KPIs and economic units of service provision; to resist the truth claims of universalising, "evidence-based" treatments; and to resist attempts at erasing the richness of diverse worldviews into narrow, pathologising, one-size-fits-all approaches, adopting instead a spirited championing of many, diverse approaches to promoting collective wellbeing and ever-changing expressions of individual freedoms.

Acknowledgments

I am writing from unceded Kaurna country and pay respects to the First Nations peoples on all the lands of the readers and contributors to this publication around the globe. My heartfelt gratitude for your long-time and continuing care of the lands and waters on which we live. I acknowledge the groundbreaking work of Kaurna Elder Aunty Barbara Wingard and Yankunytjatjara/Antikirinja woman Jane Lester in addressing First Nations trauma in Australia through "telling our stories in ways that make us stronger" (Wingard & Lester, 2001).

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Trans bodies, trans selves:

A resource by and for transgender communities, edited by Laura Erickson-Schroth (2nd edition)

Reviewed by Tiffany Sostar

Tiffany Sostar is a narrative therapist and community worker living as an uninvited guest on Treaty 7 land (in Calgary, Alberta, Canada). Tiffany is bisexual, nonbinary, non-monogamous, neurodivergent and disabled. They are particularly interested in "insider" practice and in complicating the binary between insider and outsider, acknowledging and attending to how they can be insider to some parts of community, and outsider to other parts of that same community. They value how there is difference and specificity even in communities of shared identity and experience. Hostility towards trans, nonbinary and gender nonconforming communities continues to escalate. For the next long while, Tiffany is undertaking a series of community projects to create a body of narrative responses in support of trans lives. This work includes their current PhD studies at The University of Melbourne. They love collective narrative practice and documentation. Tiffany can be contacted care of Dulwich Centre

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Abstract

Tiffany Sostar reviews *Trans bodies, trans selves: A resource by and for transgender communities*, edited by Laura Erickson-Schroth (2022, 2nd edition). Oxford University Press. 728pp. ISBN 9780190092726.

Key words: trans; transgender; nonbinary; gender-expansive; collective document; book review; narrative practice

Sostar, T. (2024). Review essay: Trans bodies, trans selves: A resource by and for transgender communities, edited by Laura Erickson-Schroth (2nd edition). *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (2). 115–119. . https://orcid.org/0009-0002-9443-096X

Author pronouns: they/them

Looking through *Trans bodies, trans selves* as a nonbinary person is exciting, energising, emotional … this book presents a wide-ranging and welcoming view of trans and gender-expansive (T/GE) experience.

While I read the book through the lens of my own experience and saw resonances in the pages, I believe the value of this book extends beyond the parts that resonate with an individual reader's experience. Accounts of differing and disparate experiences across transness offer something precious: an opportunity to learn from those with lived expertise.

I hope this review will inspire other readers to pick it up. Flip through it. Be moved by it. Become briefly immersed in some of the richness of difference that exists within trans communities. Put it on a visible shelf in your office, share it with the people you work alongside – clients and colleagues alike.

In the first chapter, authors Mira C. Jourdan and Harper B. Keenan write:

> Trans people are diverse, and we will never resolve the contradictions between our many views. We can all agree, however, on certain things. Trans people are real. There are many, many ways that people conceive of their own genders. This expansiveness can be creative, and it can also be a source of frustration. Trans people should not be forced to earn recognition of who they are, nor be forced to perform a narrowly prescribed gender role to be able to stay alive, to be safe, or to access community integration, legal recognition, or medical services they need. Although we are all very different, there is strength in common advocacy.
> (2022, p. 7)

Kai Cheng Thom notes in the Foreword, "*Trans Bodies, Trans Selves* stands within the activist lineage that dares to recognize the rich depth and brilliance of our culture, to imagine that *trans people* are the rightful experts in our own identities, bodies, and experiences" (2022, p. xi). In a time when many people have a lot to say about transgender people (Serano, 2024), not all of which is kind, dignifying or offers any kind of acknowledging or witnessing, this is an important position to take.

Trans bodies, trans selves takes inspiration from Our Bodies, Ourselves, another significant project that recognises the depth and brilliance of insider knowledge and lived experience. Our Bodies, Ourselves was founded in 1969 by a group of women who met during a "female liberation conference" (Our Bodies, Ourselves, n.d.). They shared their knowledge in order to "serve as a model for women to learn about themselves, communicate their findings with doctors, and challenge the medical establishment to change and improve the care that women receive" (Our Bodies, Ourselves, n.d.). They formed the Boston Women's Health Book Collective and published *Our bodies, ourselves*, which was revised and updated multiple times between 1971 and 2011.

In the Afterword for the first edition of *Trans bodies*, *trans selves* (Erickson-Schroth, 2014), the authors of *Our bodies, our selves* wrote:

> Thanks to *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves* and all the transgender folks who have been writing and teaching over the past many years, we, a group of cisgender women, now know that we can no longer say "a woman's body" and mean only one thing. One person's body may have a penis and testicles, and be a woman's body. Another person's body may have breasts or a clitoris, and be a man's body. The revolutionary point is that we can name our gender identity for ourselves and rightfully expect respect and recognition. "Our bodies, ourselves" grows in meaning daily. (Authors of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, 2014, p. 592)

In narrative therapy, we are invited to "consider the histories, herstories and theirstories in [our] local context of the folks who transgress, fail, defy norms of gender, sex, sexualities, bodies and families, including those histories that are currently emerging" (Maeder, 2021). It is a political stance to centre the lived experience and stories of the people we are working with. Practitioners in the field of narrative practice have historically acted in alignment with this stance when it comes to gender and other areas of experience, even when these actions have been "controversial and bold at the time" (White & Cross, 2016, p. 61). When I dream of the future of narrative practice, I want practitioners to be bold in our centring of trans people as the experts in their/our own lives, regardless of controversy.

Acts of boldness like this can also be acts of celebration! In *Queer Counselling and Narrative Practice*, David Denborough wrote, "For those of us whose sexual identities flourish outside the norms of heterosexual desire, and for those who are demonstrating how gendered identities are more fluid than we were led to believe, this book is a celebration of insider knowledge" (2002, p. vii). *Trans bodies, trans selves*, too, is a celebration of insider knowledge in similar ways.

In *Queer counselling and narrative practice*, Esben Esther Pirelli Benestad wrote:

> The challenge for all health professionals, indeed all adults, could be formulated as follows: The quest is not for the possibly transgendered child or adolescent to understand or take care of the world, but for the world to understand and take care of the transgendered. (2002, p. 217)

This challenge remains relevant today. I believe this book can help narrative practitioners meet it.

The challenge that Pirelli Benestad offers to all health professionals, and all adults, resonates with a question that Arthemis Rodhanthy has offered to feminists. In a 2004 letter to Dulwich Centre's ongoing project on "Feminism, therapy, and narrative ideas", she wrote:

> My relationship with feminism is rather complex. How is it possible for me to draw upon feminist ideas when some circles have caused damage to my kindreds …
>
> It is a sad reality that those who I thought would be allies in a patriarchal world have caused harm to the sub-group of women to whom I belong. It's a sad reflection of our situation that, unless we keep quiet [about being trans], we have both the patriarchy and feminism against us.
>
> This brings me to the question of whether it is possible to connect feminist ideas with poststructuralism. I don't believe that there are two sexes or two genders. I think there can be many. Is it possible to connect the projects of feminism to notions of a multiplicity of genders; to gender-diversity; to multiple ways to become gendered or sexed; to freedom of gender-expression; to genderrights? My hope is that it is. (Rodhanthy, 2004, p. 2.)

Twenty years later, some branches of feminism have answered Arthemis's question with a "no". But there are many other branches of feminism that continue to say yes. For narrative practitioners who identify as feminists and want to say yes to Arthemis's question, this book will offer encouragement and support.

As you make your way through this volume, you might note how language has shifted in the 22 years since *Queer Counselling and Narrative Practice* was published. In a field where words hold deep significance, *Trans bodies, trans selves* can help readers become grounded and fluent in some of the current language. As Jennifer Finney Boylan writes in the Afterword to *Trans bodies, trans selves*:

> The language has been changing at a dizzying pace …
>
> In the Introduction to the first edition of this book, I wrote a little bit about the language that people then used to talk about their genders, and noted some of the tension in the community between some of its different wings … I observed then that the diversity of the community is its strength, not its weakness, and that we should all be glad that there are so many ways of being us. (2022, p. 660)

Esben Ester Pirelli Benestad (2016) published a revised version of the paper above 15 years after it was first published. The revised paper reflected how understandings of words, concepts and attitudes had changed. The second edition of *Trans bodies, trans selves* has also changed significantly from the first edition, which was published in 2014. In the Introduction, the editing team writes, "*Trans Bodies, Trans Selves* is an aspirational and evolving document, and we expect it to change, perhaps radically, with each iteration" (Carmel et al., 2022, p. xvii). The book includes 23 chapters with one to five authors and over 150 additional short pieces, as well as a significant number of direct quotes from contributors to the Trans Bodies, Trans Selves Survey.

Trans bodies, trans selves celebrates and makes visible many of the different ways of being trans. Almost every page includes photos of trans people, text boxes with trans people's stories in their own words, art by and about trans people. Old and young, fat and straight-sized, ambulatory and with mobility devices, from a wide range of locations and racial backgrounds, with outfits and hairstyles and jewellery and makeup that locate them across the vast galaxy of gender … flipping through this book lifts the crushing weight of cisnormativity.

Cisgender narrative practitioners working in individual, group, family or community spaces will find value in the rich diversity of stories, told in people's own words and often in profound and moving experience-near language. Here is an entire book of voices with which to "people the room" (Reynolds, 2011) in conversations with T/GE folks and the people who are in relationship with them.

This is also a valuable resource for narrative practitioners who want to become more aware of some of the discourses that swirl around T/GE folks, and who want to take an informed position on these discourses in order to listen with more context in narrative conversations.

Despite this, it is important to note that:

> An effort was made to select short pieces, quotes, and art that represent the diversity of trans communities. We have inevitably failed at this goal. Most of the authors live in the United States or Canada. Many are middle or upper class, and many are white. There are stories that are not told here – voices that are not heard. (Carmel et al., 2022, p. xviii)

Narrative practitioners in global majority contexts will notice these gaps (and perhaps be sparked to create collective documentation that addresses them!).

Collective narrative practitioners will recognise how this book fosters a context for readers and contributors "in which individuals who are going through hard times can make contributions to the lives of others who are going through similar difficulties" (Denborough, 2008, p. 4), how it works to locate problems in their social and political contexts, and how it is a counter document to so many impositions of expert knowledge from outside the community.

There is a significant sense of *communitas* (Denborough, 2008; V. Turner, 1969) in the book, which narrative practitioners will recognise. Narrative practitioners have been interested in ways communitas can evoke connection while not merging identities (Denborough, 2008): in communitas, "the gifts of each person are alive to the full, along with those of every other person. Communitas liberates individuals from conformity to general norms" (E. Turner, 2004, p. 98).

Trans bodies, trans selves is not a narrative therapy book, and narrative therapy isn't mentioned in the chapter on mental health (perhaps future partnerships can be developed with the Trans Bodies, Trans Selves team!). Despite this, narrative practitioners can learn from, benefit from, and find resonance and political alignment with this phenomenal publication.

Inside the book, you'll find sections addressing:

- race, ethnicity and culture
- immigration
- disability
- religion and spirituality
- sex and gender development
- coming out
- social transition
- work and employment
- legal issues
- general, sexual and reproductive health
- medical transition
- surgical transition
- mental health and emotional wellness
- intimate relationships
- sexuality
- parenting
- US history
- arts and culture
- activism, politics and organising.

Notes

[1] This is the terminology used in *Trans bodies, trans selves.*

[2] I use "straight-sized" rather than alternatives such as "thin" to refer to people whose body shape and size is more readily accommodated by the fashion industry and dominant, fatphobic standards. (https://www.teenvogue.com/story/superfat-small-fat-how-they-are-used)

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