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## Editorial

From Cheryl White and Jane Hales

Dear Reader,

This is Cheryl White and Jane Hales writing together. We hope you are well!

We have big news.

This edition of *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work* brings with it a new format, which includes not only formally reviewed papers but also interviews, video and audio contributions, and reviews. This set up also enables the journal to be interactive. You can now easily leave comments about papers and enter into a dialogue with authors and therefore foster a greater sense of intellectual community.

Significantly, from this day onwards, the journal is also going to be Open Access, so all freely available! This is possible because the journal is now to be hosted by Dulwich Centre Foundation.

The journal has always moved with the times, and we believe this format makes the most sense for the contemporary field. We're really looking forward to it. We are also going to be actively publishing pieces by young and emerging narrative practitioners, and of course we will continue to ensure that we publish papers, videos and audio files from a great diversity of contexts and cultures.

Things have come a long way since Jane was typesetting *Dulwich Centre Newsletter* on a typewriter! It's almost 40 years since we started working together! Seeing this journal start as a one-page newssheet to now becoming an international online multimedia production is quite something.

There are other changes too. After 40 years, I (Cheryl) have decided it's the right time for a new editor. I will still be involved as Editorial Consultant, but I am very delighted to announce that the new editor will Shelja Sen. Shelja is a feminist narrative family therapist and author based in Delhi, India, and it feels just perfect that she is now going to be the Editor-in-Chief. She is terrific and we are so happy.

And after almost 40 years of typesetting, design, proofreading, liaison and journal management, I (Jane), have decided it's the right time to pass most of these tasks to others! I will still be involved in proofreading – I am perhaps the only person in the world who has read every word of every Dulwich Centre publication!

For those readers who have been engaged with this journal since the beginning, we want to thank you for your support and interest in narrative practice. And to the next generation of readers, listeners, viewers and authors, we very much look forward to seeing how you continue to stretch the field and develop diverse forms of narrative practice.

*International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work* is a feminist-informed publication, and it's always been a place where we announce new projects and initiatives. It gives us great pleasure to announce here the first Dulwich Centre Fellowship! Tiffany Sostar from Calgary, Canada, is being awarded this fellowship in relation to their projects on *narrative responses in support of trans lives*. More information about this will be included in the next issue!

This Fellowship sits alongside the two Chairs of Feminisms, Intersectionality and Narrative Practice here at Dulwich Centre, currently held by Tileah Drahm-Butler and Sekneh Hamoud Beckett.

We hope this issue and the new format of *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work* support your work with individuals, families and communities who are struggling. That was the hope when the first Dulwich Centre newssheet was typed up and posted out in 1983 and remains the hope 40 years on.

Warmly,  
Cheryl White & Jane Hales  
Kauria Country, Australia



*Cheryl White has been involved with Dulwich Centre since it opened in 1983. Jane Hales started soon after and they've worked together ever since.*





## Editorial

From Shelja Sen

Dear Reader,

A metaphor that came to me as I read and watched and listened to the rich offerings of this issue of the journal is a web. The stories here offer ways to connect us across time, ages, themes, continents, histories, colour, bodies, genders, sexuality and so much more.

I am writing from New Delhi, but through engaging with the stories told in this issue, my life connects in some way with the lives of others in diverse contexts. This includes the lives of young people and children.

Early on in this issue we are given a vantage point to view collaborative conversations on safety with young people using the migration of identity metaphor in a paper by Clare Kempton Sladden. Deborah Mrema shares how we can nurture spaces to respectfully honour stories of pride and survival in fostering healing possibilities for children using the Tree of Life, and Luke Kalaf brings to us the gamification of narrative therapy, in which elevation of side quests can invite subversive anti-colonial adventures.

In further peer-reviewed papers, Nicolás Mosso Tupper offers cross-cultural partnerships that challenge narrow definitions of masculinity and open new and diverse ways of being a man. Barry Sullivan questions individualistic and capitalist discourses of productivity that promote ageist ideas.

We are also introduced to how AI (artificial intelligence) can be used creatively in therapy. It is fascinating to listen to Andrea Ng's audio practice note on the use of AI in generating stories that heal. As we ponder on how technology can enrich our practice, we have an old gem from the archives – "My favourite questions" by Jill Freedman, being read out in an audio recording by Esther Benz – reminding us how our questions can invite people to link their lives with others through shared purposes and how we are all in it together. This paper is so significant as we find our way out of the pandemic.

Vijaya Teelock's interview with David Denborough on seeking truth, justice and reconciliation in Mauritius – where there is a history of indentured labour and slavery – is poignant as it explores how we can memorialise and democratise history in ways that are participative and not separate from our present lives. Zan Maeder's interview of Perry Zurn is fascinating and so important for narrative practitioners to reflect on the politics of curiosity and how reclamation takes constant work from people who are marginalised as the world is constantly trying to erase their right to know. As Perry puts it, "Curiosity can be revolutionary. It can prompt us to imagine a different way of being in the world for ourselves and for one another".

This idea links so well with Gipsy Hosking's video on disability politics and invisible illnesses and how we shape discourse as well as being shaped by it. This issue also includes a video by Sabine Vermeire, recorded as a message to Turkish colleagues after the earthquake there. Sabine takes us on a journey of playful seriousness and serious playfulness to foster experiences of agency, belonging and coherence when children have experienced loss and suffering.

David Newman's review of the documentary film *Addicted to Life* reflects on the urgency, complexity and tenderness of the Belgium athlete Marieke Vervoort's decision to end her life via euthanasia as a form of defiance or refusal of biopower, and at the same time explores how people's lives cannot be reduced to their final act.

All these are exquisite stories of pain, despair, loss, survival, healing, responses to injustice, reconciliation, reparation and reclamation. Stories that make a difference and as Auntie Barbara Wingard put it, being told in ways that make us stronger. In all of them, there is a spirit of adventure, a legacy that has been passed across generations of narrative practitioners. As Cheryl White passes on this legacy to me after 40 years of editorship, I am honoured and committed to sustaining it until it is ready to be passed on to the next generation in an ever-growing and evolving web of life that spans time, generations, regions, languages and cultural contexts.

In solidarity,  
Shelja Sen  
New Delhi, India

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## 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 for all



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The background of the image is a dense, textured pattern of green leaves, likely from a plant like a willow or birch, with long, narrow, pointed leaves in various shades of green. A semi-transparent white rectangular box is centered in the upper half of the image, containing the text.

Peer-reviewed  
papers



# The River of Life safety map: Narrative journeys in a school-based setting

by Clare Kempton Sladden



*At the time of writing this paper, Clare Kempton resided on the unceded lands of the Djab Wurrung and Jardwadjali peoples. She works across multiple schools in a rural context, and seeks to hear students' expertise in matters relating to their own lives. Clare has a specific interest in finding micro-opportunities to unsettle practices of power within a duty-of-care context. Clare was born at home on Bunjalung Country and spent her formative years on Awabakal Country in Newcastle. She is proud to locate herself within a big blended family, and was raised by her beautiful mother. Clare spends much of her time swimming in wild places and cooking with friends. [clare.kempton55@gmail.com](mailto:clare.kempton55@gmail.com)*

## Abstract

This article explores the use of narrative practices in a school-based setting to approach safety planning with young people. The article proposes an alternative safety planning tool: The River of Life safety map, which draws on the migration of identity metaphor. The author explores opportunities for collaboration in safety planning and risk management, drawing on feminist ethics. A story of practice gives suggestions for how one may use the map.

**Key words:** *school counselling; self-harm; suicidal ideation; duty of care; safety planning; risk management; ethic of control; ethic of collaboration; rites of passage; migration of identity; narrative practice.*

Kempton Sladden, C. (2023). The River of Life safety map: Narrative journeys in a school-based setting. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (1), 2–15. <https://doi.org/10.4320/BPBI1807>

Author pronouns: she/her



## Introducing my context

I work with primary and secondary students in two different schools. My roles were established in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as funding for mental health was prioritised by the state government. I began working in schools at the same time as beginning a master's degree in narrative therapy and community work at The University of Melbourne. My studies prompted me to pay careful attention to my influence on the lives of the young people seeking my support.

Being positioned as a mental health practitioner in a small wellbeing team contributed to an expectation that I was an expert in relation to mental health. I am a university-educated cis woman living in an able body, and according to neuroscience, my brain is now fully developed. I choose not to disclose certain aspects about my relationship status and sexuality at work. These combined locations may have elevated my perspectives when teachers, parents and students engaged with me.

In addition, the legal context underpinning duty of care (Commission for Children and Young People, 2023; Merlino, 2022) contributed to certain discourses that situate mental health practitioners as responsible for guaranteeing the safety of students (Buckley & Decter, 2006; Stout, 2010). In this context, risk assessment and safety planning often dominated my meetings with young people. Teaming up with young people to explore options for safety is essential. However, I wondered what was being missed when risk assessments and safety planning were the focus. I did not want safety planning to be a simplistic tick-box exercise that obscured young people's stories of "resiliency, hopes and values" and instead highlighted "pathology and diagnoses" (Buckley & Decter, 2006, p. 5).

In their work in an adolescent mental health unit, Beck Paterson (2021) wondered how narrative ideas can fit with other models and approaches. They used the metaphor of "tessellating shapes" (2021, p. 41) to suggest ways of looking for areas of connection rather than despairing at points of difference. Realising that the safety planning templates offered by the Department of Education and Training Victoria (DET) were only a suggested guide, I wondered whether I might craft a narrative-informed safety plan to tessellate with DET requirements. Could such a document offer an opportunity for multi-storied engagements with young people about how self-harm and suicidal ideation were showing up in their lives?

This paper tells the story of the ways I embraced curiosity and critique to uncover operations of power and privilege. It outlines a journey that illuminated a preferred ethical stance and opportunities to utilise the migration of identity metaphor (Epston & White, 1992; White, 2000). I introduce some key narrative concepts that informed my thinking, introduce the River of Life safety map, and detail a story of practice.

## An ethic of control

For workers who feel a sense of personal failure and deep frustration when their efforts to bring about changes in people's lives are unrealised, Michael White offered an analysis of the "ethic of control" that can be associated with the taken-for-granted privilege of having the resources, opportunities and power to achieve desired ends (White, 1997, pp. 196–214). Because both workers and clients often lack power and resources, White critiqued the idea that the facilitation of independent "effective action" leads to favourable outcomes for people – "their disadvantage denies them access to solutions of the sort that are informed by [the ethic of control]" (White, 2007, p. 197). Buckley and Decter (2006) extended this concept into the realms of risk and safety interventions.

One of the effects of the ethic of control was illustrated by some boys in Year 10 (age 14–16) with whom I have informal catchups, sitting in the wellbeing room discussing whatever is going on for them. They introduced me to a metaphor for a feeling they sometimes got when meeting professionals:

When I told the counsellor I'd tried to kill myself a few years back, it's like his eyes went dead and something inside him couldn't handle it. He changed the subject immediately and asked me if I was cutting myself.

When we meet with professionals, it's like they want to "fix us". They approach us like band-aids, just trying to make us happy again.

I recognise in myself the distinct shift that my body experiences when a young person begins to disclose information that has me worried about their safety. Concern and fear team up, getting my heart pounding and urging me to take action immediately to promote safety. In this state, I am prompted to run to the first aid cupboard and apply a bandaid.

Earlier this year, a brave young person spoke up about the abuse that she was experiencing. Knowing about the lack of resources in the rural area where I work, I knew I needed to build a compelling picture of the abuse to present to a child protection intake worker. I transitioned immediately into risk-assessment mode, gathering as much information as possible. I was now engaged in what Meiners and Tolliver described as “police work: surveillance, regulation and punishment” (2016, p. 107). I stepped into a centred role that positioned me as responsible for this young person’s safety without consulting them about their hopes, wishes and responses to the violence. Actions to promote safety were done on them rather than with them. In such a centred position, “an unintended, implicit message was sent to the young person: you are unable to keep yourself safe so let us know what to look for so we can do it for you” (Paterson, 2021, p. 42).

Rather than locating blame for such responses with professionals, Reynolds argued that in “contexts of structural oppression, scarce resources and abundant need, workers struggle to practice in line with their ethics, and to help clients keep a finger hold on dignity” (2014, p. 2). This context can make it difficult for workers to act in ways that align with their values and illuminates how discourses emerging from duty of care can recruit workers into an ethic of control when young people are experiencing a crisis (Buckley & Decter, 2006).

## *An ethic of collaboration*

Narrative practice is deeply aligned with feminist ethics. White drew inspiration from feminist ethicist Sharon Welch (1990) in his exploration of the ethic of collaboration, which he proposed as an alternative to the ethic of control (White, 2007, pp. 198). White encouraged partnership: that workers show determination in understanding the contexts of people’s lives. He suggested therapists attribute special significance to people’s everyday actions: the mundane, irrelevant and often overlooked. Through collaboration, a foundation of possibility is established (White, 1997). Buckley and Decter emphasised that a primary feature of this ethic of collaboration is the “belief that children, families and their communities have expert knowledge about their own lives. Finding ways to elicit this knowledge can create effective plans for safety that draw on and access local resources” (2006, p. 8).

Coming back to the Year 10 boys, I was moved to hear about an alternative to the bandaid approach. I asked about the name they might give to the significant support that they described finding in friendship. After some consideration, one of them said: “Stiches – they last a lot longer.”

## *Mysterious destinations*

As I began to embrace the ethic of collaboration in my practice, my thinking about safety evolved beyond binary terms of safe and unsafe. I began to see safety as something young people navigated with the help of their communities and families. I stayed close to White’s (2002, p. 12) idea that the people he met with were taking him to new destinations that he could not predict, along routes not previously mapped.

About 40km east of the school where I work is the source of the Hopkins River. This river winds its way across Djab Wurrung and Gundijtmara Country, meeting the ocean in Warrnambool. It is in the Hopkins River that the incredible migratory journey of the kooyang (short-finned eel) takes place. Kooyang are born in the deep waters off Vanuatu and carried by ocean currents into freshwater estuaries in southern Victoria. Once they have migrated to the upper reaches of the river, they grow into adults. When the kooyang have matured, the females migrate to the sea to return to the tropical waters to spawn. Where exactly kooyang go to die remains a mystery. I have graciously been given permission to share the story of the kooyang from a Djab Wurrung Elder. His words, “the animals are keeping the spirit alive on the tides and winds”, speak to the cultural significance of the kooyang.

I share the story of the kooyang as it taught me to stay inquisitive about the migrations of young people, seeing their lives as a journey and not being the expert on the destination. This quote from Makungu Akinyela supported me to embody a decolonised stance:

To assume that somehow as a therapist we can hold the secrets of the meaning of somebody else’s life, and impose our interpretations on that life, can only serve to further colonize the minds and spirits of those seeking our help.  
(Akinyela, 2002, p. 38)



## Migration of identity

The kooyang sparked my interest in migration. I was then introduced to the rite of passage metaphor developed by van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969). This metaphor describes the migration of identity people go through when separating from the known and familiar and moving into a new state of life. This seemed apt for work with young people, who constantly embark on journeys marked by change, growth and learning.

Michael White and David Epston translated the rite of passage metaphor into therapeutic practice (Epston & White, 1992; White, 2000). They described the three distinct phases of a rite of passage. The separation phase marks the beginning of a journey in which people break away from what has been known and familiar (White, 2002). The liminal phase is a time of confusion and disorientation, where nothing is certain and familiarity erodes (White, 2002). The reincorporation phase is achieved when people arrive at a new destination yet feel a sense of home and that it “fits” with their hopes and dreams for their lives. This new destination is sometimes shrouded by mystery when people set out (White, 2002). Practitioners in many parts of the world have since adapted this metaphor to use within their local contexts (Abu-Rayyan, 2009; Danilopoulos, 2011; Denborough, 2006; Fox, 2003; Hung, 2010; Loveday, 2009; Man-kwong, 2004; Oliveira, 2009; White, 2002), and I drew inspiration from them in developing an alternative template for exploring safety and risk.

Keeping in mind the kooyang and their epic journey from river to ocean, I designed a template that represents life as a canoe journey down a winding river, incorporating the different phases of the migration of identity metaphor.<sup>1</sup> School-based narrative practitioner Tarn Kaldor inspired me with their approach to subverting professional documents. They warn that these can “subjectify, reduce or marginalise identities” (2020, p. 14). However, Kaldor holds out the possibility that professional documents might not always have these effects. I hope that the River of Life safety map will elicit double-storied accounts of life. It invites people to map their journey, contextualise problems, and explore hopes for the future. I designed the map to contain all the elements required by the DET in their safety plan template. I will introduce the River of Life safety map through a story of my practice with Sakura.

## Sakura's story

I have been given permission by a student to describe our work together. In this paper, the student is represented by the fictional character Sakura.<sup>2</sup> I will describe how I initially met with Sakura and then outline how we used the River of Life safety map in our work together.

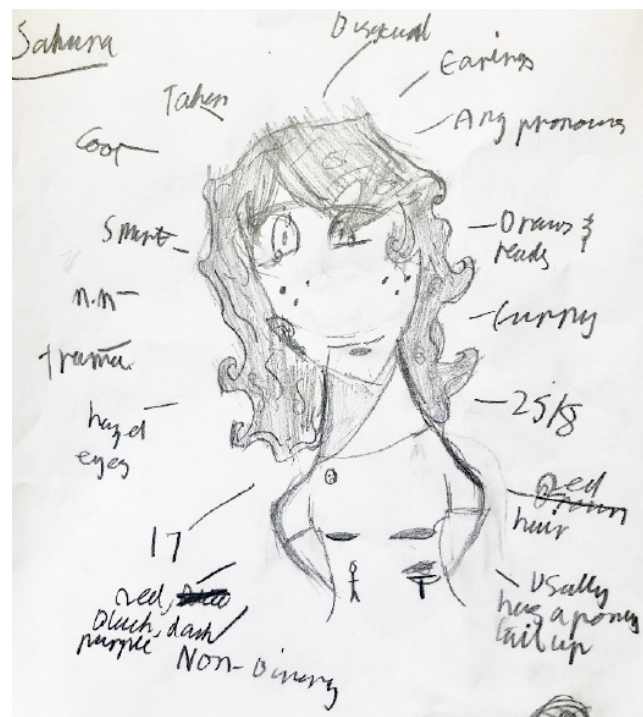


Figure 1. The student's portrait of Sakura

### Single-storied referrals

In my first meeting with a student, I often need to explain that I'm going to have to speak with their parents or other services about safety concerns. Meeting with Sakura was no different. I invited them into the wellbeing room after receiving a referral from their year-level coordinator who let me know that Sakura was experiencing thoughts of suicide. I noted that the bandid effect accompanied this referral. In response to the invitation to enact an ethic of control, I came up with some questions to help me think about Sakura's life in multi-storied ways:

- What skills had Sakura used in speaking up about these suicidal thoughts to their year-level coordinator?
- What do these skills say about what is important to Sakura?
- What did they have to get through in order to speak about this?

- How does Sakura define safety?
- What skills have they already been using despite these suicidal thoughts?
- Do they call these thoughts suicidal thoughts or something else? (Stout, 2010)
- How can I structure safety with Sakura and explain duty of care?
- How will I tell them that I will have to let a caregiver know about this?
- How can this communication with their caregiver honour Sakura's skills, knowledge and existing responses?

To evoke collaboration and respect from the beginning, I invited Sakura into the wellbeing room and engaged in what First Nations narrative therapist Tileah Drahm-Butler termed practices of welcome (2015). These practices included asking Sakura to choose where they would like to sit, offering a glass of water and asking some general questions about how their day was going. I asked if they had seen me around the school and wondered if it might be a bit strange meeting with me, given they hadn't.

I then attempted to structure safety (Reynolds, 2014). These practices had me asking about pronouns and whether they had a preferred name. Because these were different to what was noted in the school's system, I asked who did and didn't know this information. We set some parameters around when I would use their chosen name and pronouns and agreed on what would be used in their notes.

I then spent some time introducing myself to Sakura, explaining the nature of my role and explicitly outlining the limits to what information could be kept confidential. I invited Sakura to ask questions at this point, so I could be sure they understood (Buckley & Decter, 2006). I let Sakura know what information had been shared so far with me. I advised that while I knew something of the problems they were facing, it felt like there was much I did not know about them.

I asked Sakura if it was alright to ask some questions about what their year-level coordinator had told me. They let me know that they had been visited by "not wanting to be here thoughts" that had the effect of them feeling a sense of "not belonging". We co-researched the external context, and I asked Sakura when they had first met these thoughts (White, 2007). Sakura explained that the thoughts were like "dark vampires"

that visited at different times and places. Sakura linked "not belonging" to early experiences of violence and abuse.

After richly describing the effects of the dark vampires, Sakura and I spoke about whether there was anyone we could inform about their presence. Sakura said they weren't sure. I let Sakura know that I would need to speak to a caregiver about the dark vampires; however, we could discuss how I would be doing this, when and where.

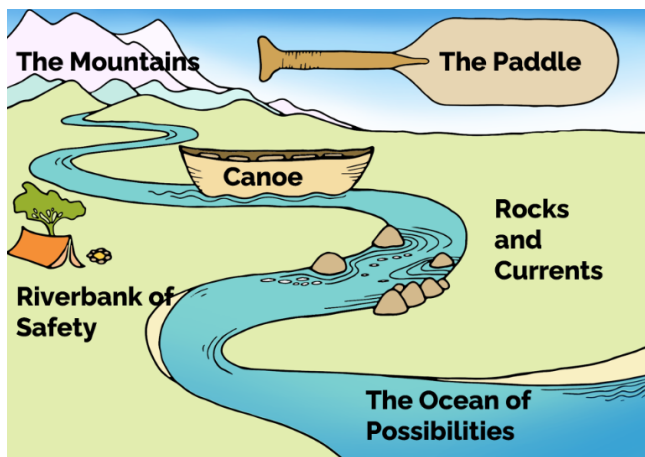
I asked Sakura what they felt was most important to share with their caregivers. Did they want to do the talking or want me to? Did they want me to use the name "dark vampires"? Did they want context provided about why the dark vampires were visiting them? Sakura and I also discussed their ideas for combating the dark vampires and sharing this with their caregivers. Sakura decided that they wanted me to call their caregiver but to put the phone on speaker and stay in the room with them.

We wrote some notes down and agreed on what I would say. Following the conversation, Sakura expressed that they were surprised at the reaction of understanding from their caregiver, as worry had done an excellent job convincing them that they might get in trouble.

Twists and turns in Sakura's life led to the dark vampires gaining greater power over the following months. This invited expressions of self-harm and restrictive eating. Despite the dark vampires trying their best to find a firm foothold, we learned many ways Sakura navigated these turbulent waters.

## *The River of Life safety map*

I will now detail the River of Life safety map. I will explain its elements and demonstrate how Sakura and I used the map together over several sessions to develop a rich picture of their life beyond the influence of the dark vampires. I have included the DET safety plan template alongside the River of Life safety map to show how they correspond. It is important to note that I gave Sakura the option of whether they wanted to use a visual template or a written document to map out this journey. They opted for the visual template. The map does not have to be completed in any given order; quite often I've found myself returning to the map over time with students to take note of unfolding developments.



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## Safety Plan template

This plan can help me to stay healthy, connected and safe.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Review date: \_\_\_\_\_

School support people: \_\_\_\_\_

Figure 2. River of Life safety map and cover of DET safety plan template

### The mountains

The mountains can represent what the young person may be separating from in their migration of identity. Nancy Grey, a social worker in Canada responding to partner abuse, discussed the importance of people “gaining an ever-richer understanding of what it is that they are separated from” (2006, p. 11).

The mountains also provide a chance to understand the histories of young people and the ways they have used skills and knowledges to get through hard times. Through honouring the skills developed in the mountains, “we discover that new understandings of identity can come from acknowledging the ‘old things’ he or she did in the past” (Abu-Rayyan, 2009, p. 31).

Introducing the mountains, I might say something like: Passing through the mountains and arriving in your canoe shows that you’ve already

overcome obstacles in your journey. You may like to write down some of the ways you got through these obstacles and whether you had anyone there with you during this time.

Starting at the mountains with Sakura illuminated many elements of their journey I might have otherwise never known. Sakura spoke about early experiences of abuse. They said that during this time, they had an imaginary friend they would turn to. Sakura also spoke about gestures of care from their big brother, efforts they now see as attempts to protect them. They spoke about a special teacher and a beloved pet. Sakura and I reflected on how connection was an important survival skill they used to get through the abuse in the mountains. This conversation brought these relationships into the wellbeing room with us, inviting in a re-membering of these connections (Myerhoff, 1992; White, 1997).

### Sakura’s time in the mountains

- imaginary friend
- special teacher
- efforts of care from big brother
- beloved pet
- connection as a survival skill

### The canoe (preparation phase)

Epston and White (1992) suggested people put careful preparation into the separation phase, giving them the best chance of a safe journey. In her work with Brazilian immigrants living in Sydney, Vivienne Oliveira discussed the importance of preparing with people and understanding the different stages of their journeys: “it is important to identify the skills, values and beliefs that these people can take with them into their journey, as well as special support people that can help” (Oliveira, 2009, p. 60).

When introducing the canoe and inviting a conversation about preparation, I might say something resembling the following:

As we journey down the River of Life, we stay safe and dry in our canoe. We can consider what might be needed to ensure the canoe is ready for safe passage. Who might we like to tell about our journey? What physical preparations might be needed to make spaces safer?

Drawing on the club of life metaphor (Myerhoff, 1992; White, 1997), I point out to young people:

You can see that the boat has more than one seat. During our journey, we may need to have others with us to help us steer through the River of Life. Are there any friends, family members, or teachers we might like to invite on to our boat? Who can be called on for support?

#### Sakura's preparation for their canoe

- Letting their boyfriend and a few friends know about the dark vampires
- Removing the sharp items from their bedroom
- Speaking up about the memories of abuse

#### People in Sakura's canoe

- mum and stepdad
- year-level coordinator
- home group teacher
- boyfriend
- two close friends
- wellbeing team at school

#### Rocks and currents (liminal phase)

Denborough described the importance of planning for potential backlash in a migration of identity journey (2014). Making predictions about potential obstacles and opponents can shield the person from a sense of failure if they return to familiar ways of being. In the River of Life safety map, obstacles and opposing forces are represented by rocks and currents.

It is important that I don't let my work become goal oriented, with young people feeling they need to agree to something and stick to it to avoid failing in my eyes. This is particularly relevant for young people who use self-harm as a coping strategy. The intention of this map is not to convince young people to stop this behaviour or have them agree to never engage in self-harm again. I try to be careful in explaining this. This consideration is necessary as in schools, young people are constantly subject to measurement against a set of standards crafted by the education system and perpetuated by teachers, family members and peers (Kaldor, 2020, p. 13). Michel Foucault (1975) illuminated how such technologies of modern power operate in invisible yet insidious ways to perpetuate dominant ideas through rules and regulations. Thus, avoiding rigid rules in these realms is paramount.

In taking a decentred yet influential stance with young people (White, 1997), I try to radically consult them about what they think about the presence of self-harm or suicidal thoughts in their life. It's important that I'm not participating in a binary language of naming what is a good or bad thing for them. Paterson wrote, "often, the message that young people in settings like ours receive is that their behaviours are 'challenging', or their coping skills are 'maladaptive'. These words are code for wrong" (2021, p. 46). I appreciate efforts to

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### 5. Family and friends I can talk to for support

For example:

- parents/carers/other trusted adult
- sibling
- friends

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### 4. How I can make my space safer

For example:

- removing sharp things from reach (scissors, knives, pencil sharpeners, etc)
- avoiding drugs and alcohol
- [for drivers] keeping car keys with parents/ out of reach

Figure 3. Corresponding sections of DET safety plan template



“complicate these stories of wrongness” (Paterson, 2021, p. 46). I am still grappling with the dilemma of self-harm being a way young people might get through hard times, thus being both a paddle and a rock. If I don’t remain decentred, I may make assumptions about where it sits for them on the map.

Mapping out problems using the currents can contextualise the self-harm and suicidal thoughts, leading to a double-storied account of these actions of pain. It counters some of the shame and blame that may visit young people when they talk about their experiences. I introduce this part of the map with attention to externalising language. I might say something like:

In the river, currents are swirling around us. These currents are the things that happen around us, things we can’t always control. Some currents can unsettle our boat or even pull us into obstacles that could harm our boats! Some students have described currents like bullying, or moving house, or not having their pronouns and chosen names used by teachers and classmates. I’m wondering if you can think of any currents swirling around you.

In externalising conversations (White, 2007), once a name and rich description of the problem is gained, the effects of the problem can be explored. The effects of the currents are represented by the rocks. When introducing the rocks, I might say something like:

When the currents get too strong, we can be pulled into rocks. Damage to our boats caused by hitting these rocks is an effect of the strong currents around us. Some students have described rocks like not sleeping very well, or feeling like life is like a blackhole, or having thoughts of wanting to end their lives.

Through seeing the rocks as effects of the currents, thin descriptions that totalise and pathologise self-harm and suicidal thoughts are avoided.

When I asked Sakura what they thought about the presence of self-harm in their life, they expressed that it “wasn’t a good thing”. Response-based practice encouraged me to be curious about what the presence of self-harm or suicidal thoughts might indicate about what is vital to a young person (Stout, 2010; Yuen, 2007). With Sakura, it led to conversations that uncovered that they are not okay with violence and deeply value protecting others. Sakura recalled times in their past when they had stood up to the abuse.

They spoke about a time when they were seven and said, “don’t you dare touch me”. Sakura named this skill courage, and it was then mapped on the mountains. Completing the map can be quite a non-linear process, it turns out!

#### Currents in Sakura’s life

- The memories of abuse
- The mirror bullies
- Getting jump scared at school
- Loud yelling at home

#### Rocks described by Sakura

- Dark Vampires and their reminders of the ‘not wanting to be here thoughts’
- Self-harming as a form of punishment
- Skipping meals, looking in the mirror and weighing themselves constantly
- Worthlessness



Figure 4. Corresponding section of DET Safety plan template

#### The riverbank of safety

The riverbank of safety invites multi-storied descriptions of safety. Caleb Wakhungu developed the “standing together on a riverbank” metaphor in his work with children in Uganda (2010). I have drawn

on his work to invite young people to explore the places they feel most safe.

Within the liminal phase, it is also critical to explore the moments of separation from violence, and from beliefs that justify violence. These small acts of movement need to be researched. We explore the chinks in these stories, the moments they have sought out other ways of being men, ways that are not in accord with violence. (Denborough, 2006, p. 7)

The riverbank of safety aims to be just that, a “chink” in the journey where stories of resistance can be explored. Pulling their canoe on to the shore and taking a break from the currents of life provides space for young people to imagine who they are and what they value beyond the obstacles that arise in their lives.

When introducing the riverbank, I ask questions that invite vivid pictures of safe places:

- Could you tell me about any places at home or school where you feel some relief from the currents of life? They could also be in your imagination or memory.
- How does safety feel in your body?
- Does it live in a particular part of your body?
- If safety had a smell, what might it be?
- If safety were a character, what would it look like?
- What songs might be sung around the campfire on the riverbank?
- What characters from films and books would you want with you?

When Sakura and I explored their riverbank of safety, they began to tell me about a coven of 20 to 30 purple vampires who provide protection against the dark vampires. I wondered when they first met this coven, and they mentioned that it was back in primary school. I asked what they thought the purple vampires would say in defence against the dark vampires saying Sakura does not belong in the world. Sakura thought for a while and then said, “the purple vampires would say there is always meaning in life”. Not wanting to take this statement for granted, I asked Sakura more about this. They said that “family being there to protect each other” was the meaning evoked by the purple vampires. I was keen to spend more time with Sakura to understand what this protection felt like, how it was enacted, and the history of these ways of being in their family.

### Sakura’s riverbank of safety

- Coven of 20 to 30 purple vampires
- “There’s always meaning in life”
- “Family being there to protect each other”

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### 3. People and places that can distract me

For example:

- being with friends at school
- playing team sports
- going to the shops with family/friends
- visiting extended family

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### 6. Safe people and places at school

For example:

- library
- first aid room/attendant
- year level coordinator/house leader
- wellbeing team member

Figure 5. Corresponding section of DET safety plan template

### The paddle

The paddle represents the skills and knowledges people use to get through hard times. Within the dominant wellbeing culture, these are commonly named “strategies”. I am frequently requested to recommend strategies for young people, teachers and parents to use to respond to challenging contexts. Often, this obscures the living expertise held by the people with whom I work. I want to avoid centring myself as an

expert by suggesting strategies for paddles. I drew inspiration from Carolyn Markey, a narrative practitioner who designed a tree of knowledges on the wall of the wellbeing room in a school where she worked (2015). I asked Sakura and their friends if they would like to team up and help me with a project. They spent a few hours painting a tree in the wellbeing room.

Now, when students visit the wellbeing room, I ask if they would like to share any skills they use to help them through hard times. They write their ideas on leaves and then pin them to the tree. Enabling students to feel like their hard-won knowledges are in some way able to contribute to other students is a key tenet of collective narrative practice (Denborough, 2008, pp. 51–70).



Figure 6. The Tree of Life in the wellbeing room

When introducing the paddle, I suggest the following:

Your paddle is what you use to navigate the waters of life and steer your canoe. These can be skills, values, practices, beliefs or hobbies. What gives you strength when times are tough? Look at the tree on the wall and choose a few things you resonate with or might like to try. These can be written on the paddles along with any other skills you might already be using.

Sakura shared some things they were already doing to combat the presence of the dark vampires and mirror bullies. Sakura and I wrote these down on a smaller paddle and laminated it so it could live in their pocket. Sakura also wanted to share this with their family and close friends (see Fox, 2003).

#### Sakura's paddle

- remember I'm beautiful
- Snapchat Mum
- listen to music
- vent
- Replika
- calming audio
- call Kids Helpline
- safe circle
- breathing
- drawing



Figure 7. Corresponding section of DET safety plan template

#### *The ocean of possibilities (reincorporation phase)*

Like the Hopkins River, the River of Life flows towards the ocean of possibilities. This is where I return to the story of the kooyang. The kooyang's migration ends in mystery, in the grand depths of the ocean. With this lesson in mind, I keep curious about the varied possibilities available to young people. I try to steer clear of adult-dominated goals, such as the ones outlined in the safety plan from the department like getting a job or being a parent.

Sakura shared with me that earlier in the year another student had been “jump scaring” them, which had the effect of causing them to feel “pain” and “remember the abuse”. Sakura stated that they would like support to have a conversation with this student to help him understand the impacts of his behaviour in a non-judgemental and non-blaming way. Sakura advised that they “know this student also goes through hard times” and felt that it might be possible to gain his understanding and show “care” towards him. Sakura mapped this as “showing classmate care and helping him understand”. They wanted this to be in the ocean of possibilities. I asked Sakura if there was anything else the purple vampires might want for their life. They mapped “to get out of the house more”. They also shared that they wanted to be a paediatrician to “help other kids”.

#### Sakura's ocean of possibilities

- showing classmate care and helping him understand
- getting out of the house more
- work as a paediatrician

Sakura explained the different parts of the map; however, when they began to link early experiences of abuse to the presence of the dark vampires, discourses around failure and mother blame crept into the wellbeing room and visited Sakura's mum. I chose to adopt a more influential stance at this moment in the meeting. I reflected that sometimes an unfortunate effect of violence was that it could invite mothers to feel personally responsible and wondered if this was occurring. Sakura's mum nodded. I wondered with her if mother blame might have snuck under the door in the same way the dark vampires could lurk around at times. She agreed that it might have happened, reflecting that they both seemed quite sneaky. Sakura asked if they could give Mum a hug at this moment.

We then spoke about what Sakura had outlined in their ocean of possibility. Sakura's mum and stepdad spoke about how proud they were of Sakura for using their skills in “speaking up” and caring for others. Sakura's caregivers witnessed Sakura's preferred identity stories through this meeting. As these multi-storied accounts of Sakura's responses to the abuse emerged, worry and blame left the meeting, and pride and hope took their place.

### Where are we now

This story of practice outlines a selection of meetings shared by Sakura, myself and Sakura's family. I continue to meet with Sakura, and the River of Life continues to flow. We have added to the map as needed. I have stayed curious about the unfolding nature of Sakura's life. Embracing the ethic of collaboration, I met with Sakura recently to outline what would be shared in this paper and ensure they felt comfortable with its final form. With permission, I had shared some of Sakura's story in a presentation as part of my master's studies. I mentioned to Sakura that my classmates had found rich meaning from hearing their story. I wondered how Sakura felt about this. Their eyes shone and they reminded me of their goal to be a paediatrician and that “helping other kids” was important to them. This conversation led to us reflecting on their journey throughout the year, with the map out in front of us.

Clare: We've certainly been on a big journey this year.

Sakura: Yeah. When I first came to see you I was having those thoughts of suicide.

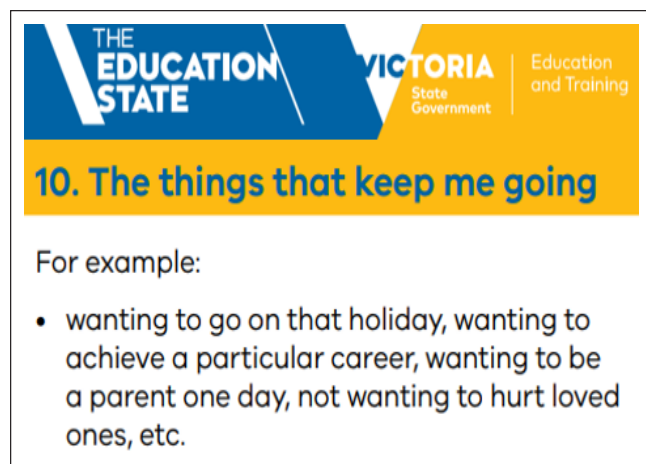


Figure 8. Corresponding section of DET safety plan template

### Finding an audience

After we spent some time working through the River of Life, Sakura agreed that they would like to invite their mum and stepdad to school to witness their journey. This meeting was particularly moving, with everyone in the room in tears at different points.



Clare: That's right. The dark vampires were making their presence pretty known in your life, hey?

Sakura: They really didn't want me to get out much. But now I'm going to way more places [counting on fingers]: school, home, a youth group, an LGBTQI+ support group – [getting excited] remember how the purple vampires wanted me to get out more?

Clare: That's right! What do you think the purple vampires might be saying to the dark vampires right about now?

Sakura: Sakura doesn't care anymore.

Clare: True! What effect does this have on the dark vampires?

Sakura: Well, for every week I don't use self-harm, they lose one member.

Clare: I see. How many members do they have now – more, less, about the same?

Sakura: Less, definitely.

Clare: But you know I'm not going to judge you if the dark vampires continue to hang around and have the effect of self-harming.

Sakura: I know.

Clare: With all of this getting out more, I'm wondering about the coven of purple vampires – any changes there?

Sakura: Yeah, there's like 40 to 50 now!

Clare: Ah, so more have come?

Sakura: Yeah!

Clare: Is there anything else we want to add to the ocean with all of this in mind?

Sakura: Well, I've got a little bit more self-confidence.

Clare: A little – like a centimetre? A metre? A kilometre?

Sakura: Maybe about 30 centimetres.

Clare: Shall we map that down?

Sakura: Sure.

## Another generous offering

So, here we are at the end of our story. To finish, I would like to return to the Year 10 boys. I met with them again and asked if they would like to contribute any words of wisdom to this paper, with the potential that it might be helpful to me and other therapists who may be struggling with the bandaid effect. The boys enthusiastically agreed to this. One of them said, "it means a lot that people like me can get some sort of help and care, and that maybe these ideas will help professionals in some way". Here are some of their words:

Ask questions that are relevant to the person.

Avoid acting robotish, like there's a script being read off.

Try to be honest.

Stay interested in the conversation. Don't be afraid to connect on a deeper level.

Eye contact and body language are important.

If there's a small amount of care in the room, you can feel it.

Listen rather than list off questions.

Don't just jump straight to conclusions.

Listen to why I want to kill myself – the reason for it.

When people are interested in what we like doing, it feels like they're doing more than just a job.

## Conclusion

This paper has outlined the various ways I translated my learnings from a master's in narrative therapy and community work into my work in a school-based setting. I discussed the ways discourses relating to safety and risk minimise the agency of young people. I proposed an alternative approach to the standard

safety plan template: The River of Life safety map. I suggested integrating the migration of identity metaphor into this template to explore the journeys of young people. I showed how various narrative therapy approaches could be used in conjunction with this safety map: externalising conversations, re-membering conversations, double-story development, outsider witnessing and counter-documentation. It is my hope that the River of Life safety map will provide solidarity to other therapists grappling with their recruitment into the bandaid effect. For those working in settings where safety planning is required, I hope this proposed alternative may inspire new and creative ways of working with people.

## Acknowledgments

The learnings that informed this paper come alive in stories. The first and most important is the story of the Traditional Owners who have skilfully cared for the grasslands, mountains and waterways where I live, work and grow. As a white woman with settler ancestry, I live as a visitor in the mountain range of Gariwerd on Djab Wurrung and Jardwadjali Country, located in so-called Victoria, Australia. This always was, always will be Aboriginal land. I am eternally grateful for the relationships I've developed with Djab Wurrung and Gunditjmara folks who have been a family to me during my time in Gariwerd.

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Big thanks to Western Australian artist Simon Gillet for bringing my vision of the map to life. Explore more of his incredible artworks here: <https://www.instagram.com/jamsimosa>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I conceived of this project before devastating flood events impacted many parts of the east coast of Australia. Using a river as a metaphor may for some communities be inappropriate, given the widespread flooding and subsequent displacement. The impacts of climate change are far-reaching and directly linked to the colonial project: they are felt disproportionately by communities who experience the effects of oppression. Metaphors that draw on nature must reflect a realistic portrayal of a changing natural world.

<sup>2</sup> The possibility of using a fictional character to preserve the student's confidentiality was proposed by Melbourne-based narrative therapist Frankie Hanman Siegersma (personal communication, July 2022).

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# Using narrative practices to support academic development in an after-school program

by Deborah Mrema



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## Abstract

This paper describes the use of narrative practices in work with young people in an after-school academic support program in Tanzania. Through games, outsider witnessing, re-authoring conversations and the Tree of Life process, we brought to light skills and experiences that had previously been left unrecognised by the evaluation tools we had been using to track students' progress. The Tree of Life in particular created space for our students to rediscover unique abilities and areas in which they shine. These had previously been hidden behind dominant stories about living in an orphanage or not meeting expectations at school. The use of narrative practices supported growth, development and healing for our students.

**Key words:** *Tree of Life; school; truancy; youth; children; Tanzania; Africa; narrative practice*

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Author pronouns: she/her



I work in an after-school academic support program with students from vulnerable communities that have been affected by HIV/AIDS. The program is designed to equip students with skills that will help them improve their performance in school. We believe there is a direct correlation between psycho-social-emotional wellbeing and academic prowess. We support students' self-confidence, communication, academic performance, focus, curiosity, problem-solving skills, self-control, hospitality and general wellbeing.

Our team of caregivers and educators meets monthly to evaluate the impact of the creative lessons and activities our participants undertake. We use particular evaluation indicators, including literacy skills, autonomy, personal hygiene and cleanliness, good mood and responsibility. In a recent meeting, it was determined that a few students required additional support. I decided to create peer-support groups for these students using narrative practice methodologies, namely: games, the Tree of Life, outsider witnessing practice, re-authoring and externalisation.

In this paper, I would like to share the journey of exploring the hopes, dreams and values of these students. Through exploring preferred stories and what was absent but implicit in the students' narratives, we were able to collaborate with them to help them thrive in the after-school support program. I worked with the students in two groups. The first peer-therapy group was attended by secondary students Agustino (19 years) and Benson (18 years). The second was attended by Ayoub (13 years) and Juma (13 years) who were in a special education school. On some occasions, I also met with the students individually.

## *Unearthing preferred stories*

While meeting with Benson and his family at their home, I observed that Benson hadn't attended school that day. When I asked about this, his mother said that Benson had performed poorly in his recent midterm test. He had responded to some of the questions in his exams with explicit comments. Benson's mother went on to express frustration about her son's truancy. She condemned Benson for becoming friends with youths in the neighbourhood who were not on a clear educational pathway. She expressed confusion because despite the presence of poverty and illness in the family, her son had failed to put effort into getting an education. I sensed despair and a loss of hope in her

expressions and asked Benson, who was sitting across from me, what was in his mind after hearing from his mother.

Benson did not share much in response. I became curious about the friends he had been spending time with when he wasn't in school and about where they went. Did he think his mother's frustration was valid? Was he happy or sad about his lack of attendance at school? Did he have a name for what was going on in his life at the moment? Benson shared that he had been hanging around with two friends from the neighbourhood. They would spend time at a kiosk where young people in the area went to get pirated movies and songs. I was keen to learn whether the activities at the kiosk were what Benson aspired to engage in in the future, but he didn't respond to my questions.

As most of my questions to Benson were being met with silence, I decided to switch my focus to enquire about the details of Benson's days. I asked, 'What else do you do besides hanging out with your friends at the kiosk?' Benson's mother, who at this point was visibly angry, shared that Benson would wake up early and make her breakfast then leave the household. I turned to Benson to confirm whether this was true, and he nodded his agreement.

I asked Benson what he would prepare for breakfast in the morning. He said, 'In the morning I would make tea with bread'. I followed up with a question directed towards both Benson and his mother: 'What does it say about Benson that he wakes up early to make breakfast for you and his siblings?' This question too was met with silence. I went on to describe how in my experience, children who make such gestures are demonstrating care and appreciation for their loved ones. I checked with Benson to see whether my description resonated with his thoughts and experience, and he nodded.

## *A peer-support group*

My next meeting with Benson would be at our centre, not at his home. I wanted to make him feel comfortable, so I asked him whether he would like to invite a friend from the centre to join us. Benson said that his friend Agustino could join our activities. Agustino was also a student in our care, and he had improved his attendance in school over the years. Inspired by

outsider witnessing practices (Denborough, 2006), and in an attempt to create an environment where an exchange of stories could occur between us educators and the students, I proposed to Benson and Agustino that the teacher who provided them with academic support might join our conversations so he too could learn about what was important to them. They were both on board with this idea. I helped my colleague to prepare for this session by discussing the importance of creating a space for the students to engage in being curious without worry. Because we were both figures of authority, and in our culture young people tend to be shy and reserved around adults, we agreed that the young people's experiences would be centred in the sessions.

Agustino: I have great drumming skills. When I was six years old or so, in my village in Karatu, there was a parade. The head soldier called me up to lead the other soldiers and that experience sparked my interest.

I checked with Benson as to whether he too had activities that he would like to share. I observed that he had been listening attentively, but he did not respond to this question. After a bit of silence, Agustino shared again: 'Benson is very hardworking. We have helped our caregivers with cleaning and cooking at the home. He is very efficient when it comes to doing things very fast.'

I asked Benson whether what Agustino said was true and he nodded in agreement. Where had he learned how to do things very fast? This question too was met with silence.

I asked, 'Did any parts of the activity remind you about your inspirations, your life experiences or the lives of the other people you care for?' Benson was hesitant to respond to this question, but Agustino replied: 'No, this activity did not remind me of my experiences, but I would like to share that I dream of becoming a lawyer ...'

## Tree of Life with Benson and Agustino

The next activity I had planned for this session was to guide Benson and Agustino through the first part of a Tree of Life activity (Ncube, 2006). I explained that they would each draw a tree, which we would use to represent good memories in their lives. This tree would represent only the parts of their lives they wished us to know about.

After they had completed tracing a tree, including its roots, ground, trunk, branches, leaves and flowers, I offered questions to guide them in filling in the roots, which would represent their origins. I structured the questions to help the students find connections and associations:

- What are your roots and what is your ancestry?
- Where do you call home?
- Do you identify with your nationality or the town you live in as your roots?

## Playing games

When I met with Agustino and Benson, we began the session with a game. Both students were very active and enjoyed sports, so I decided to start with a game in which they could demonstrate some of their skills. The premise was to walk as fast as possible without running until we got out of breath. In order to win this game, one had to walk the fastest. Our winner was Benson. Moments after the game was completed and everyone had caught their breath, the following questions (after Nyirinkwaya, 2020) guided reflection about the game:

- Has the activity connected you with important people in your life? Did a friend from school or a relative cross your mind as you were walking that fast?
- Did any parts of the activity connect you with safe spaces in your life? While you were moving in the game, did you think of a person or place that makes you feel safe?
- Are there other activities you are interested in or are good at?
- What do you do well at home or at school that you would like to share with us today?

Agustino responded to the last of these questions:

Agustino: Yes, playing the drum, helping out caregivers with cooking, cleaning and gardening activities.

Deborah: Agustino, would you like to tell us more about where you learned to play the drums well?

- Are you part of a club at school or out of school whose values you believe in enough to consider adding them to your roots?
- What languages do you speak that you want to include in your roots?

I invited them to share the details they had added to their trees.

Benson: I was born in Kilimanjaro. I lived there with my mum until my mum and dad started quarrelling. Then we moved to Arusha near Tanganyika Packers. I speak Swahili.

Agustino: I am from Mbulu-Mbulu in Karatu. I speak Swahili, English and a bit of Mbulu. I remember one time we had acrobatic performers and a band come to our school in Karatu. My favourite moment was when the band leader called me out to try the drums. I remember this experience to date.

I followed up with a question to Benson: What good memories do you have of these places? Do you know what part of Kilimanjaro? Do you know the hospital you were born in, and would you like to include its name in your roots? Benson didn't share any good memories or remember the name of the hospital. He shared that his life in Kilimanjaro had been exceptionally hard. He remembered being really sick, and that at the time he was sick, his mother was staying with him in the hospital.

Deborah: Where are you grounded? Where do you live now? Where do you feel the happiest? Is there a place you enjoy being?

Benson: I live in Tanganyika Peckers with my mum and my siblings: Agnes, Martin and Esther.

Agustino: I live in St Lucia in Moivaro.

Deborah: Are you a member of any club at school, church or in the community that you enjoy or that makes you feel grounded? Is there anyone – a friend or family member – who keeps you grounded?

Benson: Yes, my mother.

Deborah: What is your nationality and tribe?

Benson: I am Chagga from my dad's side and Meru from my mum's side.

Agustino: I am Mbulu.

After they had completed the roots, they were invited to add their skills to the trunk of the tree. While doing the fast-paced walking activity with Benson and Agustino, I observed they were both exceptionally fast. I became curious about what other activities they were good at. The following were the variations of questions I asked to help the students fill in the trunk:

- What are things you are good at or talented at?
- What do you do well?
- Think of someone you care about like your caregivers and mother, what would they say you do well?

When I turned to Benson, he had not completed this part of his tree. I became curious about what Benson's mother would think he did well.

Benson: My mother would say I am good at fixing things when they break.

Deborah: Has there been a time when you have fixed something? What was it that you fixed? Who was there with you?

Benson: In 2018, when I was really sick, my mother promised me she would buy me a toy car. She ended up buying a two-battery torch to use at home instead. We did not have electricity at home. A few months later when the torch broke down, I started playing with the different parts to figure out what was wrong. Slowly, I was able to make the torch work. My mother was very impressed with that. We also had a radio at home that we would take to our neighbours to be recharged. When this radio broke, I would play with the wires until it started to function again. My mother loves the radio. It made her happy when I could fix it.

When Benson had finished sharing, Agustino exclaimed, 'You are also a really fast walker!' We all acknowledged that he had dominated the activity and was our winner. I asked Benson whether we could also include this skill of being a really fast walker on his tree and he nodded in agreement.

Deborah: Agustino, what are the things you are good at?

Agustino: I am good at making small objects out of paper.

Deborah: Can you think of time when you have made small objects out of paper? Where were you and who were you with? Where did this skill come from?

Agustino: When I was in class at my secondary school, I sometimes would make a boat or a box out of paper to pass around for my friends. I did this to entertain myself and my friends.

Deborah: Did you include this skill of entertaining your friends and people around you on your trunk?

Agustino: No.

I followed up with the following questions:

- What does a young man who entertains his friends care about?
- What does this information tell us about you as a person?
- What does a young man who cares to entertain his friends value about life?
- What does this act say about who he wishes to become?

I also asked what others would say about his skills.

Agustino responded:

If we asked Aunt Naomi, she would say I am good at helping with activities at St Lucia. That is things like cleaning the floors. I also help out in the kitchen when she needs it. I do some activities in the garden too. Together with other children, we make terraces for the vegetable garden. These vegetables give us good vitamins in our meals.

I asked whether it would be appropriate to include caring for others and being thoughtful as some of the skills listed on the trunk of his tree. Agustino acknowledged that he was good at being thoughtful and caring for and helping his elders and peers.

Later in this session, I invited the teacher to reflect on some of the stories he had witnessed.

Deborah: Were there any moments that stood out to you when Benson and Agustino were sharing that reminded you of a time in your own life? Your own roots? Your own skills?

Teacher: I see Benson with a different eye. I didn't know that Benson had been severely ill at some point in his life. I think he must be very strong to go through the illness period even though it was very challenging. His experience of fixing the torch and the radio reminded me of my childhood. When I was young, I used to be very good at making wooden bicycles to play with others. It made me think how if I had pursued this skill and interest, perhaps I would have become an engineer by now.

In the following session with Benson and Agustino, we continued to explore their individual skills and the histories of these, and then moved on to the other parts of their trees where we documented hopes and dreams, important people, and gifts they had given and received.

I found that it was very helpful to have my colleague with the students during the Tree of Life activity because some of the conversations that transpired in the session shed light on competencies that were not evaluated in our monthly meetings. We observed that students' unique skills and the areas where they shine can be underappreciated with the evaluation tool we had been using. For instance, that Benson was able to repair broken items at home for his family, indicating his technical skills and determination. As educators, the Tree of Life process allowed us to create space for our students to rediscover abilities they might have forgotten they had. Not only that, but it created entry points to continue encouraging our students to foster these skills in ways that would support their academic development.

## Responding to difficulties

Time passed before I met again with Agustino, this time in an individual session. This session was inspired by a quote:

Within any community that is facing difficult times, community members will be responding to these difficulties. They will be taking whatever action is possible, in their own ways, based on particular skills and knowledges, to try to address the effects of the problem(s) on their lives and the lives of those they care about. (Denborough et al., 2006, p. 20)



In this session, Agustino shared that he had gone to the ward executive officer to process his national identification certification. At the ward office, he did not respond to an inquiry about his home address. Agustino shared that he didn't like to tell people where he lived because he was raised in an orphanage and efforts to reunify him with his extended relatives had not been successful. I was curious to learn why he didn't want to share where his current home was, and asked the following questions:

- What did you think hindered you from telling the ward representative officer where your home was?
- Is there a name that comes to mind for what prevented you from communicating your address?
- Do you get any imagery of what prevented you from confidently expressing what your agenda was at the ward office and what your home address is?
- Does what obstructs you from telling people your home address have a name? Could you describe it with a sound?

Agustino: The name that comes to mind is lack of courage and confidence.

Deborah: Could you tell me some of the characteristics of lack of courage and confidence? When does it come to you? Is it a he or she? When do you observe its presence?

Agustino: Lack of courage and confidence shows up whenever I am out of the orphanage communicating with people. He prevents me from explaining about myself and my origins. He makes me unable to interact with people because I am in fear of what they think. Whenever he visits, I am in total confusion. I forget what I was supposed to say.

Deborah: Has lack of courage and confidence affected you in your life at the orphanage, at school and in the community?

Agustino: Yes! One time I was walking in the road and met with one of the St Lucia friends who brings support at the orphanage. I recognised her face right away. I was embarrassed. I failed to interact with her because I think people disrespect me

because I live at an institution for children who don't have a support system. I notice people don't take me seriously when they know I am a child who lives in an orphanage. People underestimate me.

When I was in form 1, I escaped from the orphanage because I missed my relatives. I wanted to see my extended family in Karatu. I remember that day I woke up really early before the official waking hours. I woke up at 3am to pack my clothes and supplies. I carried my school backpack and when it was time to leave for school, I departed to return to my hometown for a visit. I remember the people on the public transportation asking why I had a backpack and why I was wearing a school uniform. They were inquisitive because students were not typically on the buses at that hour. They asked me questions about where I was from, whose child I was, to whose address I was going to at the end of my destination. I responded to these questions without getting found out that I had escaped. When I returned to the home days after, I became 'the child who was most likely to escape'. This caused me a lot of worry and distress. I wished I had money so I could live by myself in peace.

Deborah: What do you see to be the effects of lack of courage and confidence to your interpersonal relationships? Are you happy about this label?

Agustino: I don't like to be a child who is likely to escape. Those are not my goals in life. I would like to continue helping and caring for others until I figure out how I can continue with school to pursue my dreams. Whenever I get into trouble for escaping, it takes me out of the path I wish to be in.

Deborah: Agustino, you mention goals and dreams in your life – what do you care about in your life? Would you want to share these goals with me? And what is the history of these goals? Are there activities you choose to do in life that reinforce these goals?

Agustino: The activities I choose to do in my life are going to school, learning from my mistakes, reading books that teach me how to care

for my life, motivating my friends when they are stressed by creating handmade craft objects, assisting the gardener with tasks on the farm, and supporting our caregivers with cleaning tasks on Saturdays.

I care about my dreams of being a lawyer. This originates from an incident I saw in the news. The late president Magufuli was on tour in Bukoba town, and a woman ran up to him to tell her about her land dispute. She had been alienated from her land and the justice system wasn't supportive. In the last week, I've read a few chapters of the book *Umezaliwa kufanikiwa* [You were born to succeed] (Stephen, 2019), which explains how to achieve a future one desires. I wish to be a lawyer because I am touched by all the injustice I see in the news. I know I can one day help.

Deborah: Agustino, can you think of ways you will use your skills to beat lack of confidence and courage when you leave this room? Do you have any advice or ways for a young man with a similar challenge on how they too could overcome lack of confidence and courage?

Agustino: The young man needs to know that it will take time to beat lack of confidence and courage. Sometimes our dreams don't match with others' dreams so they shouldn't be discouraged if people don't prioritise their dreams.

## Tree of Life with Ayoub and Juma

When I met with the younger peer-support group, I offered a slightly different version of the Tree of Life process. I had previously hesitated to offer the Tree of Life to children with limited literacy skills; however, this time around I decided to ask them simplified and clear questions, and to help them write down their thoughts on their trees.

As a warm-up activity, the children were invited to share with the group their first and last names and a song they particularly loved.

- What is one song in the world you love the most?
- Where did you hear this song for the first time?
- Why do you like it so much?

- Who was you with when you were listening to this song?
- Does this song remind you of someone you care about? Who does it remind you of?

We then traced their trees including their roots, ground, trunk, branches, leaves and flowers. To help them fill in their roots, I asked:

- Where are you from?
- What is your origin?
- Where do you feel at home?
- Where do you live?
- With whom do/did you live?

To fill in the trunk, I asked:

- What activities do you choose to do by yourself?
- What are you good at?
- Are there things in your day-to-day life that you do exceptionally well?
- Is there something you did well recently?

This was followed by sharing across the table.

## Ayoub's Tree of Life

Ayoub introduced himself with a song he had learnt from the radio. This was a song he listened to with other children at the orphanage. As we discussed the roots of his tree, I learnt that he had very fond memories of his uncle and that he had been named after his grandfather.

On the ground he shared all the places he recalled having stayed in the course of his life. He mentioned that he loved to hang out at Mama Kibajaji's shop, a local grocery shop in the village he used to live in before he was admitted to the orphanage.

The skills he recorded included his summersaulting. He learnt this skill from Johanna, a famous football player in the local leagues. Ayoub hoped that with somersaulting he could strengthen his muscles. He spoke about his challenges with balance and coordination, and mentioned that his brother who stayed at Kijiweni did some weightlifting, which inspired him to want to build his own strength. I also learnt that Ayoub was a great dancer and entertainer.

Ayoub also shared about Omary, a person who had cared for him when he was really sick and encouraged him to look forward to a hopeful future. He said that he missed eating chai ya maziwa and chapati, food that his brother Abdalla cooked. I learnt that when Lillian asked if he was okay while lying in bed, this evoked feelings of care and love. Mwalimu Lucy had taught him Kiswahili really well. Teacher Sylvester from his school had helped him whenever he fell down or was being abused by other children .

Ayoub could not remember his sister's name, but he remembered the contribution she had made to him when she cared to ask about his wellbeing. He shared that Mwl Kaaya was important to him because he gave him leadership opportunities.

### ***Juma's Tree of Life***

Juma also introduced himself with a song he learnt from the radio. He wasn't able to describe why he loved this song in particular. In completing the roots of his tree, I learnt about Mama Mkubwa Asha and his brother also called Juma. He is of Sambaa and Nyaturu tribe. Some of his favourite places were shopkeepers' stores in his village, which he visited before he was admitted to our care at Kwa Mchagaa.

Juma shared some of the activities that he chooses to do and enjoy: his brother and he would listen to their mother when she told them to do things in the household. He enjoyed riding bikes, having learnt this skill from his brother. His brother had also taught Juma the trick of holding on to the handlebars and taking his feet off the pedals while in motion.

## *Reflections*

As I reflect on what was shared during the conversations with the students, I am reminded of how inadequate evaluation tools can be in making sense of and honouring our students' experiences and skills. Many of our students' stories had never been heard or acknowledged: the stories of where they have come from, the hardships they have faced in life and the effects of these hardships, their hopes and dreams, and what is important to them. The Tree of Life activity enabled conversations about aspects of our students' lives that we wouldn't have expected to exist if we believed they were defined by dominant narratives of 'growing up in an orphanage' and 'falling below average' in a metric established by their teachers and authority figures.

Involving a teacher as an outside witness not only provided a re-telling of the students' stories, it also offered them a glimpse of ways they had responded to similar experiences in their upbringing. This showed our students that they are not alone in their obstacles.

There is no doubt the journey towards academic prowess will require concerted effort from our students and their educators in areas that are captured by our academic tools and evaluation metrics. However, I am convinced that this pursuit should be guided by the discovery, acknowledgment and recognition of a much wider range of experiences and skills that make our children who they are. In this way, we can create space for who they can become. There is also the need for us educators to engage with our own experiences in the process and bring to light resonating themes. I believe by doing this, we can support multidimensional growth, development and healing for our students: physically, emotionally, spiritually and psychologically.

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# Gamification:

How game design and narrative therapy can work together

by Luke Kalaf



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## Abstract

This paper documents ways of incorporating gamification (using game design elements in a non-game context) into therapeutic conversations using narrative therapy principles to uncover skills and knowledges suppressed by dominant discourses.

**Key words:** *gamification; games; metaphor; Dungeons and Dragons; D&D; role-play; TTRPG; failure; procrastination; Aboriginal; narrative practice*

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This paper details explorations and adventures in the therapeutic uses of game metaphors and gamification alongside narrative therapy principles. It describes conversations with “The Traveller” and others for whom games provided resonant language and metaphors. Games provided new ways of thinking about problems and the skills being used to respond to them. In particular, games helped us to identify sites of resistance to dominant discourses about procrastination and productivity, and to build alternative narratives that better captured local skills and knowledge. Metaphors from fantasy game design brought forward new concepts for story development, such as side quests, preparing spells and building a homebase. This provided experience-near language for exploring problems, and openings for alternative stories of creativity, friendship and the development of new skills.

The conversations described in this paper were grounded in narrative therapy theory and practice. I drew on work from Michael White (2002a, 2002b, 2005, 2007), David Denborough (2005) and recent innovations in the use of games and fantasy for therapeutic purposes (Andersen-Giberson, 2016; Salja, 2022; Taylor, 2014).

## *The stigma of gaming*

The discourse of gaming as a problem is so prevalent that it's necessary to specify that this isn't the focus of this paper. On the contrary, it's about how games and gaming metaphors can provide possibilities for addressing unrelated problems. But it can be hard to talk about games without conjuring up terms like addiction, obsession, mind-numbing, useless and escapism (Erickson & Monk, 2018). While these terms may not necessarily be inaccurate, when they become the only language used in relation to games, this can “close off the possibility of finding alternative understandings and explanations of what is going on during the gamer's lived experience” (Erickson & Monk, 2018, p. 2).

The stigmatisation and pathologising of gaming can recruit people who game into this way of thinking and identifying. Several papers by narrative practitioners have looked at the discourse around gaming and the effects and missed opportunities of defining gaming solely as a problem (Andersen-Giberson, 2016; Dinç, 2019; Erickson & Monk, 2018). Using narrative

principles to externalise the influence of games can “offer a separation and un-totalising of identity” (Andersen-Giberson, 2016) that doesn't negate any negative effects of gaming.

In line with the possibilities described in this paper, Chan (2021), Nyirinkwaya (2020), Salja (2022), Taylor (2014) and Wong (2012) have described inviting gaming experiences and metaphors into conversations to explore what is important to a person, what they learn from gaming, and how this relates to what they value in their real-life experiences. Skills used in games can be translated into real-world contexts (Anderson-Giberson, 2016; Dinç, 2019).

## *Context and location*

The language, metaphors and ideas offered in this paper were gifted to me as a practitioner. While the focus of this paper is on games, gaming and game design, the stories shared here were co-authored with Aboriginal people. As my co-adventurer The Traveller said, “The stories you will be sharing are Blak stories”.

I work as a narrative therapist in an Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation. We provide free medical and social support to people who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Some of the people I meet with have asked for the support themselves, and some have been given the option by a doctor or case worker. Aside from cultural identity, there is no criteria for someone to access the service.

I have come to narrative practice from a place of privilege. I identify as a European Australian decedent of immigrants from Greece and Holland. I was born into a middle-class family, and have experienced a life of financial stability, education and familial support.

Counselling can position people as problems that need to be fixed to support wider social cohesion. Emily Salja (2022, p. 23) argued that it is imperative to recognise that conventional therapies can be hazardous to those who are not “palatable to dominant discourses”. There is potential for therapy to be a “vehicle of colonisation” (2022, p. 23). As a profession, particularly in so-called Australia, counselling has historically used problem-focused diagnostic mechanisms to tell the stories of Aboriginal people.

Prominent narrative practitioner and Kaurua Elder Aunty Barbara Wingard has written about the importance of bringing forward stories about skills

of resistance, survival, thriving and honouring cultural knowledge (Wingard, 2001). The effects of colonisation are central to many conversations in the work that I do and to my position as a non-Aboriginal person working in spaces where I attempt to be of support to First Nations persons. Through a history of forced removal of lands and family, the people I meet with are disproportionately affected by child protection laws, over surveillance and over servicing (Cunneen & Rowe, 2014). They are aware that my notes could be requisitioned by the Department for Child Protection, thus contributing to an experience of being surveilled. Counselling work is not apolitical: we are governed by certain laws, held to organisational policies, and directed to report on outcomes influenced by funding bodies (White & Epston, 1990).

My anti-colonialist therapeutic stance is to adopt a position of non-neutrality against racism, the occupation of unceded lands and the legacy of violence of colonisation. I refuse to be neutral about the ways their effects continue to show up in our conversations, about the silencing of stories, and about the lack of acknowledgment of cultural disconnection and removal of culture (Drahm, 2018; Drahm-Butler, 2015). Through externalising and re-authoring, I take an influential but decentred stance to resist the violence of colonisation and the messages associated with it, while prioritising stories that support people to feel empowered in their own resistance (White, 2007).

## *The Traveller and the Black Ball*

In our conversations, The Traveller and I had externalised what he called “the Black Ball”. He explained that when the Black Ball was close, he experienced worry, dread and a sense that things were not possible.

During one of our conversations, The Traveller said that he had noticed that worry about the war in Ukraine was increasing the influence the Black Ball was having in his life. Amid the troubling news stories that were feeding the Black Ball, The Traveller described accounts of multinational gaming corporations “responding” to the war by pulling their servers out of Russia, so that the Russian public could not play their games online, and then donated money to the Ukrainian resistance. This was the first time that The Traveller’s interest in games entered our conversation. The Traveller compared the companies’ actions as akin to taking a Gameboy from

a privileged child and giving five cents to someone sleeping rough. He was frustrated with the ways these profitable companies had made decisions that mostly affected the lives of people who likely had no interest in the occupation of Ukraine, and furthermore live in an authoritarian society with few safe ways of resisting their government’s decisions or interests. The Traveller explained, “it’s all for show”. Through a re-authoring conversation about these reports, we discovered values dear to The Traveller: justice and fairness.

## *Discourse and procrastination*

The Traveller had been developing a television show exploring First Nations issues with a panel of First Nations people. He hoped that if the show were picked up by a network, it would elevate the voices of Aboriginal peoples across South Australia and highlight the communities’ experiences and problems. The Black Ball had The Traveller feeling guilty about having been absent from this project that was so important to him, and The Traveller was feeling overwhelmed at the prospect of re-engaging.

Michael White (2002b) wrote about how failure discourses can influence the way we tell our stories: “Never before has the sense of being a failure to be an adequate person been so freely available to people, and never before has it been so willingly and routinely dispensed” (White, 2002b, p. 33). The Traveller was consumed by the idea that participation in anything outside of the television project was a form of failure, which he labelled “procrastination”. A discourse of productivity seemed to overshadow his whole story.

Drawing on skills for receiving and documenting testimonies of trauma (Denborough, 2005), I asked The Traveller what he had been doing instead of the project. My intention was to bring forward what was “absent but implicit” (White, 2000) in these activities: were they linked to skills The Traveller had developed in response to the influence of the Black Ball?

The Traveller explained that he had been focusing on writing a Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) campaign with his friend. Dungeons and Dragons is a fantasy tabletop role-playing game in which players are encouraged to embody the character they choose. Using Michael White’s statement of position map 2 (2005), we began to document what it was about writing the D&D campaign that was interesting to The Traveller, and

why. He said that creativity was important to him, and that D&D provided an avenue for him to create a fantasy world with its own history and attributes. I asked if there were any other effects of engaging with D&D. The Traveller explained that it was a “good outlet”, and that researching all the details that would make the world believable enabled him to “practice writing stories”, be “creative” and “explore the mind”.

The Traveller was writing the D&D campaign with a close friend, and their plan was to play the campaign with a wider friendship group. This project had brought The Traveller’s interests in creativity, connection and community together. In listening to The Traveller, I took a position of curiosity, not invalidating the effects of the Black Ball or positioning myself in the conversation, but exploring what other stories were also available to us (White, 2002b). Through doing so, we were able to enrich an alternative story that ran alongside the dominant one.

The next time The Traveller and I met, he spoke about how he had still been reading the news about the war in Ukraine, but that he’d been able to “turn down the heat” and “lift the lid” to “let off the pressure” of the Black Ball. When I asked how this had been possible, he explained he had asked himself questions: “Why am I feeling this way?” and “Where is it coming from?” When I asked him what he might call this skill he said, “It’s kind of like gamifying it”. The Traveller explained that it was like breaking down the big quest into small tasks, and considering all the things that need to be completed before “levelling up”. He added that it was helpful to think of all the tasks he was doing outside of the television project as small adventures that would support his bigger quest.

## Gamification

Gamification is “the use of game design elements in non-game contexts” (Deterding et al., 2011, p. 9). Gamification has become increasingly popular in the digital world. Developers have been bringing game mechanics into many different applications, websites and programs. An example of this is in the exercise app Strava, through which people upload the runs, rides or other exercises they complete and receive badges or crowns for their achievements. Another popular app using gamification is the language learning program Duolingo. Again, users receive points, streaks and badges for their continued engagement.

In many uses of gamification, the user or participant is similarly encouraged to complete tasks and remain engaged or active in the program, moving towards a predetermined goal. These programs are single storied and consider very little outside of narrowly defined progress or ongoing engagement. Much of the literature about the use of gamification to promote health or wellbeing is centred on its effectiveness in harnessing engagement in a program or encouraging predetermined outcomes such as healthy eating and exercise (Johnson et al., 2016; Lew et al., 2017; Suleiman-Martos et al., 2021; Shameli et al., 2017).

There is risk in using games as a metaphor for life. Many games have specific confines and rules that restrict players and determine the aims, goals and directions of play. Many games are built on patriarchal and colonising ideals; consider Grand Theft Auto, Risk, Chess and the increasingly popular Catan. I was aware that in using gaming metaphors with The Traveller, I might unintentionally reinforce the single-storied narratives influenced by the structuralist discourses I had intended we expose.

The type of gaming that is structured by rules and encourages competition and the achievement of set goals can be seen as distinct from “play”, which suggests a more free-form, expressive, improvisational and even “tumultuous” recombination of behaviours and meanings (Deterding et al., 2011, p. 11). The “play” aspect of game design might be most useful in narrative conversations. Games can give us metaphors with which we can play and explore, suggesting language, skills, knowledge and avenues for reflection. Play might even be used to expose unhelpful discourses. This is where I have found role-playing games like Dungeons and Dragons to be helpful. In D&D there can be limitations to the world the players are in, but generally speaking, the players are free to explore and interact in the game world, choosing where they go and what they do, creating openings for all kinds of conversation located in landscapes of identity and action (White, 2007). Fantasy landscapes like those of D&D can be a powerful tool for externalising problem stories and complex discourses:

Instead of the problem being positioned in reality, we can take a step back and view it through the lens of a familiar fictional character or from an array of fantasy landscapes. This can feel like stepping out of the middle of oncoming traffic and instead watching from the sidewalk as the cars race by. Once we can see the pattern of traffic, we can use that information to decide when to cross the road. (Salja, 2022, p. 20)



Taylor (2014, p. 61) adds that game metaphors can serve as an effective way of externalising viewpoints and re-authoring events, and also do so “from a place where [a person has] more knowledge than they might realise”.

## *Talking about games in a narrative context*

Therapists are likely to find greater success if they create room for language that is familiar and comfortable to those they work with (Erickson & Monk, 2018, p. 12). White (2007) described the importance of naming as an initial step in “loading up” the significance of something otherwise unnamed (2007, p. 266). To honour The Traveller’s naming and meaning-making skills, and to invite language familiar to him, I asked him more about his D&D world building. I provided an “editorial” (White, 2007, p. 238) of what we had spoken about in our previous meeting, and I asked him what, in D&D terms, he might name his time spent writing the D&D campaign. He called it a “side quest”, and explained that side quests are alternative paths that adventurers can go down. They might not directly contribute to the main adventure, but they provide possibilities for gaining experience or finding valuable new weapons, skills or resources. With any one of these gains, a player might return to the main adventure better placed to complete their quest.

Continuing to “load up” the significance of this new narrative, I asked The Traveller what it meant to him to consider his D&D creative writing as a side quest of sorts – might it support him to gather valuable resources or even “level up” in his main quest? The Traveller responded that it was helpful to think that his activities weren’t just procrastinating: the writing was good practice for the writing that would be required for his TV project, his friendships were important to him, and he was really excited by the prospect of playing this campaign with them.

He added that you can spend too long on side quests, and this can have consequences for the main adventure. The stories in the main adventure can develop while you’re focused elsewhere, and the tasks can become more difficult. This was relevant to The Traveller because he knew that he wanted to get back to his main quest of developing the TV show, and he didn’t want to let the jobs list get too long in his absence.

At the end of our time together that day, I asked The Traveller what our conversation had him thinking about. He explained that our conversations were like another side quest that was supporting him to build experiences that he could take back to his main quests. Even when our conversations went off on a tangent, “they still provide experience and knowledge that support the bigger stories”.

The next time we spoke, The Traveller was happy to tell me that he had returned to working on the TV show project in “full force”. He had also sought more shifts at work and had been able to improve his financial situation enough to buy his partner the birthday present they wanted. The Traveller explained that he had been able to see that the Black Ball wasn’t him all along, because it wasn’t telling all his stories, so therefore it can’t have been within him. Being able to renegotiate his relationship not only with the Black Ball, but also with his other interests had made it possible for him to take control and re-engage in areas of his life that had previously felt overwhelming.

## *Inviting gaming into new conversations*

Following the conversations I had with Traveller, I introduced the idea of games into conversations with others I was meeting with. I learnt about skills in preparing spells and equipping weapons – ways of ensuring you are ready for any encounter you may have. Gaming metaphors helped one person to consider the tasks they do when they “need to be studying”, such as cleaning their room or responding to texts from friends, as important parts of setting themselves up for the main quest. This helped to create space from the influence of failure discourses that presented a single story of procrastination as a deficit.

Through exploring the use of game metaphors with other adventurers, I learnt that online games like Minecraft and Fortnite also afford possibilities for meaning-making that interrupts the notions of failure that can dominate identity stories. For example, I learnt from a young person about the importance of building a house in Minecraft. This is not the “most fun” part of the game, but if you build a house, you can use it to keep your things safe at night when the zombies come out. This allows you to build on the hard work you’ve put in elsewhere. This metaphor made it possible to consider skills for completing less preferred work to keep their

teacher “off their back a bit” so they could spend more time on their main adventures, like being with their friends.

## Revisiting gaming metaphors with The Traveller

The Traveller and I revisited gaming metaphors in a later conversation. Much had happened since he had first offered me the side quest metaphor. I let him know that I had introduced the idea to other people I had met with. He was happy to hear that his contribution had supported others in telling their stories, and that it had been a useful frame to explore and deconstruct normative ideas of productivity.

Our conversation returned to what was happening in The Traveller's life, and we continued to explore this through gaming metaphors. I had learnt in a previous conversation that The Traveller was having troubles in his family. He was struggling to talk with one of his family members because he couldn't support them in the ways that they were asking for. The Traveller informed me, however, that he had recently had a conversation with this family member. I asked how this had been possible for him, hoping to uncover the skills he had used. He explained that he had spoken to the family member over the phone, and this gave him a sense of distance and control: he could more easily leave the conversation if he needed to. I asked what he might call this if he borrowed language from D&D. He explained it was as though his character had prepared several spells “just in case” he needed to use them. He named the spells “pass without trace”, “dimension door” and “misty step”. In D&D, such spells allow a character to move from one place to another without being seen or noticed. I asked, “What did it make possible, having these spells prepared?” He said that they made him feel safer, so he could take more of a risk and venture further into his family member's worries.

The Traveller told me that his family story was one of his main quests. The side quests (our conversations together) had been where he'd learnt how to prepare these spells. With them prepared, he felt it had become possible to participate in his main quest once again, but now better equipped.

He added that he had initiated the conversation with his family member, asking what was going on for them.

I asked him if initiating the conversation had been another skill. He agreed, explaining that it was through “bridging the gap” that he had been able to sidestep the requests that made him uncomfortable, and instead offer support on his own terms. Asking whether there was a D&D term he might use to describe this, he named these his “cooking skills”. These are skills only certain players can use to make a meal that boosts the abilities of the other players in their party. Cooking skills require time, and The Traveller could use them when he felt he could offer them freely.

## Productivity, procrastination and efficiency: Turning towards collectivism

Throughout my conversations with The Traveller, externalising the Black Ball helped us to uncover skills and knowledges, including those he transferred from the world of gaming. It also enabled us to identify values of creativity, friendship, fairness and justice. The Traveller began to situate the problems he was experiencing as external to himself and identified preferred identity stories. Throughout this re-authoring process, D&D offered metaphors that helped to reduce structuralist influence on The Traveller's stories.

Instead of assuming gamers are “hollow dupes ... lacking the capacity for critical discernment” (Tilsen & Nylund, 2009, p. 5), therapists can adopt a position of curiosity, and invite others into it too, to interrupt this discourse by exploring the effects and the meaning of gamers' relationships to games.

I grew up playing boardgames and digital games, but fantasy and role-playing games are new to me. I have been enthralled by the possibilities that they create through imagination and play. I have also been interested in the ways that role-playing games can go beyond dominant discourses and provide opportunities to explore what lies beyond perceived boundaries.

The use of game metaphors and mechanics with The Traveller and other adventurers had me considering this: if rest is framed as procrastination, what do we lose? Capitalism co-authors discourses of hyper-productivity and sociopolitical imperatives of constant contribution. How does this influence our framing and understanding of rest? Being introduced to the use of game metaphors for therapeutic conversations expanded the possibilities for understanding the effects of capitalist discourses of productivity, as well

as making visible the effects of the discourses of abstaining from activities and/or choosing rest, creating openings for alternative narratives.

I think about the many ways we might build on gaming metaphors to weave in re-memembering practices, to honour community contributions to quests we undertake, and to make visible the skills and knowledge of individuals and communities. In these conversations, we could explore how we are witnessed and understood in these quests and how we might co-construct quests and contribute to collective story telling.

In their very architecture, many games embody capitalist and colonial representation, structures, ideas and designs (Tilsen & Nylund, 2009). Thus, gaming

language is not impervious to meanings that reflect dominant structures of power. Therapists need to be aware of this, or risk reproducing dominant hierarchies. But the playing of games can create metaphorical spaces where better understandings of these systems become possible. Game metaphors have potential for therapy that is decolonising, anti-colonial and subversive to normative standards. Through The Traveller's invitation to explore the language and logic of games, I have learnt skills that support attempts to create decolonised, safer spaces for the people I interact with. Through integrating language from games people are interested in, we can foreground the individual's meaning-making skills, while creating distance from the problem.

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# Building bridges across stories:

## Developing cross-cultural partnerships to challenge masculinity

by Nicolás Mosso Tupper



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### Abstract

This paper explores the possibilities of developing cross-cultural partnerships to support men in defying dominant prescriptions of masculinity. It focuses on the individual stories of two men of different ages and experiences living on different continents, and shows the coming together of their stories. Both undertook a migration of identity away from dominating ideas and beliefs that justified harm and abuse, and towards a preferred form of masculinity aligned with their values, and with practices of dignity and nonviolence. Through the creation, translation and sharing of documents of resistance, each of these men was able to contribute to the other, and to receive something in return. This helped to counteract the sense of isolation often experienced by men who depart from dominant masculinities and seek to inhabit a more ethical way of being. It also enabled cross-cultural insights about the operations of power. I hope the story of these two men and their improbable partnership will inspire more partnerships that support the questioning of cultural ideas about how we perform gender, and that it will invite practitioners to notice and attend to acts of resistance to non-liberative ways of being.

**Key words:** *masculinity; cross-cultural; partnerships; violence; alcohol; ethical restoration; documentation; narrative practice*

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Author pronouns: he/him

It is not uncommon to find that some of the people consulting us are facing similar problems. In fact, I often find myself meeting with multiple people who are dealing with similar issues. A substantial number of men who consult with me have expressed that they do not feel comfortable with how they think about themselves as men or with actions they have undertaken as a result. Many have started to question the way they perform masculinity and are opening up to new and diverse preferred ways of being a man.

Although I will touch on the issue, the focus of this paper is not on work with men who have used violence in their relationships and the possibilities for responding (see Jenkins, 2006, 2009; Lindemann, 2001; Yuen & C. White, 2007). My main intention in the following pages is to explore the possibilities for developing cross-cultural partnerships to defy dominant prescriptions of masculinity. These partnerships have been fostered through the use of documents of resistance and the creation of bridges across stories.

I will share the stories of two men: Fernando, a 22-year-old college student from Chile, and Chris, a 60-year-old journalist from Australia. Given the many cultural differences between Australia and Chile, I was quite surprised to hear many similar expressions from these men who were not only living on opposite sides of the world, but were also in different stages of their lives.

## Meeting Fernando

I met Fernando in early 2018 while working in a psychological clinic in the centre of Santiago in Chile. Fernando was an 18-year-old college student, and he was unsure about which degree to pursue. In the beginning, our conversations focused on his relationship with his older brother, Lucas, who was consuming multiple drugs and had recently been given a diagnosis of schizophrenia. Fernando had a complex relationship with his brother, as Lucas could be violent, especially when under the influence of marijuana, which was quite often. Fernando, the youngest of five siblings, had been responding to his older brother with matched aggressiveness. Back then, we worked on some of the many skills Fernando had to respond to those situations in ways that were safe for both him and Lucas. I saw Fernando until October of that year when we both felt confident that he had enough knowledge and skills to navigate this complex relationship.

I did not hear from Fernando until a year later, in November of 2019. Back then, I knew that I would be moving to Australia at the end of the year, and I recognised that I would be dealing with all the complexities of that move. So when Fernando asked me if we could start seeing each other again, I said that if we were to have more than a few meetings, they would have to be online. This was before COVID-19 times, and it would be a new experience for both of us. After some thought, we agreed to give it a try and see how we both felt.

This time, Fernando was dealing with something completely different. And while it was great to hear from him again and to learn how much his relationship with his brother had changed in the past year, it is not always the best when people get back in touch as it often means that they are dealing with hardship again. During our first meeting, Fernando explained that he had been concerned about how his relationship with his partner had been unfolding. Fernando described how, because he came from a stigmatised part of the city, his partner's family tended to make derogatory comments, which affected his self-esteem and how he looked at himself and his family. Even though he did not agree with the comments, Fernando said that he was finding it hard to shake them off and felt embarrassed about inviting his partner over to his house.

With time, Fernando started to connect to his life and roots in a different way. He began to talk about the effort some members of his family had made so that he could study and go to university – an opportunity that not all of his siblings had. And while he could recognise his privilege in relation to other family members, Fernando was also proud about how much he had worked to get to where he was in life. The conversations about shame started to dissipate as stories that honoured his family's history gained more strength.

After meeting for a couple of months, Fernando and I decided that it would be a good idea to stop having our sessions. At that time, I remember seeing Fernando much more comfortable with who he was.

### ***Inviting conversations of masculinity***

In January of 2021, I received a message from Fernando saying that he had broken up with his partner and would like to talk once again. I was still living and working in Adelaide so we met over video calls. During our second meeting, Fernando began to name something new he had been dealing with. He called this a "rage attack". Fernando said that he felt "toxic" when

he was under the influence of these rage attacks and connected them with feelings like “pain” and “suffering”, which he did not want for his life.

I asked Fernando to tell me more about these rage attacks he had been facing. Fernando told me that when he was growing up, his dad had been an aggressive man, and Fernando had witnessed his older brother fighting with their father on multiple occasions. He had discussed this with his brothers; they often said how lucky he was to have been the youngest sibling because he didn’t experience the physical punishments they were subjected to. Nevertheless, Fernando explained to me that in order to resist the violence that he had experienced and witnessed, he had found in rage a useful ally as a young child to stay safe.

I was curious about how he had been resisting the effects of rage attack in the present, but I also felt like I needed to know more about the consequences of the actions he took when under its influence. Fernando said that rage attack had grown stronger when he argued with his then partner, and that afterwards he would feel “guilty” and “like a monster”. He even felt like taking his own life because of this.

### ***Moving away from abuse: The separation phase***

I sought to conceptualise what Fernando was moving away from: beliefs that justify abuse, and also conclusions and ideas about gender and power – what Fernando was describing as “rage attacks” and feeling “toxic”. I also sought to understand what he was moving towards: forms of masculinity aligned with his hopes and values. This line of exploration was inspired by Nancy Gray’s work responding to men’s violence (Gray, 2006) and Michael White’s use of a “migration of identity” metaphor (M. White, 1995, 2007; after Turner, 1969). This metaphor can be used to help men “chart a movement away from violence and dominating practices and towards different forms of masculinity” (Gray, 2006, p. 4) through stages of separation, liminality and reincorporation (M. White, 1995, p. 100).

My initial intention was for Fernando to create some space between himself and some of the beliefs that can justify domination and control.

In the following conversation, I invited Fernando to create a rich description of rage attack. He described how rage fed insecurity, particularly about his body. Even though he and his former partner had broken up months before, he still felt jealous and often found himself thinking about her having sex with other men.

This made him feel enraged and insecure about himself and his body: “I just start to think that I’m trash, that I’m disposable ... It makes me think about my muscles, or lack of them, and the size of my penis. It makes me think she may feel more pleasure with her current partner, so I feel insecure.” The effects of these ideas led to negative conclusions about who he was as a person.

I asked Fernando about why he felt jealous, and to consider where this set of ideas about sexuality and body standards had come from. Fernando thought that most of these ideas “come from society ... and from the world of pornography. It makes me feel like I’m toxic”. Fernando said that he did not agree with any of the ideas he had described, but he could not stop thinking about them.

At this point in the conversation, Fernando had mentioned a few concepts that I was curious about. He had talked about “insecurity” about himself and his body; he had talked about “rage”, which appeared during arguments but also came as an effect of some intrusive thoughts; and he had talked about feeling “toxic”. He had also named “ideas that come from society” about bodies, sizes and shapes.

I asked Fernando if there were connections among these ideas or maybe a common plot. And if they did have something in common, perhaps he could think of a way we could name these ideas that so far seemed to appear very close together, but not necessarily together. Fernando quickly said, “Yes! It’s not hard to see that it is toxic masculinity. It’s not just masculinity, but it’s a toxic masculinity”. My idea here was to make this problem more tangible as it appeared to be blurry and abstract, but at the same time, it was taking up too much space in various areas of Fernando’s life.

### ***Looking back, moving forward: The liminal phase***

At our next meeting, I invited Fernando to take a step back and look at what we had been discussing. I mentioned what I thought had been some relevant topics of conversation. Fernando rapidly started to describe other aspects of his life he had noticed being affected by “toxic masculinity”.

Fernando mentioned that he often felt like he was “competing with other men”, especially “competing for women”. Even if only in his head, he found himself constantly comparing himself to others. Fernando was sure that this form of masculinity invited him to compete with others, which ended up leading to more insecurity.

Once again, Fernando did not agree with these ideas. When I asked him why he did not agree with these ideas, Fernando said that they “try to convince me that women can be possessed, not as an object, but as an ‘achievement’ by hooking up with more women or things like that”. I then asked him how he could resist those ideas. “I try to resist these ideas by being aware that they are not good ideas because they reduce the dignity of women, and I do not want to become someone like that. Understanding that helps me.”

During this time, I could already hear an intention and a concrete movement away from abuse and dominant forms of masculinity and towards a preferred identity that was distinct from being “toxic” and “a monster”. However, it was also important that Fernando continue to develop and move away from the tactics of dominant forms of masculinity.

This led to a conversation about dignity, which seemed to be something Fernando greatly valued. Fernando mentioned that he had learnt dignity from his mother and that it was a significant value she had taught him. At this point, I invited him to tell me a story about how that had come to be. I intended to move between the landscape of identity and the landscape of action (M. White, 2007), so I invited Fernando to think of possibilities for ethical restitution that would be aligned with the value of dignity, and with moving away from a sense of repentance and merely wanting to apologise because it’s “the right thing to do” (Jenkins, 2006). Some questions that I would ask to invite reflection about whether an apology might have a restorative effect are:

- What is the purpose of your apology?
- Who is this apology in service of?
- What do you think the other person will gain from your apology, and what do you think you will gain?

After this meeting, Fernando and I both had the feeling that our topic of discussion was clearly relevant. Fernando said at the end of our session that it seemed like we had managed to “hit the nail on the head”.

### ***Inhabiting nonviolent values and creating documents of resistance: The reincorporation phase***

During our conversations, Fernando had described holding beliefs that served the purpose of justifying abuse and tactics of domination and control. Through

our discussions, Fernando had been able to take a step back from these beliefs and had started to live his life through nonviolent values and concrete actions aligned with these values. He had made substantial changes to his daily practices to live in accordance with nonviolence.

Our conversations at this point had started to touch on many different ideas and topics, so Fernando and I thought it would be a good idea to document our conversations. We decided to set up a shared online document in which I could ask questions and he could write his responses. Because I had the practice of taking notes during conversations, I provided Fernando with a few key words or topics from the conversations we’d had so he could expand on them. Focusing on the landscape of identity, I provided Fernando with two big categories:

- beliefs and tactics that allow for abuse: competitiveness, rage, social standards, jealousy, social media, ideas of success and guilt
- practices and values I want for my life: dignity, nonviolence, damage-repair and self-love.

In response to the first category of beliefs and tactics that allow for abuse, Fernando wrote:

The idea of *competitiveness* with other men, especially “competing for women”. It is not wrong to fight for what you want in life, but it is not good to compare yourself with other men to see who the “alpha male” is or who “gets the women”. Women are not a trophy.

Here Fernando described some of the beliefs that justify or normalise abuse towards women (competitiveness) and briefly mentioned something he wanted for his own life (not comparing myself to see who “gets more women”). Because I hoped that Fernando would create a description close to his own experience, I then wrote on the document some questions inspired by the externalisation map (M. White, 2007).

Nicolás: Fernando, what would you call this first idea? Is competitiveness the best way of naming this? If that is the name you find the most accurate, how do you think competitiveness is trying to convince men that they can possess women?

Fernando: I think this “competitiveness” or “comparing myself” is due to insecurities. A better name for it might be “masculine competitiveness”.



I believe that this idea suggests that women can be possessed, not as an object, but as an “achievement” by hooking up with more women or things like that. I try to resist these ideas by being aware that they are not positive because they reduce the dignity of women, and I do not want to become someone like that. I don’t have to comply with cultural standards that are unfair and have been built based on outdated and unrealistic logics. Understanding that helps me.

Nicolás: Fernando, you mentioned that you are measuring yourself against “cultural standards” – what do you mean by that? Where do you think these cultural standards come from?

Fernando: By “cultural standards” I mean certain “norms” or ideals that are understood in our [Chilean] society as something optimal in the eyes of others. But this is something merely cultural, and it is built by the same people, collectively. I think because of the history of the country, we often believe we must compete with others.<sup>1</sup>

Nicolás: I think it’s great that you are aware of the impact of these cultural standards in your life. What steps do you think you can take to live farther apart from the cultural standards and closer to dignity, as you mentioned before?

Fernando: Those ideals have hurt me, and I have ended up hurting others as well as a result. When I compare myself, I feel lesser for not meeting the expectations of the dominant ideas. Knowing this helps me to be more authentic and show myself to others. I don’t have to be ashamed of being myself. This helps me reduce my anger, jealousy and self-esteem problems, at least so that those ideas lose strength. I think [the other values] will serve me for a lifetime and [help me] build the person I want to be. I am not where I would like to be yet, but I have made significant progress, and I want to keep moving forward. I want to be a healthy and happy person. And I think I can do it. I want my acts to be more in line with my values and not with dominant social ideas.

We continued working on the document between sessions, adding, changing and editing concepts. I continued to ask questions in the shared document until we both felt comfortable with how rich the document was – although we also understood that there were plenty more stories that could have been added.

After we finished writing, Fernando decided to print and keep a hardcopy of the document on his nightstand. Whenever he felt rage, competitiveness or another face of “toxic masculinity” attempting to crawl back into his life, Fernando would lay down on his bed and read his document.

## Meeting Chris

In April of 2021, I started working in an alcohol and other drugs rehabilitation program in Adelaide, Australia. In my second week there, I met Chris, who was 60 years old. When I first met him, it was hard not to feel curious about this person in front of me. Chris seemed highly motivated and appeared to have a passion for telling stories. In our first meeting, Chris seemed eager to adequately explain to me who he was and why he had decided to consult the program – I barely got to ask him any questions at all!

Chris began by telling me that he was a journalist, and that in 1993, he had been sent for several months to Yatala Prison for protecting a source in court. This had led to what Chris called “thirty years of struggling with depression” leading to “serious alcohol dependency”. He and his family had struggled as a result: “My family had come to their wits’ end constantly finding empty bottles hidden in the house and my car.”

Throughout this meeting and our next one, Chris told me about what he and his family had to endure due to “alcoholism”. However, there had also been clear attempts to resist these effects: “Alcohol is not going to control my life.”

Chris and his family had a harrowing experience at the beginning of the year when Chris’ wife attempted to take her own life. He recalled finding her “lying in a pool of blood on our kitchen floor, having tried to end her life because she could no longer cope with my lies”. Chris felt highly responsible for this situation: “My actions nearly cost me my wife’s life ... I suddenly realised I had become so absorbed in myself and my pain that

I had failed to see the impact that my pain, my addiction and my behaviour were having on those closest to me.”

In our subsequent conversations, we continued to challenge some of the past beliefs that Chris had used to justify his actions. However, these conversations seemed quite heavy for Chris, with the realisation of the pain he had caused his family. We discussed his frustration at coming to realise this and the guilt as well: “I could hear what they were saying, but I felt so frustrated because they could not see that I ‘had this’. I was in complete control. I was lying the whole time!”

Following the same ideas as the work I was doing with Fernando, once Chris had begun moving away from the beliefs and tactics that allowed abuse in his life, I invited Chris to collaborate in documenting some of the ideas and topics we had discussed.

Linking stories

When working with people who have developed significant knowledge through their experiences, I always seek to find ways of sharing it with others who may find it helpful. The experience of sharing hard-won knowledge can “bring a sense that their suffering has not been for nothing” (Denborough, 2008, p. 3).

Because I was working concurrently with Fernando and Chris, I thought I would invite them to share their newly acquired knowledge, and hopefully develop a sense of partnership between them.

I found that overlapping the re-authoring conversations map (M. White, 2007) with the three phases of definitional ceremony (M. White, 2000), as seen in Figure 1, was a helpful guide to structuring their interaction.

	Creating bridges: Telling of the story	Developing partnerships: Re-telling of the story	Inhabiting ethical identities: Re-telling of the re-telling:
<b>Landscape of identity</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Values</li><li>• Hopes</li><li>• Dreams</li><li>• Longings</li><li>• Commitments</li><li>• Understandings</li></ul>	A. Beliefs that justify abuse <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Non-liberative traditions</li><li>• Cultural and normative understandings about gender</li></ul> B. Nonviolent values and beliefs <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Liberative traditions</li><li>• Liberative cultural understandings of gender</li></ul>	A. Cultural and non-liberative understandings are contrasted B. Cultural and liberative understandings are contrasted C. Sense of partnership starts to develop	A. Moving away from: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Notion of nostalgia</li><li>• Notion of apologies and forgiveness</li></ul> B. Katarsis to understandings of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Remorse and restorative action</li></ul>
<b>Landscape of action</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Actions</li><li>• Initiatives</li><li>• Responses</li></ul>	A. Tactics of domination and control <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Non-liberative stories and rituals</li></ul> B. Practices of life that are aligned with nonviolent values	A. Cultural practices of life are questioned B. Space for new initiatives is created	A. Moving away from <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Act of apologies in line with notions nostalgia and forgiveness</li></ul> B. Katarsis to new ways of performing masculinity: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Practices of ethical restorative action</li></ul>

Figure 1: Overlaying re-authoring conversations and the phases of definitional ceremony

### ***Creating bridges: Telling of the story***

Because Chris was an English speaker and Fernando spoke Spanish, I figured that if we met up on a video call, it would be a bit hard for them to communicate, even if I was interpreting. It was also tricky to find the right time due to the time difference between Santiago and Adelaide.

Then I thought that I could translate the very rich documents of resistance they had each written. They had described values and understandings that had in the past allowed them to abuse and hurt people they loved. They had shared stories about how that came to be, and they had declared how they now opposed those ideas. They had also described the values they wanted for their lives and narrated stories and practices that were aligned with these preferred values.

I thought that we could share the translated documents and then record each man's responses for the other. I proposed that we meet to read and discuss the documents, and suggested that this might give each the opportunity to both contribute to and receive something from another man, on the other side of the world, who, despite age and cultural differences, had dealt with similar issues.

My intention was also to invite them to further consider how some of their previous ideas and tactics were related to cultural and non-liberative traditions, and to foster a sense of belonging and liberation that was distinct from the oppressive ideas they had both described. I hoped to create space for justice and reparation and to give each the possibility to contribute to someone else's life through sharing stories about attempting to live away from violence and abuse (Lacey, 2005).

I believe that understanding the non-liberative traditions that come from our culture is crucial. Often, it is not until we can look at our culture in contrast with others that we can see the non-liberative aspects of it (Tamasese & C. White, 2007). However, it is important to keep in mind that this understanding must not be used as a means to justify abuse and harm we have done to others, but as a way to take a step back from our own culture and look with a critical eye at our ways of being.

The intention of developing this partnership was also that these two men who were now actively contesting patriarchal forms of masculinity – and beginning to identify the effects of the new lifestyles they were creating – might be supported to resist the commonly

felt sense of isolation faced by men who depart from dominant masculinities, and which can often be dissuasive for men who are starting to inhabit a more ethical way of being (M. White, 1992).

### ***Developing partnerships: The re-telling of the story***

I met with Chris and read through Fernando's document with him. My initial plan for this meeting had been to go over the four categories of inquiry used in definitional ceremonies – expression, image, personal resonance and transport (M. White, 2000) – with an ethical focus on restorative action.

I began by asking Chris what had most caught his attention in Fernando's document.

Chris: There are a lot of things I resonate with, a lot of things in common, especially about the outside expectations. This has been part of my own road: setting my dreams, my desires and my objectives based on outside expectations. And what's worse, I've put them on other people. I made it other people's responsibility for them to fulfil these desires. I made it like a box of expectations to my wife, my kids, and told them, "You have to make me feel better, feel fulfilled". So my relationships turned into a constant negotiation. I look back now, and just like Fernando, I realise that has been influenced by society and social media ... Now I see the effect of this on my kids, on them wanting to get the perfect photo all the time, to always want to upload the right angle, and even to use photoshop to edit their photos. Sometimes it breaks my heart to hear my kids talking about how they want to "sell that image", and then I look at myself and realise that I'm still doing it, maybe in a more traditional way, in the way I speak, or the things I give value to, instead of Instagram. I feel really guilty about it. I think Fernando and I feel guilty.

Here, what Fernando was calling "cultural standards", Chris called "outside expectations". I have found that in such slightly different namings, creative responses can occur as they suggest a different perspective on a similar subject. My intention was for Chris to describe what was resonant for him in a way that was near to his own experience, and not for him to adopt Fernando's ideas.

Nicolás: Yes, that is very much in line with what Fernando was saying. It seems like there are many points in common, many bridges that connect your stories. Do you think that crossing those bridges invites you to relate with guilt differently?

Chris: I hear Fernando's story and the childhood he went through, and I have to take my hat off. I understand he didn't grow up on the best side of the city, and that alone can sometimes defeat people, or make them believe that they are never going to get away from that, and you start to become a prisoner in your own city, you start to think that there's nothing you can do. And I think that the fact that he is studying at a university now really shows how you can have really positive life changes. I think that's a massive goal to achieve. I think it installs an idea in my mind – a new perspective on the power that we have over our lives. I think I can continue to feel defeated, or I can embrace it and seek a different victory.

Nicolás: Does it invite you to think differently about guilt as well?

Chris: Yes, for sure. Seeing that Fernando has been able to affect so much change in his life despite all of the things he has had to deal with gives me the strength to do something about this guilt, and not to continue demanding for others to make me feel better about myself, to think of what I can do to repair what I've done – the damage and pain that I've caused to my wife and kids.

I have found that having someone acknowledge and create a sense of partnership around the idea that there is more to our identities, stories and traditions than causing harm to others can facilitate a movement away from the ideas of "repentance" or "forgiveness" from the Judeo-Christian tradition, and closer to initiatives that are aligned with ethical restorative action (Jenkins, 2006). As partnerships are a form of relationship that invites accountability and consideration of the needs of the counterpart, they are often a good beginning point in the journey of "becoming ethical" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 157, 2009). Because there is always more to our identities,

bringing light to those sometimes-invisible stories can allow us to take a step forward in this political journey.

### ***Inhabiting ethical identities: The re-telling of the re-telling***

After meeting with Chris, I transcribed and translated our conversation. I later met with Fernando and read him the transcript. So he could experience someone re-telling his story directly to him, Fernando read my side of the interview and I read Chris' words to him. I then invited Fernando to share the effect on him of hearing his own story reflected back in Chris' words.

Fernando: When I listened to Chris' story for the first time, I thought it was really powerful and heavy at the same time. He had been in prison, and in a way, I thought to myself that if he had been able to overcome all of that, I can surely overcome and deal with what I've been dealing with myself. And it's funny because now I hear Chris saying the same thing about my story. It's a really powerful feeling. It makes me feel connected to him in that way, and it gives me the strength to keep going on this path that I've been on for the last couple of months. It feels like we are supporting each other, even at a distance.

Nicolás: And thinking about this support that you are providing to each other, what do you believe it can enable in your life in the future? Do you think this partnership can open space for anything new in your life?

Fernando: Maybe in my intimate relationships in the future, it can help me move away from guilt as something that doesn't allow me to make right what I've done. I know now that I've done things that are wrong in the past, and it seems like guilt can show me that those things are wrong, but it doesn't help me to address the damage or restore the relationship. Guilt sometimes convinces me to keep thinking about myself, to think "I'm a monster". And I think having Chris recognise other aspects of my life, like the fact that I had a hard time growing up, is giving me strength to move past guilt and to think of restoring what I've done, to stop focusing on myself, and to think of



the experience of others and how can I do better in the future.

Nicolás: So I'm understanding that having Chris' companionship is enabling you to take different actions in the future that involve focusing less on yourself, and more on thinking of the experience of the other person, is that right?

Fernando: Yes, that's right. Feeling that companionship and knowing that we have both dealt with similar situations gives me the strength to focus less on myself. In a way, I feel like I have Chris now looking after me, while I look after him, even if we can't speak to each other because of the language barrier. I hope we can stay connected.

At this stage, Fernando was able to easily recognise the effects that developing this partnership with Chris was having on him in terms of moving away from keeping a focus on himself and towards focusing on "the experience of others". The intention at this stage was for Fernando to develop a sense of agency that would give space for the creation and consolidation of initiatives that oppose practices aligned with abuse – a sense of personal agency that had as its cornerstone the partnership that was created through the building of bridges between stories. At this point, people often reclaim a new sense of ethical identity that is more aligned with their ethical striving, and they can begin to recognise relevant aspects of their identities that had previously been subjugated to fixed and dominant ideas of identity (Jenkins, 2006, 2009).

Seeing our cultures in contrast also became relevant to me as a practitioner. When working with Fernando, a person of similar age and cultural background to me, my questions were influenced by my own experience of being a man in Chile. However, given my cultural and age differences from Chris, after our conversations, I would often be filled with curiosity, and would look forward to exploring with Fernando some of the topics Chris had brought up. For example, after Chris described how ideas about masculinity in Australia had been shaped through that country's participation in the Vietnam War, I was prompted to re-explore with Fernando how the recent history of Chile had influenced us as men – an idea I had previously overlooked.

## Final considerations

When we work with people individually, it can seem as if each person's experience is so unique and exceptional that their knowledge may not be useful to other people. However, there is always more to be drawn from people's experiences. It has been through initiating improbable partnerships that I have been most surprised at the connections people make, based not only on their similarities, but on what is different and particular about them, especially when we are tackling what seems to be a massive problem. I have found that the contrast of experiences creates space for creative responses.

With Fernando and Chris, coming from such different backgrounds enabled them to take a step back and question some of the notions of what "being a man" meant in their contexts and the importance that this notion represented in their lives. At one point in our conversation, after hearing descriptions of masculine stereotypes in Chile, Chris said to Fernando and me that "it seems Chile has its own Crocodile Dundee!" (He then explained this cultural reference to us both!)

I hope the story of these two men and their improbable partnership will spark more partnerships that support questioning about how we perform gender. I also hope that it will invite therapists and practitioners to understand and focus more on the responses and acts of resistance that men enact, rather than to exclusively focus on determined and static ideas of a person's identity that more often than not simply help to reproduce violence. It becomes relevant to challenge the responses we provide to men who have abused, especially those that reproduce more violence through police action, and to welcome more grassroots and community-based responses that can provide space for *ways of becoming* that can leave behind dominant cultural restraints and move towards rediscovering our ethical strivings (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Jenkins, 2006). At the same time, it is pressing that the work and partnerships we develop with men become accountable to women as well. This involves opening our work to gender partnerships and feedback, and at same time, that we move away from hierarchical notions of accountability that reproduce patriarchal structures and move closer to a process that "enables the exploration and critique of work practices, yet does not invite a defensive reaction" (Hall, 1994, p. 10).

## Note

<sup>1</sup> Later, I asked Fernando to explain what he meant by “the history of the country” and how it was related to the idea that “we must compete with others”. He mentioned that he was referring to Chile’s history of neoliberal policies that were enforced through a dictatorship (1973–1990), which he found to have a “significant negative influence on our daily lives”. This invited discussion of some other non-liberative traditions that seemed “natural at first” and “simply a part of our lives”. This allowed us to move to a conversation that shed light on other spaces that were under the influence of “masculine competitiveness” in Fernando’s life.

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# A personal reflection on “depression”: Not only a problem but also a learning opportunity

by Barry Sullivan



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## Abstract

For most of 2022, I was challenged by depression. One of its effects was to derail action-taking skills in my personal and professional life, leading to a sense of paralysis. This paper documents the narrative therapy skills and knowledge that helped me to move out from under depression’s dark cloud and shows how I applied learnings from my personal experience to my work with clients, including those also dealing with depression.

**Key words:** *depression; ageism; personal failure; statement of position; narrative practice*

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Author pronouns: he/him

## Background

In Westernised countries such as Australia, depression currently seems to be constructed as an individual issue that can be addressed through medication and psychological interventions. I have chosen to use both of these to address my experience of depression and found them helpful. However, this is far from the full story. The use of labels such as “depression” and “mental health issues” reflects an individualistic and medicalised understanding of problems. Narrative therapy offers a different perspective: that problems are not only individual but rather social and socially constructed. Deconstruction of social contributors to the understanding of depression and how to respond to it is therefore important.

In her preface to *Narrative therapy classics* (White, 2016), Carolyn Markey (2016) asked a young person she was working with whose dad had been struggling: “As you watch your dad at home, what do you see your dad doing now that is helping the medication to work even better?” (2016, p. 4). This question, echoing Michael White’s questions to people he worked with at the Glenside Psychiatric Hospital (Stewart, 2016), reminds me that attention to insider knowledge, choices and actions assists the development of a sense of agency. This is a vital consideration when it comes to responding to issues named as depression, whether or not medication is used.

## Externalising, naming and deconstruction

As I continued to respond to depression in my own life, I realised that I could apply to myself some of the narrative ideas that I regularly used with clients in counselling. I referred to the Statement of Position Map Version 1 (White, 2007, pp. 40–59) and recorded some reflections.

A name or definition that accurately reflects my experience of depression over this year is “the Harsh Judge”. The impacts of this Harsh Judge include:

- *Impacts on my feelings:* The Harsh Judge led me to feel “down”, which was often accompanied by a sick-in-the-stomach sensation. It seemed that my energy levels were low, and the Harsh Judge was draining away my joy in life.

- *Impacts on my relationship with my partner:* The Harsh Judge had me withdrawing from my partner, Kerrie, and failing to notice her contributions to our relationship.
- *Impacts on my work:* I was being invited into a sense of no longer being able to cope and of not doing a good enough job. The Harsh Judge was reducing my sense of satisfaction with my work and trying to convince me that I was letting down my clients and colleagues.
- *Impacts on my thoughts about myself:* Because maintenance of physical fitness is important to me, the Harsh Judge tried to twist this into negative self-judgement: “You should be doing more. You should be fitter.” Because providing useful and helpful service to clients and colleagues is also important to me, the Harsh Judge tried to use this against me: “You used to be able to provide good service, but you can’t do it anymore.” The Harsh Judge was also trying to convince me that the problem was located inside me, trying to talk me into the idea that there’s something wrong with me and it’s somehow an aspect of my identity.

### Supporters of the Harsh Judge

The Harsh Judge employed two supporters to aid its attempt to have more power in my life: ageism and failure. My desire to deconstruct ageism and its effects on me was initially inspired by my supervisor, Belinda Emmerson-Whyte, at Relationships Australia NT. During a supervision session, she named that ageism might be a factor in my struggles. As I considered this further, I found myself agreeing with Belinda that individualism and capitalist discourses of productivity can promote ageist ideas. Unlike more collectivist societies in which the wisdom and experience of age are honoured and valued, Australian society seems to place more value on the supposed energy of youth and middle age. Particularly in work contexts, this can invite ideas such as “You’re past adding value at work once you move beyond the age of 60 or 65” or “You’ve lost your energy, no wonder you are struggling”.

White (2004a, pp. 168, 174) argued that our Westernised culture has constructed norms for becoming an adequate and worthy member of society. Failure is characterised by ideas such as not measuring up, not realising one’s full potential or falling short of the mark (2004a, pp. 152–153). This exercising of “modern power” (2004a, p. 157) leads to “people being induced to actively participate in the judgement of their own



and other's lives ... through routine and culture-wide practices of normalising judgement" (2004a, p. 169).

Through this analysis, I was able to take a clear position on the Harsh Judge, internalised ageism and failure: I want to reduce their power in my life because they locate the problem inside me and drag me down; they have no interest in what's best for me or for my partner or for my clients and colleagues. Pooja Raina (2022, p. 53) quoted one of her clients: "I'm not a depressed person. I have a relationship to depression". This statement offered me hope that I could change the status of the Harsh Judge, internalised ageism and failure to that of minor players in my life.

### ***Privilege and disadvantage***

Before I explore what I have learnt from the above reflections and how I applied this to counselling with clients, I note that as a white, middle-class, male, cisgender and heterosexual person, I sit in a position of unearned privilege that advantages me when it comes to dealing with problems that might be positioned as mental health issues. Many of the clients I work with do not enjoy the same level of privilege. They might be grappling with the patriarchal structures that increase the trauma experienced by survivors of domestic abuse; the effects of colonisation and entrenched racist structures; or the effects of homophobia and transphobia. Social issues that are beyond the person's control can affect their ability to respond to problems. Not only that, but rather than locating problems in the dominant social and cultural structures that shape people's lives, persons can be assigned the label of "experiencing mental health issues" as though the problems existed within them. This is not to imply that there is no chance to uncover an alternative, preferred story. It is, however, important to acknowledge the realities of privilege and disadvantage, and to uncover where possible their effects on people's lives.

### *Learnings for my work with clients: Experience-near naming and deconstruction*

Some clients arrive already carrying the label "depression". I might ask questions like: "Where did this label of depression come from? Did you perhaps hear it from someone like a doctor or from friends or family members?" My intention here is to invite the client to think more about the name depression. I don't want

to presume that the name depression either works or does not work for the client, but simply to invite further exploration. I might then continue: "The name 'depression' does not work well for everybody. How does it work for you?" If the client expresses interest in this, I will tailor my questions to their context and previous responses. I might ask: "Would it be okay with you if we explored together possible helpful insights from your culture? Does your culture give you any ideas about an alternative name for a problem like depression? If you were to ask an elder or someone else you respect, what name would they use for a problem like depression?"

As indicated in the above discussion concerning ageism and failure, it can be useful to uncover and deconstruct socially constructed ideas that contribute to problems. Tim Donovan and Dale Johns (2022, p. 79) provide a valuable reflection: "Picking the right time to promote broader thinking is crucial ... Otherwise there can be a shifting of power towards and centering of the practitioner."

When working with Aboriginal clients for whom a problem is named as depression, I try to keep in mind possible impacts of colonisation and ongoing racism. However, I want to allow the client to develop trust and a level of comfort with me before I attempt deconstruction. This may take several sessions and involve, with client permission, consultation with an Aboriginal colleague about "collaborative yarning" (Christensen, 2022, p. 3) with the possibility of this colleague also attending and participating in some sessions. Once I sense that there is sufficient trust and comfort for the client, I might ask: "It seems to me that there is a significant level of racism in Australia towards Aboriginal people. What do you think about this? Is this something you have experienced? If so, what's this been like for you?" I might then add: "Experiencing racism can talk you into thinking that problems like depression come from inside you, rather than from things outside you that you can't control. Does this make sense to you?"

### ***Suicidal ideas***

It's an unfortunate reality in Australia today that problems named as mental health issues can become so dominant in a person's life that they can lead the person down a path to self-harm or suicide. In situations where a client expresses suicidal ideas, it could be argued that it is important to prioritise risk assessment and safety planning. Narrative understandings invite

me in my therapist role to also consider the complexity of the situation and to continue to explore possible alternative responses. I am starting to ask myself questions such as:

- When suicidal ideas are around, how can I maintain a decentred client focus at the same time as being aware of organisational procedures and requirements to do with risk assessment and safety planning?
- How can I continue to invite the client into meaning-making while facing my own fear about giving more power to suicidal ideas?

I might direct questions like these to a client experiencing suicidal ideas:

- How are you responding to suicidal ideas in ways that make you stronger?
- Are these ideas in any way an expression of protest about the conditions imposed on you by the way our society is structured?
- Are these ideas based on a desire to protect yourself or other people who are important to you? (David Newman, personal communication, 2023)

## An alternative identity project

I used the Statement of Position Map Version 2 (White, 2007, pp. 233–243) to reflect on my responses to depression and the Harsh Judge. An experience-near name emerged that captured my response to the Harsh Judge as I attempted to reduce its power in my life: the Confident Learner. I recorded my reflections in writing:

- *Impacts on my feelings:* As I focused more on the Confident Learner, I began to experience more frequently at work and at home feelings of hope, joy and satisfaction. I noticed a sense of being able to enjoy times of rest, and to resist the Harsh Judge as it tried to convince me to “give myself a hard time” (White, 2004a, p. 197).
- *Impacts on my relationship with my partner:* I was able to accept the invitation of the Confident Learner to return to giving voice to expressions of affection for my partner. I was able to experience more enjoyment as I spent time with her.
- *Impacts on my work:* The Confident Learner helped to bring an important realisation much more to the forefront of my mind: I have skills, in particular narrative therapy skills, to bring to

my work with clients. Under the influence of the Harsh Judge, I had been struggling at work to find an appropriate balance between meeting commitments and finding time for myself. The Confident Learner opened up other possibilities for me: I want to be continually learning without taking on too much. It’s okay to say “no” at times.

- *Impacts on my thoughts about myself:* As the Confident Learner became more embedded in my home and work life, I found myself engaging in positive identity conclusions: I can reflect on other ideas that I encounter as I read articles and books and listen to music, and use these to expand my own skills. I can handle the tasks and challenges of life and seek professional and personal help when needed.

### **Landscape of action examples**

I reflected further on how I was putting into practice some of the above ideas inspired by the Confident Learner and began looking out for “landscape of action” examples (White, 2007, pp. 84–86). These were associated with my relationship with my partner, and my thoughts and feelings about myself. I chose to talk more to Kerrie about how I was feeling, and to set aside time to do enjoyable things with her, such as going to lunch, having a swim or going for a walk. Such choices helped me to feel more confident in myself, and helped me continue to learn about my relationship. I also chose to continue regular physical exercise, either early in the morning or later in the afternoon. At times, I needed to set aside feelings linked to the Harsh Judge, like reluctance and lack of energy, in order to proceed with the exercise. Practices associated with the Confident Learner enabled me to experience satisfaction and to engage in positive identity conclusions.

Another significant landscape of action example was associated with the passing of my mother, who died in August 2022 at the age of 92. While this was a sad time for me and my three brothers and one sister, there was also the opportunity for me to choose where to place my focus. The Confident Learner enabled me to share with my siblings our memories of Mum, what she meant and still means to each of us, her contributions to our lives and our ideas about how to continue her legacy. These steps were further reinforced when I presented along with two of my brothers the eulogy at Mum’s funeral service. Thus, the Confident Learner helped me to resist the invitation of the Harsh Judge to withdraw inside myself. This resulted in my engaging in positive identity conclusions.

## **Responses to internalised ageism and failure**

Landscape of action examples do not stand alone but need to be assigned meaning in the landscape of identity or consciousness (White, 2007, pp. 78–84). For me, meaning-making and important identity conclusions were linked to my Confident Learner responses to the two allies of the Harsh Judge: failure and internalised ageism. In his Failure Conversations Map, White (2004a, pp. 196–201) described a response to failure expressed in unique outcomes and underpinned by a “system of rules/body of values and principles” (2004a, p. 199). My Confident Learner response to failure was shaped by a value of respect for myself, my clients and my colleagues. What did this say about me as a therapist? It said that, despite the presence of the Harsh Judge and ideas about failure, I had not lost touch with the value of respect, and I had tried to maintain expressions of it. I had been able to continue to give time and energy to reflection on my work with clients as a Confident Learner.

As I reflected on my alternative identity project outlined above, I recalled a question posed by Michael White about evaluating the effects of an initiative: “What’s it like to see this happening in your life?” (2007, p. 238). My answer to this question was that the Confident Learner gave me hope that I could continue to make choices and take actions to reduce the power of the Harsh Judge, internalised ageism and failure in my life. I could justify this evaluation by referring to the effects and examples listed above.

It’s important to add that this alternative identity project has never been a solo affair. Throughout this year, the Confident Learner was supported by my club or team of life (White, 1997, pp. 22–23). I want to continue to reflect on what it is that these members bring to my life, and what they might say about what they value about me as a person, partner, family member, colleague and therapist.

## *Learnings for my work with clients*

As I reflect on the above, I’m asking myself this question: How can I best support clients to move beyond a focus on the problem and towards an alternative and more helpful sense of identity for themselves or their relationship? In the case of an individual client dealing with a problem named as depression, I would first use the Statement of Position Map Version 1 as outlined earlier in this article.

The client may of course come up with an experience-near name that fits better than “depression”; however, I will use depression for ease of description. I might then say: “My guess is that there is more to your life than this depression story. Is this correct? Would you be interested in exploring this idea further?” My intention here, guided by the Statement of Position Map Version 2, is to tentatively and respectfully scaffold exploration of a preferred alternative story. I’m keeping in mind that my role as therapist here is to “step back from assuming primary authorship” (White, 2007, p. 233) and invite the client to assume the primary author role.

If the client expresses interest in further exploration, I might then ask: “Can you think of a time when depression seemed to be around less strongly, or have less power in your life, or you resisted or responded to depression in some way?” If the client seems unsure, I might then scaffold further: “This does not need to be something spectacular; it could be something quite small. It might have happened in the last few days or perhaps a month or two ago.” Once the client is able to give a couple of examples, I might then invite an experience-near naming of this possible initiative: “How were you able to take these actions? What name might you give to these actions you have taken?” I have deliberately used the term “possible initiative” above because it is important that I invite the client to assign significance (or not) to their examples: “As you think more about these examples, would you say they have some meaning for you or do they just seem like a bit of a fluke?”

Assuming the client does assign significance, I might then explore the effects or possible effects of the initiative in various domains of life: “If [initiative name] were around more in your life, what effects might it have on your thoughts and feelings about yourself? On your relationship? On your work?” Again, guided by the Statement of Position Map Version 2, I might invite the client to take a position on the initiative: “Is [initiative name] something you want in your life? Is this something important to you?” Presuming a positive response, I would then invite the client to justify their position: “Why is this important to you? Is [initiative name] linked in any way to a value or values you hold in your life? Can you tell me about another example that illustrates putting [initiative name] into action?” (see White, 2007, p. 239). By continuing to explore this and other initiatives, I am hoping to thicken an alternative story, to work with the client so that they can highlight their preferred ways of being and acting (Donovan & Johns, 2022, p. 89) and to focus on their choices and initiatives.

## Documenting and sharing skills in responding to depression

A couple of years ago, Jasmine (pseudonym) and I spent a number of counselling sessions exploring the effects of depression on her life, and her responses to these effects. Michael White and David Epston made frequent use of letters to clients to help thicken alternative preferred stories and the skills that supported these stories. Keeping this in mind, I invited Jasmine to co-author a document that highlighted the skills she had been using.

### Keeping depression in its place

Get regular exercise.

Use my depression-managing strategies, e.g. name for myself that I can sense depression trying to take over, use breathing exercises from Beyond Blue.

Remind myself about helpful ideas such as:

- I'm worthwhile and deserve a good life
- I have competence in my life and in my relationships
- I want to move away from the idea of myself as a victim to the idea of having the courage to stand tall
- I can grieve and be real and these support self-appreciation and self-understanding
- I can claim my own power
- I can accept and forgive myself
- I can say "no" and not feel guilty.

It's important that I manage my depression even when I'm not feeling depressed, e.g. by taking action such as:

- journaling
- establishing a routine and sticking to it
- reading helpful books such as *Breaking the patterns of depression* by Michael Yapko (1998) and *How Dante can save your life* by Rod Dreher (2017).

Invest my energy in things that are important and valuable to me in my life, such as looking after myself, my relationship with my children and my relationship with my partner.

Jasmine agreed to share this document with two other clients struggling with issues named as depression. One of these clients sent a message of thanks to Jasmine. Jasmine also let me know that the process of co-authoring the document, sharing it with others and then having a copy available to refer to whenever she chose was very helpful. Re-reading this document was also useful for me and helped to thicken my own preferred "Confident Learner" story. Particular statements that stand out for me are "I can accept and forgive myself" and "I can say 'no' and not feel guilty". "Managing depression even when I'm not feeling depressed" is now more of a focus for me and I regularly re-read my Confident Learner skills to render them as accessible as possible. Therefore, it's important that I acknowledge Jasmine's contribution to my alternative identity project.

To conclude this section of the article, I will discuss two topics that involve an overlap of the personal and work domains of my life as I respond to the Harsh Judge and remain open to the Confident Learner: making a contribution and music.

### Making a contribution

One of the actions I took earlier this year when the Harsh Judge seemed to be interfering strongly in my life, was to make a contribution to someone else also being challenged by depression. Recalling the document co-authored with Jasmine helped me to take this action. I was also assisted by my understanding of the value and importance of "linking stories and initiatives" (Denborough et al., 2006), and my continued contact with a former colleague, Lucy.

Lucy had moved interstate into private practice, and we were both enthused by the possibility of linking together some of our respective clients through sharing of story. Lucy and her client Ray had documented their work together on responding to depression and had sent a document to me titled "Just start moving: Getting out of the horror nightmare that is depression". The original intention was that I would share this story with a couple I was working with at the time whose relationship was being dragged down by depression. Unfortunately, I lost contact with the couple, so I made the decision to honour Ray's sharing by sending my own response. Both Ray and Lucy have given their consent to the sharing of their words. Shaped by the four categories of inquiry for inviting outsider witness responses (White, 2007, pp. 190–191), I put together the response below.



My name is Barry and I work as a counsellor in Darwin. Lucy passed on your story to me.

Ray, some of your words really stood out for me:

Depression told me I couldn't seem to do anything good, and it started to affect my confidence.

I had to speak up. I had to own it and tell them "I'm depressed".

If I see someone else struggling,  
I can turn around and reach out to them.  
I have different insight.

As I read your story, I get a sense of you as someone who puts a lot of value on relationships with family and friends, likes to take action, and is determined not to allow depression to rule your life. The image I have of you as I read your story is of someone climbing a mountain, slipping back sometimes but overall making steady progress.

The reason that your words I've listed above stood out for me is that my life has also been impacted by depression. My confidence was also really dragged down, and it was only when I spoke up to one of my co-workers, to my wife and to another counsellor that things started to get better.

Ray, reading your story has made a difference to me. It's reminded me that if depression tries to come back into my life, I can use the skill of speaking up, just as you did. In my role as a counsellor, I do work with a number of people affected by depression. I will try to keep in mind your words about "reaching out" and "having different insight" so that I can keep encouraging them to stand up to depression.

Ray, assisted by Lucy, then sent me his response to my sharing.

Dear Barry,

After reading your message, it had me wondering if you had got into counselling after your experience of depression or before. And I wonder if that has been helpful in your work. It's good to know there is someone else out there with lived experience who is helping others. I think it makes a real difference to people. In my own experience, having depression has helped me talk to others and help them understand it.

I liked your analogy of conquering a mountain. It's not the kind of image I would have thought of. When I was in depression, it felt like I was in a hole and it was hard to see a way out. But the image does fit for me now I'm out of the hole. I can picture myself as if climbing a mountain, and I'm about half way up. I'm trying to conquer other things.

I imagine you're probably a similar sort of guy to me, wanting to move forward and be stronger, which is perhaps why you clicked with certain words I had written like "speaking up", "reaching out" and "having different insight". It seems this is going to be useful in speaking to your clients too. I'm glad my words resonated with you.

I'm also realising I'm not on my own in this lived experience. That's the biggest thing. It's why more of us should stand up. We can help other people through it and make a difference to their lives. I've learnt that sharing a story can change one's whole thought process.

It feels good knowing something I've said has been taken on board. When I look back at my own story and read "Just start moving", it's a big reminder to me to just do something. I don't want to go back to that hole; I want to keep moving up the mountain. It doesn't matter what you do, if you just do something, you will be moving forward.

Thanks for your message.

It seems that this process has made a positive difference to Ray, and it has certainly been of significant help to me. Choosing to re-read both of the above responses at different times this year, as well as the knowledge that I made a positive contribution to Ray's journey through depression, helped me to reduce the power of the Harsh Judge in my own life. It also reinforced the Confident Learner and therefore strengthened my alternative identity story. As with Jasmine, I want to acknowledge Ray's contribution to my journey through his willingness to share his original story and then work with Lucy to respond to my sharing.

## Music

In a 2020 article, US family therapist Chris Beels was invited to recall an interaction he had witnessed between family therapist Israel Zwerling and "a family with a very disturbed and distracted young man who was upset about something that happened prior to the start of the session" (Beels et al., 2020, p. 34). Israel Zwerling found out that the young man knew the song "Moon River" and he invited the young man to sing it with him. This resulted in a sense of calm arising at the start of the family session. The reason that this touching interaction stood out for me is that it demonstrates the unique power of music to transport someone to a different emotional place. It also aligns with the history of my own love of singing and music, which I can trace back to my mother. I have clear memories of her listening to songs on the radio and singing along. Singing and music also offer possibilities for me both personally and professionally. Throughout this year, as I've been trying to minimise the influence of the Harsh Judge, I've found listening to music, singing along and sometimes breaking into song in private moments to be a great source of joy and comfort for me. Music and singing have helped to nourish the Confident Learner. I've listened to and sung along with "Moon River" (Mercer & Mancini, 1961) a number of times since reading the interview with Chris Beels. Some of its lyrics have particular meaning for me. "I'm crossing you in style some day" speaks to me of the hope associated with the Confident Learner. "Two drifters, off to see the world" reminds me of the members of my club of life who support me in my alternative identity journey.

David Denborough's (2008, p. 164) statement that "music, melody and songs in some way shape our identity, who we are in the world" prompted me to think about how I can make use of aspects of literature such as music, song, story and poetry in my work

with clients. I'm aware that I need to be careful to remain "decentred but influential" in these professional interactions, to not allow my enthusiasm for music and song to draw me away from a focus on the client. At the same time, I would like to be able to harness the Confident Learner so that I can remain open to possibilities. For example, as I listen carefully in a counselling session, I might pick up a hint of interest in literature and extend an invitation such as, "Are you saying that there is a particular story, poem or song that speaks to you in a special way, that perhaps provides support for you when you are dealing with hard times, that *offers you company, support or sustenance?*" (Denborough, 2008, p. 166). If this invitation is received positively, I might continue: "Can you tell me a bit more about this story, poem or song and its history in your life? What is it about this story, poem or song that makes it special for you? Who else in your life either already knows about this or would have an understanding of why it is important for you?" Asking such questions when appropriate would be something new for me, but hopefully I can use the Confident Learner to help me to step into new territory and to invite clients and colleagues to take a similar step on their alternative identity journey.

## A last word

An article that has stayed with me over the years is "Folk psychology and narrative practice" (White, 2004b). In it, White argued that "wisdom" is not confined to academia or to experts but can also be found in the "domestic", the everyday interactions of life. The last word I've listed below is such a domestic example. I've always been a lover of cricket, despite its past and current associations with colonialism. My partner is aware of my interest in the sport, and noticed a book about cricket being offered at a bargain price – an autobiographical account of the life of current English cricketer Jonny Bairstow. She bought it earlier in the year (when the Harsh Judge was strong in my life) and gave it to me simply because she knew it was about cricket. As I read the book, I realised it was also about depression – for most of his life, Jonny has had to deal with the ongoing impacts of the depression-related suicide of his father, which happened when Jonny was a teenager. Towards the end of the book, Jonny offers the following piece of "wisdom":

Life goes on. It must. And you have to catch happiness as it flies, enjoying it there and then and for however long it lasts.  
(Bairstow & Hamilton, 2017, p. 291)

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The background of the entire page is a dense, textured pattern of green leaves, likely from a coastal plant like a bay leaf, arranged in a somewhat chaotic but rhythmic fashion. The leaves are various shades of green, from a deep forest green to a lighter, almost yellowish-green, and they have a prominent central vein. A solid, light green rectangular box is centered on the page, serving as a backdrop for the title.

# Interviews





## Making history come alive

Seeking truth and justice: An interview with Vijaya Teelock

Vijaya Teelock interviewed by David Denborough



*Vijaya Teelock is a Mauritian historian and writer who was also the vice chairperson of the Mauritian Truth and Justice Commission.*  
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### Abstract

In this interview, Mauritian historian Vijaya Teelock discusses breaking historical silences, democratising history, intangible heritage, memorialising and the complexities of seeking justice and reparation for historical wrongs. The interview took place in Vijaya's home in Mauritius with David Denborough, Cheryl White and Diana Shanto present.

**Key words:** *Mauritius; indentured labour; slave trade; memorialising; oral history; truth and justice commission; democratising history*

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Author pronouns: David Denborough he/him; Vijaya Teelock she/her

DD: Narrative therapy and community work is a non-psychological approach to people's suffering. It's determined to ensure that problems are not located within individuals (internalised) and instead are located back in history and culture (externalised). It's a way of working that I believe has more in common with the field of history than psychiatry, and our field has so much to learn from historians such as yourself! We have great respect for your work in three different areas: how you contributed to breaking a historical silence in relation to slavery in Mauritius, your involvement in the Truth and Justice Commission here, and how you have sought to memorialise both slavery and histories of indentured labour. Is it okay to ask you about each of these themes?

Vijaya: Yes, of course.

DD: In Australia there have been multiple historical silences, one of the most profound relating to the histories of the Frontier Wars – colonial violence and the resistance of First Nations peoples. Here in Mauritius, in your early work, you were confronting a historical silence in relation to slavery and what happened to the descendants of enslaved people on this island. I believe there was a profound silence in the heart of a community of memory and you were determined to do something about this.

Vijaya: Yes. I graduated in history in 1979 and came back to Mauritius and got a job as a high school history teacher. I remember the job interview in which they asked me, "What books are you going to use to teach history? Because we don't have any school textbooks". I said I would go and do research in the archives, and so that's what I did.

DD: That's very interesting to me. So your initial engagement with the archives as a historian was in order to make the history available to Mauritian young people and children.

Vijaya: Yes, to 12- to 18-year-olds. And this was exciting. In schools, students initially consider history to be dry and separate from their lives. So I tried to make history come alive, to show them that history is all around them:

the houses we live in, the chair they're sitting on, the food we are eating, the jeans they were wearing – there is a history to all of these. And then we went about popularising the history of Mauritius, getting it to be known to the younger generation, not as something past, but as something very present.

At this point, the national television asked us to help them with a series of programs on local history. This involved going to different districts and letting the local population know about historical sites in each area. As we were systematically going through the districts, there was one chronological period that no one seemed to know anything about. When we asked: Where are the descendants of those who were enslaved? Where did they go afterwards? And when I looked in the history books and even into the archives, I couldn't find the answers to these questions. This was a huge gap in the narrative of Mauritius. We all celebrate the abolition of slavery, but what happened to those who had been enslaved? And how is this linked to Mauritius today?

We know the answers to those questions now, but at that time, there was a huge historical gap. There was one particular meeting that was very significant to me. During the making of the television series, I went to the village of Le Morne and met with a very elderly man. We were sitting together in a straw hut, with just a little light in his room. When I said to him, "I would like to talk to you about things that happened in the past, slavery and so on", he said, "No, no, no, I can't talk to you about it. My employers will not like it".

That was really the beginning for me. Slavery had ended so many years ago, so why would people be scared to speak about it? Everywhere I went, it was the same story. No-one would speak. So I realised there was something very wrong. When I talked to my colleagues – my fellow scholars, fellow lecturers at the university – they seemed scared of offending Franco-Mauritian friends. They said, "No, we don't talk about it. We don't want to offend people, and no-one would publish your work anyway".

Since I'm not really the relinquishing type, that was when I decided I must focus on this. It was in response to that silence that I started looking at the history of slavery through a master's degree at Columbia University then a PhD at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at University of London.

DD: I'd like to hear more about the actual historical research, but first, can you say something about Le Morne Mountain, which is now a World Heritage Site commemorating maroonage. I believe there was a struggle involved in this.

Vijaya: Yes, another key turning point for me was when developers wished to build a cable car on top of Le Morne Mountain, which is a place where those who escaped slavery, the Maroons, sought refuge. I saw a little note in the newspaper about the cable car proposal which invited people to come and give their views on this project. Only three people turned up to object to this idea: one of the most elderly Rastafarian people in Mauritius, an environmental activist and myself. After this meeting we started a campaign to fight against this cable car project. And again, we heard the same sort of fatalistic stories: You can't stop development. You can't go up against the big capitalists. You can't go against this. You will never win. So that made us even more determined. As a historian, I became involved in defending this historical site.

DD: So your initial determination to teach a meaningful history to school students led to discovering this historical silence, and then also to forming relationships and partnerships to defend historical sites. Can you say a bit about the journey from there being a deafening cultural silence around the descendants of those who were enslaved to now Le Morne being such a significant place of acknowledging history and memory? I'm thinking back to that elderly man who you met under that small light in Le Morne village all those years ago when it wasn't even possible to speak about these histories.

Vijaya: Yeah! People are not scared anymore to talk. So that's great. When you go to Le Morne today, people are proud that is a

World Heritage Site and they are all involved in this history. They're proud to take part in protecting it. We also discovered an abandoned cemetery, and we found when we did DNA testing that those buried there were all descendants of people from either African or Malagasy descent, so inevitably this was a cemetery of people who had been enslaved. Importantly, the whole village participated in these archaeological excavations.

For me, history making doesn't just involve one historian going to the archives and looking for information. It's also about getting people involved. For a lot of my students, the first assignment I used to give them was to go search for their family history. Go interview your grandmother, grandfather. And then they used to come back and say, "gosh, our grandmother knows so much!" [laughs] Family history for me is just as important as political history, or military history, or national history and so on. It's all those family histories put together that make up Mauritius.

Through these projects the study of history also became interdisciplinary. In researching the history of slavery, you don't have any written documents emanating from those who were enslaved, so it becomes important to look at other sources of evidence. Archaeology became very important, and this is what enabled the Maroon Cave archaeological project exploring where the Maroons had escaped and where they had lived. Some artefacts were found.

The importance of honouring oral tradition through oral history projects also became clear. Normally, historians are stuck in the archives, but it is very important to actually go to the places, interview those who are directly connected to these histories. Our history making became interdisciplinary combining archival work, archaeology, oral tradition and field work.

DD: It seems to me that some of your projects are also community work and social action: enabling communities to make their own history and influence the views of others. There is a great contrast between the image of your first conversation with that elderly man in

Le Morne who was too afraid to talk, and the image of the entire village being involved in engaging with history, becoming proud of the place as a symbol of resistance.

Vijaya: There are still places of silence though. For instance, there is no official recognition that discrimination and racism exists in Mauritius. I think the Mauritian government and civil servants strongly promote the idea that everyone is given equal opportunities in education and housing, and they don't want to recognise that racism – anti-African racism – does exist. Even the police, if you give a statement saying you have been discriminated against, they will not accept it as ethnic or racial discrimination. So too in academia. We have a whole sociology department that will write and talk about race and discrimination all over the world, but they won't talk about it in Mauritius! This includes some of my colleagues. When I asked them, "Why are you not including Mauritian case studies?", they said it was too complicated, it's too complex. It's crazy.

DD: I imagine this must contribute to people feeling crazy too.

Vijaya: Yes. The situation for women of African descent in Mauritius is particularly complex. During Covid, I started a small research group for women, and Creole women described the difficulty of talking about experiences of discrimination they had faced at school or in the office. Even when they try to talk about these experiences within their own families, they are laughed at and stereotyped. We know anti-African racism and discrimination exists, but how do we face it?

DD: Perhaps this is an appropriate moment to turn to your work with the Mauritian Truth and Justice Commission. In Australia, First Nations people are calling for truth telling and commissions will be one part of this. The learnings from your experience could be significant. What an extraordinary endeavour the Mauritian Truth and Justice Commission clearly was!

Vijaya: [Laughs] It exhausted all of us.

DD: What an extraordinary achievement of complexity. I believe it was unique in numerous ways. Within the report it states:

Mauritius is the first country in Africa and the world to have a Truth and Justice Commission investigating the history of slavery and its consequences and to accept the principle that reparations are required. (Truth and Justice Commission, 2011, p. 22)

It was also the only commission to look at events over such a long period (from 1638 to 2011) and explore the ongoing effects of those histories. It involved truth telling not only in relation to slavery, but also indentured labour and land justice. And when I read through the report, you considered the effects of these histories on diverse realms including family patterns and gender relations and considerations of child protection and safety. Your recommendations also involved trying to facilitate travel for descendants to ancestral homes, access to genealogy, reparations through education, memorialisation and much more. It was an extraordinary undertaking in a really short period of time.

Vijaya: We hired 50 experienced researchers, provided research assistants, access to whatever documents they needed and said, "Go and come back in two years with your report". And then we put everything together. The government gave us all the funds we needed and police powers to enter any building to obtain information and documents. It was, I believe, the first time historians have had police powers to enter any building and access any document.

Ironically, the only institution that really tried to block us was the Mahatma Gandhi Institute as they hold the Indian immigration archives, and they didn't want us to access these files because of the issue of caste. Many Mauritians of Indian descent hide their caste, and they wanted those records to remain hidden. Eventually we were able to gain access.



DD: Just one of many complexities that you had to deal with! Can I just take a step back. You mentioned how you had begun your historical explorations as a high school teacher trying to think about how to teach an honest or a rich telling of Mauritian history. And then, you had become the deputy chair of the Mauritian Truth and Justice Commission. You mentioned that your team experienced a sense of a “moral duty” to this work. When I read the terms of reference for the commission, you had a small task. It was to seek “reconciliation, social justice and national unity through re-establishing historical truth”.

Vijaya: [Laughs]

DD: In response to this *profound* challenge, it appears to me you did have some extraordinary achievements. The commission resulted in the establishment of a land division of the Supreme Court, the establishment of a land bank, the Museum of Slavery that you are working on now, a national inventory of heritage and an audit of housing units, alongside very practical developments such as breakfasts and lunches for school children who might be facing hunger on a daily basis. Some significant changes.

Vijaya: Some change, yes. But I think 290 recommendations were made, and very few of these have actually been fully implemented. I think civil servants were given the task of implementing the recommendations and I am not sure whether they were the right people to be tasked with this. Many did not even read the report.

DD: I'd like to ask you about some of the complex topics for the commission, starting with reparations. There is a section in the report titled “From compensation to slave owners to reparations for slavery” (2011, p. 381). It always takes away my breath when I look at the figures of the amounts of money paid to slave owners at the time of abolition, particularly when these figures are placed next to the current financial status of many of the descendants of those who were enslaved. I believe the call and struggle for reparations was a big part of why the commission was established.

Vijaya: Yes. Mr Sylvio Michel and his brothers had campaigned for many years for reparations in relation to slavery in the form of cash compensation for every ex-slave family. His work was highly influential in making Mauritius the first African country to formally discuss compensation and in establishing the commission with the hope of redressing injustices caused to the descendants of slaves and indentured labourers. The commission discussed Mr Michel's proposal for cash compensation and researched it, and what became very complex was the question of who is a descendant. There have been so many intermarriages and migrations on a small island that you have people of African, European and Indian descent within the same family, so how are you going to decide who will get compensation? I know Mr Michel was not happy at all at the end when the commission said it would recommend reparations rather than financial compensation to families.

DD: In Australia, considerations of reparations may one day be considered as part of treaty negotiations. I was interested in the direction of reparation proposals made by the commission which included:

Funding for reparations is sought by the Mauritian government from the historical slave trading nations, namely, the United Kingdom and France, for the rehabilitation and reconstruction of communities and settlements where slave descendants are in the majority.

Reparations be provided to poor individual families in terms of social reparations such as housing and education so that this community and its descendants are better able to create a more stable social and economic existence going into the future.

That a system and policy of affirmative action be implemented in Mauritius to address the social and economic imbalances created and fostered under Slavery, Indenture and Colonialism. (2011, p. 402)

You also included proposals in relation to making discrimination illegal at any level of society and the creation of an anti-discrimination unit.

Vijaya: Yes, and there was also a lot of attention paid to land justice and making it possible for families who believed they had been dispossessed of their land to seek justice. Now, 10 years later, when we look at the land issue, so many families are still waiting for justice. Their cases remain in the courts and every time a new obstacle is placed in front of them, as if it's hoped the claimants will die before they ever see their land. As claims for land justice have stagnated in the courts, I believe the debate for financial reparations to descendants of slaves will be revisited, should be revisited.

DD: Can I also ask you about the issue of caste?

Vijaya: It was very surprising to all of us that trying to study lower-caste discrimination within Indian populations was actually harder than studying anti-African discrimination. We had plenty of case studies, and it was possible for people to come forward and give us examples in schools, hospitals. But in relation to caste, people said, "Do not record us. Do not take our names. We will tell you everything, but we don't want this to be on record". This really shocked our researchers who would come to us and ask, "Why are they so scared?" There is clearly still a lot going on underground in Mauritius in relation to caste distinctions. I don't think this has changed. We are in need of campaigns that will enable people of lower-caste backgrounds to shift shame and reclaim a pride in their histories as has occurred for those descended from people who were enslaved.

DD: In addition to making recommendations and calls for justice, the commission involved "democratizing history", as Joyce Fortune (2011, p. 272) described it. Can you say a bit more about democratising history?

Vijaya: I never wanted to be an academic. I ended up in a university, but I always wanted to be a journalist. I respect questioning and have a determination to make sure that people

can understand their own history and can take part in writing their own history. There's a limit to what academic historians can do in the archives. If you make interpretations of history from the archive or from far away from the communities most affected by those histories – if you don't go and meet the people, or the descendants of the people, whom you're writing about – then very often those interpretations of history will not be correct. So it's critical to go and visit the place or talk to people and get other views. It's also critical to get people to write and reflect on their own family histories. Joyce Fortune, one of my first students, wanted to go around interviewing elderly persons about African or Malagasy traditions within their own families. It was through such oral history projects that a momentum started for what is called popular history, but this hadn't existed in Mauritius before. This democratising of history is very significant.

DD: I'd like to ask you now about memorialising, as this is one aspect of popular or democratic history. The first place we visited in Mauritius was Aapravasi Ghat, a superbly curated memorial, museum and research centre in relation to the indentured labour trade. We loved this memorial! There were many things about it that were significant to us. To start with, it not only richly honoured the individual and collective stories and exhausting labour of those whose lives and bodies made up this trade, but it also told the international story. I didn't know that the blackbirding of South Sea Islanders to Australia was so directly linked to Mauritius! I had no idea that this was the first place, after the abolition of slavery, that the British created an indentured labour trade of hundreds of thousands of people, primarily Indians, to support the industries that had previously been created and sustained by enslaved labour. While I was standing in the memorial, there was a group of Australians looking at the exhibit. They were clearly very moved by the experiences of the Indian indentured labourers. And so I asked them if they knew the Australian and South Sea Islander part of the story. They had no idea. It is actually not that well known in Australia. I, on the other hand, didn't know the international story and how

the international indentured labour trade has shaped peoples and cultures and economies in so many different parts of the world. And, of course, these histories are still affecting the lives of descendants of the labourers and the descendants of those who profited from their labour. I really appreciated how the international story was told.

But what I want to ask you about is the room that focuses on intangible heritage. I also hadn't known that Mauritius was the second state to ratify the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Heritage, and that this led your country to make an inventory of intangible heritage. I loved hearing this. I wonder what an inventory of the intangible heritage of South Sea Islanders in Australia would make visible. Can you tell me about the thinking and process that led to the creation of that small room in Aapravasi Ghat, with the videos, songs, stories and riddles that represent the intangible heritage of those from different parts of India who made new lives in Mauritius through the labour trade?

Vijaya: As part of writing history, I think it's very important to look at oral traditions and oral histories and to collect these and re-present them. At Aapravasi Ghat, we started a project to collect oral histories, and that's shaped what is in the museum. I think we collected 400 to 500 interviews and this is continuing. As a historian, you learn through conversations and interviews so much that cannot be learnt through the archives. Archives can provide information about health, education, wages, but you'll find very little about what people think, how people think, about their traditions, and how they practice and re-make their cultures. This can be compensated for by studying oral tradition and history. Oral or digital archives are like another category of archive.

DD: Intangible heritage is a fascinating concept, isn't it? It's linked to narrative practice too. When people are enduring hardship, we try to explore some of the skills or practices people are using to endure this hardship. We seek stories about this and then we trace the histories of these skills of survival or endurance. These histories are personal and

often familial, but they are also often linked to collective histories and traditions. Often, the daily skills that someone might be using to endure hardship are linked to forms of intangible heritage. I'm really interested in this.

Vijaya: We learnt a great deal about our country through the national inventory of intangible heritage. This included learning about so many different crafts and fishing traditions that the researchers didn't know existed, and we also realised that there is a huge difference between the different parts of Mauritius: whether they live in the north or south, people's conception of life is completely different. We learnt that the more isolated villages of the south have kept traditions that have been forgotten in the rest of Mauritius. Even though it's a small island, there is a lot of variety. We talk of microclimates, but there are also microcultures that exist and exquisite variations of language in which Marathi, Bhojpuri and Creole are mixed together or Tamil, Bhojpuri, Creole together, so much so that a person from India would come and would not understand a word. These are unique aspects of Mauritian life that are worth preserving.

DD: We'll try to return to Aapravasi Ghat again before we leave! Now though, I'd like to ask about the very different ways that the history of slavery and resistance to slavery are being memorialised here. The monument at Le Morne is a very different place of memory. I have heard it described as "a holy mountain", "a fortress protecting freedom and dignity", "a temple in which rituals of healing take place", "a sanctuary", and "a shrine in recognition of crimes against humanity". Sitting in the shadows of the dramatic and beautiful Le Morne Mountain, this memorial consists of very few words, and instead rock carvings and symbols and representations of resistance and reclamation. Is there anything you'd like to say about this different sort of memorialising?

Vijaya: It's very significant that Le Morne has been recognised, and that an institution now exists to manage the World Heritage Site, but there are also complexities. The village of Le Morne consists of people of many different heritages. They're people of Indian and African ancestry.

Most of those of African ancestry would also have an Indian grandfather and so on. When the dossier was put together to try to establish World Heritage status, a particular ethnic approach, shaped by the South African experience, I believe, was adopted, which I had many doubts about. The experience positioned the mountain and memorial as being for Creoles (people of African heritage) only and prioritised the involvement of Creole people rather than continuing the momentum of a local collective village approach. Prior to this process, all those at Le Morne village were joined in their commitment to the mountain and to its heritage. But the process of creating the dossier split the village in half. I was unhappy about this and didn't agree with it at all. The split still exists today. I think we must engage with histories and honestly memorialise them in ways that honour complexity and local ways and relationships. I think Mauritius and Mauritian history asks this of us.

DD: Speaking of complexities, I believe you are now working on a different Site of Conscience, creating the Intercontinental Slavery Museum in the oldest building of the island, the former military hospital. Cheryl [White] and I had a powerful experience in Ghana some years ago when we visited Cape Coast Castle with Makungu Akinyela and Vanessa Jackson. This was a prison, a site of enslavement of Africans before they were sent across the Atlantic Ocean. The Ghanaian historian at that site, James Amemasor, took exquisite care in the ways in which he accompanied us. He had curated a memorial that was profoundly honouring of the suffering and injustice of the histories of that place, and at the same time involved cultural and spiritual practices to welcome and acknowledge people from the African diaspora. We learnt a great deal from this and also how he named the complicity of Ghanaians in these histories (see Amemasor, 2002). As you curate this new memorial, are you preparing to welcome Africans from the diaspora who are descendants of those who were enslaved?

Vijaya: Yes, I keep asking myself what this museum will mean for descendants of slaves here in Mauritius, and what will it mean for people in

the diaspora. In Madagascar, in Rodrigues and so on, slavery is not even talked about. In Madagascar especially, people are looking for this museum to spark interest and conscience in their own countries. There are huge expectations, and I'm afraid they're not going to be met in the immediate future.

Right now, they've got French experts coming to give suggestions for exhibits, but the Mauritian element appears to be missing. The Afro-Mauritian element is not there. I hope that African and Malagasy curators will be consulted and involved in the design, but this is not happening at the moment, which is disappointing.

I completely agree that we need to create a particular emotional space within the museum, and I have been advocating for water being central to this. Originally, the museum building, which used to be a hospital, had a direct entrance to the sea, where slaves or soldiers or sailors would be brought in directly. But now there's a huge building between the museum building and the sea and you can't see the water.

This new museum is adjacent to Aapravasi Ghat. Both are in the area that has historically been the safest bay in Mauritius. This is actually where everybody's ancestors would have come through. It's now part of a World Heritage Site for indentured labour, but for years we've been saying we need to open the space by the bay so it's open to honour all ancestors. So this is something to be discussed, but we are now at a time when the mode of honouring histories is by separating groups, separating histories, separating memories. This is the official policy. Trying to mix histories is not acceptable!

To me, the logical thing would be to create a common water feature or sculpture by the bay – a water memorial that would bring all Mauritians together. And then this would also link the new Intercontinental Slavery Site of Conscience and Aapravasi Ghat.

I believe that museums need to bring the past into the present too. Some of my students wrote a book on their experience



as young Creole girls in a very Catholic, very Franco-Mauritian convent, and how they were encouraged by their teachers and their parents to straighten their hair, to not have curly hair, to use skin lightening creams. They described how in their own families, when there are children of different shades, it was always the child with the lightest skin who was introduced to visitors. These practices are still going on today, which is so crazy. I have one student who's doing her master's on body politics: how women with African hair are looked at and considered in Mauritius, and why the same women often reject their African heritage, straighten their hair, use whitening creams and reject their Africanness. All of this needs to go in the museum. The legacies of slavery and anti-African racism are not just something of the past. We're still living the past with us today.

DD: In trying to represent histories in this new museum, there must be so many complexities you are grappling with. Would you like to speak of any of these?

Vijaya: Even language is complex. A lot of Creole Mauritians now don't use the term "slave" to describe a person but instead refer to "Africans who were enslaved", so how do we consider this in the creation of a museum about slavery? And there are also complexities about whether only Indians should be involved in studying indentured labour and only Creoles involved in studying the history of slavery. I'm not a believer in this as you then end up with different institutions and separate versions of history. But for the time being, it seems we're doomed to each one having their history.

DD: As there were not Indigenous people of Mauritius (it was an uninhabited island), the challenges of re-presenting Mauritian history are quite different than in Australia. But there are some resonances. We also have different versions of history. In Australia, there continue to be struggles between these. Sometimes this is simplistically characterised as a "white blindfold view" of history (that depicts a glorious version of European colonialism) juxtaposed against a "black armband view" of history (that honours the real consequences of colonialism for First Nations peoples).

But these struggles are over more than just which stories are told. There are also diverse philosophies about history in Australia. First Nations philosophies and spiritualities relate to history quite differently than Western engagements with the past. I don't think we white Australians have much of an understanding about this yet.

Vijaya: Yes, considerations of honouring ancestry, bringing ancestors with us into the present: these philosophies bring different implications for making histories. Interestingly, there are actually many historic connections between Mauritius and Australia. Many Mauritian slaves were deported to Australia and somehow integrated with Aboriginal families and community (see work of Clare Anderson, e.g. 2000, 2016). And there are also stories of Australian Aboriginal women who came to Mauritius on board whaling ships.

DD: I'd love to learn more about those interconnections! Finally, I believe struggles in relation to history continue here – as they do elsewhere. Can you say a little about current challenges?

Vijaya: The battle is still going on and perhaps now is getting even worse because in the tourist sector they have been setting up museums and mansions for tourists, and in the process the entire history of slavery is being re-silenced. There was a time when there were a lot of books and events about slavery and its continuing legacies, but now a re-silencing of the past has started.

As I mentioned earlier, there are also many continuing struggles over land. We have many land claims being made by descendants of slaves, and others too because dispossession of land is not only related to slavery. Hundreds of claims are being made, but access to the archives is often blocked to these people. There is a constant battle for information and evidence that will support land claims and restitution.

There are also new conversations beginning as some of the young generation of Franco-Mauritians whose ancestors may have been slave owners want to acknowledge the

damage done by their ancestors. They really want to talk about this but how to do so is complex.

DD: I guess this comes back to what you said earlier in relation to the significance of family histories. I can relate to this as some of my ancestors played very influential roles in colonial dispossession and in Frontier Wars in Australia. Being invited by Aboriginal colleagues to find ways to speak and write *together* about these histories, and in ways that make action more possible in the present to address current injustices, is really significant to me. One Aboriginal colleague, Jane Lester, said to me that she couldn't trust me, that we wouldn't be able to keep working together, unless I found ways to honestly connect with, honour and talk about the actions of some of my ancestors (see Denborough, 2020, 2022). This includes talking about family histories related to the blackbirding (indentured labour) of South Sea Islanders, which I've now learnt is linked to Mauritius!

Vijaya: While we seem doomed to parallel histories here in Mauritius at present, I think also maybe it's a question of time. My kids have

all grown up in an independent Mauritius and they're living relatively okay lives compared to what my parents went through. My dad was born in a straw hut. My son was born in a nice clean hospital. Their orientations to the histories here are so different. Young people don't feel what my dad may have felt about living in colonial Mauritius. For them, they've never lived it, they've never endured it. So maybe in 30 years' time, or 50 years' time, there will be very different ways that Mauritians of different heritages will come together to speak of those histories, to write about them, to memorialise them.

DD: Well, when a secondary school history teacher stands in front of a class in 30 years' time in Mauritius, thanks to your work and those of your colleagues and friends, they will be able to not only find textbooks to share, but they will be able to take them to Le Morne memorial, to Aapravasi Ghat, to the Intercontinental Slavery Museum. Hopefully they will also be able to follow your lead in participatory history making in relation to their own family histories and the histories of this intriguing, complex, beautiful island. Thank you so much for speaking with us today.

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# Curiosity, power and narrative practice:

## An interview with Perry Zurn

Perry Zurn interviewed by Zan Maeder



Perry Zurn is Provost Associate Professor of Philosophy at American University, and affiliate faculty in the Department of Critical Race, Gender, and Culture Studies, the Honors Program, and the Antiracist Research and Policy Center. Zurn is a Fellow at Cornell University's Society for the Humanities and a Visiting Scholar at the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Research in Feminist, Queer, and Transgender Studies. He researches primarily in political philosophy, critical theory and transgender studies, and collaborates in psychology and network neuroscience. Zurn is the author of *Curiosity and power: The politics of inquiry* (2021) and the co-author of *Curious minds: The power of connection* (2022). [pzurn@american.edu](mailto:pzurn@american.edu)

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Zan Maeder is a queer, feminist narrative therapist and doula. After working in community services for many years, Zan discovered the work of Dulwich Centre and dove head first into a Master of Narrative Therapy and Community Work. They have since worked as a counsellor in a family counselling team specialising in family violence, and set up a service to support trans young people and their families. Zan now works in private practice providing counselling, birth support services and workshop facilitation. [contact@radcounselling.com.au](mailto:contact@radcounselling.com.au)



### Abstract

What are some of the dominant and alternative stories of curiosity? How do we wield it and to what effect? What does it mean to attend to the politics of curiosity in our lives and work and to acknowledge it as a collective practice and social force that can colonise, normalise and divide us and disrupt, liberate and connect us? Zan Maeder interviews Perry Zurn, Provost Associate Professor of Philosophy at American University and author of *Curiosity and power: The politics of inquiry* (2021) about work tracing histories of curiosity in philosophy and political theory and co-creating (with many other transgressors, past and present) possibilities for ethical and liberatory curiosity praxis.

**Key words:** *curiosity; queer; colonisation; narrative practice*

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Author pronouns: Perry Zurn he/him; Zan Maeder they/them

Zan: Welcome, Perry. For narrative practitioners, curiosity is really a first language. Of all the audiences of your work, I imagine that narrative practitioners would be some of the least surprised by the notion that curiosity would be political. And there are so many things about your work that might extend and deepen our attention to the politics of inquiry that I'm excited to hear more about. Would you share a bit about the history of your interest in the politics of curiosity?

Perry: We live in a globalised world in which curiosity is largely perceived as an automatic good, a simple good. It's just good to be curious. It's good to ask questions in all kinds of directions. And in a sense, I resonate with that. But in another sense, as someone who has worked in educational settings and learning spaces all my life, I've witnessed a lot of constraints placed on curiosity. Despite everyone saying that curiosity is always good, there's a lot of governing of curiosity, directing it in particular ways and forbidding it in other ways.

I went to a conservative college, for example, where discussion of gender and sexuality was not permitted. Now I teach at a liberal college where we have a department devoted to topics like this. How do institutions of learning – institutions of curiosity – develop in such different ways?

Our political setting and our political structures really inform who's asking questions about what and how they're asking those questions and how those questions get taken up and legitimated or not. Instead of just a blanketed celebration of curiosity, I think we need a critical approach that asks, well, where are these questions coming from? What are they really doing in the world? And who are they supporting and who are they not supporting? For me, the notion that curiosity *is* political prompts me to attend to *how* it's political (Zurn, 2021b).

Zan: As you've traced the political histories of curiosity discourses and the ways that curiosity and politics are co-constructive, what are some of the things that you've discovered that curiosity can do?

Perry: I define curiosity as a capacity to build connections through a set of investigative affects and practices. Curiosity is typically thought of as something we have: an individual desire for knowledge, a kind of lightbulb that switches on when we are motivated to explore something. But I like to think about curiosity as something we do.

On the one hand, curiosity can be revolutionary. It can prompt us to imagine a different way of being in the world for ourselves and for one another. New paths forward. And that can be beautiful and empowering if (and that's an important if) the vision of a new world is itself beautiful and empowering. This is the kind of curiosity that can inform social justice movements, for example.

On the other hand, curiosity can support the status quo. How do we keep things the way they are? How can we keep going in the direction we're already going? Sometimes, maintaining the status quo can be troubling, especially if the status quo is inequitable in certain ways. Other times, maintaining the status quo can be good. If we're on the path toward liberation and we're already expanding rights or conditions of flourishing for more people, how can we keep doing that? And how can we keep doing that better? Liberation doesn't always require new questions and new directions; sometimes it takes pure staying power. So curiosity can break us into new patterns, or it can sustain current patterns. Either way we have to ask, "Why are we committed to sustaining or breaking those patterns? What are the values and the relationships at the root of that choice between revolution and the status quo?"

Zan: In your book, *Curiosity and power*, you really seek to disrupt the notion that curiosity is an individual trait or practice and explore examples of curiosity as a collective practice or a social force, again, both in ways that enforce and subvert dominant power. Why is it important that we consider it in this collective way? And I'm wondering if you have ideas about what this might have therapists considering if they're orienting to justice in therapy and community work?



Perry: For thousands of years, at least in Western intellectual history, curiosity has been thought of as an individual desire that each of us has, some kind of kernel of intellectual interest that fires off whenever we are personally motivated to explore something new. Honestly, that perception has contributed in many ways to a colonial curiosity – where an explorer gets to discover whatever it is that they want to discover, whether that's land or whether that's ideas, regardless of the effects. As a colonial practice, it's fine to express your individual curiosity, in whatever way you want. Because it's individual, it's personal, so how could it be political or subject to ethical evaluation, right?

But, as we know, the personal is political, and the individual is always submerged in some kind of social fabric. There's no real way of extracting the individual from the social. That's just a ruse. So all of our individual curiosities, all of the questions that each of us brings to ourselves and to the world and to each other, are informed by social networks and social histories, political networks and political histories, people present in our lives today, or people who existed well before we ever appeared on this Earth. Our curiosities are informed by all of that. Curiosity is already collective in that sense. It's already communal. It's already social. It's already political.

The question then is: What are we missing when we treat curiosity individually? When we don't approach it in its communal setting, its collective context, and the relationships that make it possible? For therapists, for example, it's important to reject a simplistic "everyone's on their own individual journey" narrative, and think instead of how our journeys, and the construction of our sense of self and of meaning in the world, are already rooted in and constantly in dialogue with the people around us, as well as people before us. How can we consciously sit our curiosity in that space and ask questions that break or that build in different ways from there? That seems like a rich place to start.

Zan: In *Curiosity and power*, it's really fascinating to read the history of discourses of curiosity more broadly in Western thought traditions. Zooming in now, narrative practice or narrative

therapy is practiced on the margins of, adjacent to, alongside and in critique of the field of mainstream psychology and psychiatry. I was wondering in your research, what you've discovered about the ways that curiosity has been and is wielded politically in this field and in the particular power relations of therapy?

Perry: Well, psychology is largely responsible for the mainstream understanding of curiosity today. Defining curiosity as a motivation to explore or a drive to fill an information gap, psychology has been pivotal in observing curiosity's role in individual information-seeking behaviour. Those psychological theories of curiosity of course build on Western philosophy and extend into neuroscience, and from there inform the spheres of education, business, technology, et cetera (see Zurn & Shankar, 2020).

I've already gestured toward my concerns with a characterisation of curiosity as merely individual information-seeking rather than social knowledge-building. So perhaps I'll highlight another concern here. In psychology, curiosity is described as a condition of or as correlated with wellbeing. The healthy person is curious, and the unhealthy person is incurious. Or the happy person is curious, and the unhappy person is incurious. By this reasoning, stress, anxiety, depression, trauma and the like necessarily compromise a person's capacity for curiosity.

But I think this misses something fundamental about curiosity. It is already there when, for example, we're full of anxiety or deeply depressed. It is already there in experiences of trauma. I would rather ask, then, how does curiosity function within states of depression and anxiety? What is curiosity already doing in spaces of trauma? How are we holding on to it – and how is it holding on to us – in those spaces? I want to resist the psychological and psychiatric penchant toward saving curiosity for folks who are "better" or getting better. And I want to instead think of curiosity as a tool always already in us and between us, one that just gets inflected in different ways based on where we are, what we're experiencing, and what we're going through.

Zan: This has me thinking about your writing about the crippling of curiosity. Is that present in what you're speaking about?

Perry: Absolutely. The field of disability studies and crip theory thinks critically about norms of mental health and rationality (McRuer, 2006). Norms that we've created for how bodies and minds work (or are supposed to work) are often inaccurate and unhelpful. There is far more diversity of function (and value to that diversity) than norms typically allow. When these norms govern individual and social behaviour, communities of people who don't have "normal" bodies or "normal" minds, or don't use their bodies or their minds in "normal" ways, experience discrimination and violence.

Crippling curiosity for me means resisting ableist norms of curiosity and embracing its divergences instead. It means trying to think about curiosity not as a simple sign of being well-adjusted, able-bodied, sharp-minded and highly intelligent. There is a perception that the paradigmatically curious person is the scientist. A scientist with a standard, normative kind of intelligence. I want to really resist that and think about curiosity in ways that are wildly diverse and won't always get recognised as intelligent or rational or correct, or well-behaved or whatever. That's crippling curiosity.

Zan: One of the things that I imagine is very relevant to narrative practitioners is the way that curiosity can be dehumanising or rehumanising and its capacity to thicken personhood. And that makes so much sense to me as a queer person who's seen the dehumanising effects of curiosity on so many folks. But also, in a narrative practice context, the experience that people have when someone is actually really interested in the many facets of who they are and their experience and what they think about and value, the sense that you have of dignity that can become available through that kind of curiosity.

Perry: In a colonial context, and in a colonial style – and I mean "colonial" not just in the sense of modern European colonisation, but stretching

back to the Roman Empire and before – curiosity involves going into someone else's land, studying the people and the language, taking artefacts (and sometimes people), organising knowledge/people according to foreign norms and expectations, et cetera. Colonial curiosity separates the knower from the thing that is coming to be known. It says, I (the knower) am curious about this thing (the object). That distancing of the knower from the object of knowledge is, I think, ultimately dehumanising.

In contemporary social sciences, such as anthropology, sociology and psychology, for example, researchers talk about patients, or clients or participants in a study, as opposed to people who share worlds with them. One of the critiques of a colonial construction of curiosity in this context has been community-led research and community-engaged research where the person who wants to come to know becomes part of – and participant in – the group itself. The researcher becomes a participant in the community rather than the person in the community becoming a research participant.

The subject/object divide also comes up regularly in testimonials of marginalised people, marginalised along a variety of different axes. We can talk about gender or race and ethnicity, or we can talk about disability or queerness or Indigeneity or class. Folks in these positions are often targeted by an objectifying curiosity. That dehumanisation reduces the person to simply an object that must produce knowledge (especially about their difference) for the knower. And that's really troubling and problematic. Now, as far as rehumanising, I do think that curiosity has this capacity to reopen the relation that has been cut, that severance of the knower from the object of knowledge, and refashion it entirely. Curiosity really has this beautiful capacity to connect everyone (and everything) involved in the knowing relation (Zurn & Bassett, 2022). It can help rebuild that relationship or that edge between things, and help humans (and nonhumans) start learning, thinking and developing meaning together in a web or a network.

But I want to pause here. It's important to think about this process not just as humanising, but also as moving beyond the human. When curiosity's capacity to connect destroys the division between (human) knower and (dehumanised) object of knowledge, something fundamental changes. We are resituated within curious webs not only of other people but also of non-people, including the animals, the plants, the earth, and the stones around us. This is one of the gifts of Indigenous philosophy, at least in the North American context (see for example Simpson, 2017). This injunction to think of curiosity beyond the human.

Zan: In your work, you speak a lot about what this means for Black and brown folks, trans folks, disabled folks, but also about folks who've died, ancestors, the power of asking questions of folks whose voices have been silenced or marginalised or distorted. Could you speak a bit more about that?

Perry: People often approach curiosity with a novelty bias.<sup>1</sup> An individual bias and a novelty bias, which means that people think curiosity has to take us somewhere new. And that we, especially young adults in the present, need to lead the way to new ideas. I think this bias is extremely limiting because it misidentifies the source of curiosity's power to change our worlds. That power does not simply lie in breaking open the new; it also lies in holding close the old. What are the questions our ancestors have had that we can humbly take up and say, "These are worth asking, these are worth holding on to, these are worth holding up to the light"? How can we reconnect with what has preceded us? This is in opposition to, again, a colonial curiosity that sets out to discover (or better yet *establish*) a new world, and in doing so erase the old.

I think about this a lot in queer contexts. What have my queer and trans ancestors asked about the world? Sure, they may have said it in language that I no longer fully recognise, because I wasn't there for that language to make sense, right? But what were they really asking? A lot of young people these days think people in the 80s and 90s were just wrong about everything because they were using the

wrong words. That approach impoverishes us. How can we learn from the elders in our lives and in our communities and think *with* them rather than immediately assume they are not woke enough, not hip with whatever we're talking about. And similarly, for those who have passed on, how can we listen? We are going to have to listen across a number of bridges: age, certainly, and time and language and experience. We have to listen across those things.

Zan: My sense is that many, maybe most of us, might be recruited into oppressive and colonising curiosity practices without realising it, and especially when we occupy locations of privilege. Like myself, as a white practitioner with over three decades of training in entitlement to knowledge, seeing myself as a knower, an expert, especially in the context of "therapy", and how subtly I can be captured by that in spite of much unlearning. What might we notice that can help us untangle, or expose, dominating or oppressive curiosity in action? And what kinds of questions could we ask ourselves in order to interrogate the kinds of curiosities we're collaborating with?

Perry: That's such a good question. I think about this in relationship to what I understand as feminist curiosity, which is a kind of curiosity that's attuned to inequities of all sorts (Zurn, 2021a). We could talk about this as a queer curiosity, too, or a crip curiosity or a decolonial curiosity. These traditions point us to how knowers get constructed through social norms and hierarchies. Marginalised groups then become constructed as objects of knowledge. But what would it mean to take those groups as knowers themselves? For me, as someone who's white in a white settler-colonial country, there's a way in which I can walk into a space and claim to be a knowledge producer fairly easily. That is true. And, in certain contexts, there won't be pushback precisely because of my whiteness.

But at the same time, as a visibly queer, trans and gender disruptive person, the privilege of my whiteness is compromised, complexified. At different moments and in different contexts, I will walk into a space or begin speaking and be met with: "You're

not a serious scholar.” “You don’t know what you’re talking about.” “You’re off your rocker.” There is this perception of queer and trans folks as too rebellious, emotional, unstable and unable to hold the private and the public apart. A perception that, insofar as we break social mores in how we behave, we also break social mores in how we think, so we must be less rigorous thinkers and less reliable scholars (or employees, or organisers, et cetera). So I’ll get both. I’ll get, “Yeah, sure. Come in, you belong.” And “We are going to hold you at arm’s length. You’re not a well-disciplined knower. You are more careless, more haphazard.”

Many of us are situated on these hinges of privilege. And it matters that we attend to where we are immediately given space and legitimacy and respect. We need to notice those places. But we also need to notice where we’re not, and where we don’t even give ourselves credit as knowers. Living in a world that dismisses queerness and transness in the way that it does, and discriminates against queer desire and trans disruption in the way that it does, I have to devote time and energy to saying, “No, I *can* be a knower. And what I see and what I observe and what I’m building with other people matters. And it is reflective of something true in the world.” This reclamation takes constant work for people on the marginalised side of their hinges, because the world is constantly trying to erase our right to know.

Zan: So on the other side of the coin, I would love you to speak about the politics of incuriosity or unexpressed curiosity. There’s lots of examples in *Curiosity and Power* about how incuriosity can be a tactic of oppression and also of political resistance. And in narrative practice we often really centre curiosity, but we’re also very attentive to the effects of our questions. I wonder what might radical or resistance-oriented incuriosity look like?

Perry: Certain experiences in our lives prompt narratives of who we are. Sometimes those narrative structures are incredibly useful, and other times they are deeply unhelpful. When you realise a specific narrative is not serving you, you have to say, “I’m no longer going

to ask questions like that, in that direction.” Questions like: Did I do that right? Am I good at this? Am I not good enough for this? All of us get negative messaging, even more so those with marginalised positionalities. It’s a constant second-guessing of self. And there comes a point at which we have to realise this way of incessantly querying ourselves is not helpful. That is the moment of radical or resistant incuriosity, to say, “I’m no longer going to ask those questions or go down that road. I am here now. I am building this sense of who I am with myself and other folks around me. And that’s the place I need to put my energy.”

A lot of times these narratives are inherited from (and tuned to) social norms. Sometimes it’s the part of prudence (and a technique of survival) to be curious about how social norms work and how you might be able to pattern your life after them. We have to be honest about that. But other times, it is important to say, “No, I do not need to spend all this energy trying to pattern my life after cisheterosexual, or white settler, or ableist and sanist norms. But rather, I need to lean into the ways my community or my culture makes its own meaning, builds its own values and practices, and find comfort and satisfaction in that. I need to be more curious about my own people rather than clamouring to succeed within oppressive social norms.” There can be a radical incuriosity here. A refusal to study dominant patterns of thought, value and behaviour and to instead lift up other ways of being.

Zan: It really makes me think about, for example, cisgender heterosexual practitioners who are working with trans and queer folks – and this is often true for people working across varied difference in power relations – those questions that people in a therapy context can feel entitled to ask. Like the phenomenon of trans broken arm syndrome where every question has to be related to gender and transness, often excluding all of the other dimensions of people’s experiences and preferences. What might it look like for people to not ask those questions, or to ask themselves whether they need to ask those questions or whether they need to “know” those things? Often, I have no



idea the way that people I work with identify or about their experience of their body, but I don't actually need to know that to be able to collaborate with them. I only need to know how they want me to relate to them. And that's a really different inquiry.

Perry: I think it's incumbent on all of us, but certainly as people working in therapy or in education, to be aware of the stereotypical ways in which problematic questions get asked of particular communities and resist those. That's not too hard to learn if you become a student of a variety of different marginalised communities. How have they experienced questions as a group? What are the constant questions that get asked in their direction and how have they critiqued them? For trans folks, there's a set of questions that typically get asked over and over again. The same goes for people with disabilities, people with specific racial or ethnic backgrounds, but also folks who are mixed in a particular way. There's a need to locate them, "Where are you really from?" Or, "Which parent do you most identify with? Or which culture?" These questions attempt to pin people somewhere, to a narrative, or to a stereotype. It's crucial to understand the ways curiosity gets constantly thrown at particular groups and then refuse to participate. Say, that's not going to be a part of my practice here.

Zan: It seems like some kind of flattening curiosity that we can be vigilant to in our work. In the final chapter of *Curiosity and Power*, you consider who might need to be the possible companions of curiosity in order for it to be practiced ethically. You name opacity, ambiguity and intimacy. Would you speak a bit about the lineages that these came from and why you think they are so important in an ethical curiosity practice?

Perry: I was grappling with how to practice curiosity in an ethical way, grounded in all the values I've been trying to develop throughout the book and in my other work. These values of relation, of equitability, of reciprocity, of generosity and humility. If curiosity can be used by all kinds of people to do all kinds of things, then how can I carve out a generous curiosity, an equitable curiosity?

What I realised was this: It's not as simple as distinguishing good curiosity from bad curiosity and saying, "Do it this way. Don't do it that way." Rather, curiosity itself isn't enough of a guide to its own best practice. It needs companions. What I love about this move now, in retrospect, is that the whole book is trying to think about curiosity in a social context. Then, in the final chapter, it treats curiosity as a person and says, "Well, curiosity needs friends, too. It needs to be in relationship, too". These are just some of the companions for a more ethical curiosity: ambiguity, opacity and intimacy. When our curiosity practice is capable of honouring ambiguity, opacity and intimacy, it is on its way to being ethical.

When curiosity is used in violent ways, it often divides one thing from another (for example, the knower from the object of knowledge) or makes binary distinctions (whether gendered or otherwise). So I thought, ambiguity lets the complexity of things sit there and we can become curious in that space of ambiguity where we can't quite settle what something means or where we want to go, and that's okay. We don't have to use curiosity to govern and settle and distinguish immediately. We can let it sit with ambiguity. I draw a lot from Gloria Anzaldúa here, a 1980s and 90s queer Chicana feminist who's written much about the power of ambiguity, especially when thinking about borderlands (the Mexico/US border specifically), but also border experiences and border people (Anzaldúa, 1987).

Opacity is the second companion. Curiosity often gets used to make the world transparent, as if the world should give me its knowledge, and other people should give me their knowledge. But what if particular objects in the world, particular communities in the world, particular organisms in the world, are opaque? Or refuse to give their knowledge to me? How could my curiosity sit with that and listen to that opacity, listen to that refusal to be known and be okay with that as opposed to a more violent, extractive approach? For opacity, I draw on Édouard Glissant, who worked in the Caribbean to think about colonisation and the colonial practice of curiosity as demanding transparency (Glissant, 1990).

The final companion, at least for the moment, is intimacy. I want to resist a kind of curiosity that is individualistic, domineering, self-guided, self-possessed and self-confident in a way that refuses to acknowledge the intimacy between me as a knower and all the things that inform me and guide me in my knowledge journey. Recognising the intimacy between the psyche, the social world and the natural world re-situates curiosity. It doesn't let me use my curiosity *on* someone or something. But it makes me practice a curiosity *with* those worlds. Not a curiosity *about* or *on*, but a curiosity *with*. I draw a lot from North American Indigenous theory here (Kimmerer, 2015; Simpson, 2017).

At any rate, those are some helpful companions for a more ethical curiosity. I imagine you could develop others in a therapeutic context to help guide curiosity toward its best self.

Zan: Ambiguity, opacity and intimacy seem like they might provide some interesting invitations for narrative practitioners in thinking about the ways that we come together with people in our work. There are so many discourses around professionalism and ideas that are meant to elevate therapists out of relationship with the folks that we are collaborating with. I wonder about how we could continue to disrupt those hierarchies that are really inherently violent. Especially thinking about intimacy in connection with Country and ecosystems and ancestors – many exciting possibilities. Thank you so much for this conversation and your work.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> For more on Zurn's critique of the novelty bias, see Zurn & Bassett, 2023.

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The background of the entire page is a dense, textured pattern of green leaves, likely from a coastal plant like a bay leaf, arranged in a somewhat chaotic but rhythmic fashion. The leaves are various shades of green, from a deep forest green to a lighter, almost yellowish-green, and they have a prominent central vein. A semi-transparent white rectangular box is centered on the page, containing the text.

# Review Essay



## Addicted to Life

Written and directed by Pola Rapaport (2022)

Reviewed by David Newman



David Newman lives and works on the lands of the Gadigal people, also known as Sydney, Australia. He is a faculty member of Dulwich Centre and an honorary clinical fellow at The University of Melbourne's Department of Social Work. Through his independent therapy practice, Sydney Narrative Therapy, he meets with individuals, couples and families. He delights in this work and narrative practices have offered invigorating company. [david@sydneynarrativetherapy.com.au](mailto:david@sydneynarrativetherapy.com.au)

**Key words:** *Marieke Vervoort; euthanasia; suicide; dying; biopower; documentary; film; review; narrative practice*

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Author pronouns: he/him



## Defiance

In the opening scene of the 2022 documentary *Addicted to Life*, about the Belgian athlete Marieke Vervoort, diagnosed with a painful degenerative spinal disease, we hear powerful defiance. Over an internet call, Vervoort, who has obtained papers to end her life via euthanasia, says to the filmmaker Pola Rapaport:

Everyone is pushing me and asking me, “When are you going to die? Do you know already the date that you’re going to die?” I said, “Fuck you. ... You don’t know when you want to die. When the time comes, when I feel it’s enough, then I will decide”.

Defiance perhaps towards others pushes and intrusions; defiance perhaps towards certainty around death and life decisions; defiance perhaps towards isolation with this experience in general and more specifically being positioned to make decisions on her own; and perhaps even defiance towards the notion that the quality or hardship of life can be measured precisely. In saying “when I feel it’s enough”, Vervoort seems to defy the notion of precision in relation to death and life decisions.

It is a powerful start to a tender and at times harrowing story of the last three years of a life and the intricate weaving of pain, extraordinary athletic accomplishment, determination, relationships and euthanasia. It’s a story that carefully explores the idea that “not only life but also death is political” (Özpolat, 2017, p. 28).

## ... And more defiance

It would be hard to overstate the ethical, spiritual, religious and legislative complexity and contentiousness of euthanasia. Three realms of this contention include:

- **Losing the will to go on:** (voluntary) euthanasia is neither really voluntary nor a choice in many instances, but may be more like a way to respond to losing the will to go on as a result of perceiving oneself to be a burden on others, especially if one has a disability: “This is not to say families will necessarily pressure their loved ones to choose euthanasia or assisted suicide, but more that people with a disability will sense the burden and lose the will to go on” (Pike, 2020, p. 39).

- **Cutting short potential autonomy:** euthanasia can be seen as cutting short potential autonomy or hastening death when it is chosen by persons experiencing an escalating lack of autonomy as a result of pain or illness (Dickson, 2022).
- **Cultivating a view of lives as worthless:** laws legalising euthanasia can be seen as creating a society in which those who are terminally ill or disabled understand they have no value: “In a society where euthanasia is widely practiced, as in Holland now, the terminally ill and disabled have learned that the public at large finds no significant value in their lives” (Chevlen, 1997).

Although there are many more themes, concerns and profound considerations with euthanasia, when we join Vervoort for her final years, we are immersed in a considerably different picture to these three contentions.

Firstly, Rapaport’s documentary largely chronicles how being granted the right to a medically assisted death helps Vervoort reclaim life rather than turn from it. Vervoort says at one point, “If I didn’t have the papers, I think I would have already committed suicide”. Here, euthanasia is understood as an antidote to suicidal experience or of losing the will to go on.

At another point Vervoort comments, “When I got those [euthanasia] papers ... You are always doing more and more because you’ve got your own life in your hands”. We see delightful images of Vervoort organising and then participating in activities such as speeding around a Formula One track in a Ferrari, even at the cost of physical pain and a hospital admission. Rather than stepping away from her life – “cutting it short” or “hastening death” – we witness Vervoort stepping further towards the deliberate shaping of her life. Euthanasia can then be understood as an antidote to a sense of loss of autonomy and self-determination.

The valuing of Vervoort’s life illuminates almost every scene in this film. From the willingness of many people to help her live out the dreams she holds for her life, to the loving and subdued gathering on the eve of her death, we see rich, sensitive valuing.

So Vervoort’s story defies three key criticisms of euthanasia: that it amounts to the legitimising of suicide as a result of losing the will to go on in the context of feeling burdensome, that it eradicates potential autonomy by hastening death, and legalising euthanasia creates a society where those who are

disabled or who have life threatening illnesses know they are not valued.

Vervoort's is one story, and one story cannot claim to bring a settled certainty to enormous complexity, but I found the claims and defiance lighting up this film to be powerful and compelling.

## *Dignity and privacy, with one exception*

Given the theme and intimacy of this film, I watched it with an acute sensitivity to the dignity and privacy offered to Vervoort and the precious relationships braided around her life.

While watching, I had the experience of standing close, but not too close, as heartbreaking decisions were made, complexity in family relationships circled, physical health problems and pain were made transparent, Vervoort's dog became a key character, and friendship joys and solidarity offered sustenance.

When we see for the first time one of the seizures that Vervoort is experiencing, the camera retreats to the edge of the room. When Jan, Vervoort's friend whom she would have married were it not that he likes men and she likes women, hugs her for a final agonising time, the camera lens becomes unfocused. And at one point, Rapaport asks Vervoort on camera whether she would like her to be present at the time of her death, thereby enacting transparency. Such scenes and editorial decisions seemed to offer some dignity and privacy. As a viewer I was relieved.

I think dignity and privacy drifted, however, in a scene that included one particular doctor. The doctor looks at his notes when speaking with Vervoort, speaks somewhat informally to her in front of the camera while her pants are lowered for a leg examination, and at one point turns to the camera and speaks about Vervoort in the third person, using a tone of pronouncing psychological truths. He asserts, "She has changed. She must think about what she wants to do."

It may have been an editing choice rather than chronology, but in the next few scenes we witness Vervoort be unable to sleep, speak of how scared she is, have a seizure, and then ask her friend to reassure her that she will indeed be there when she ends her life. This seemed to be one of the key turning points in the story.

I responded with disappointment. I had hoped that rather than suggesting turning points marked by a medical professional's actions and meanings, the filmmaker would privilege turning points cultivated from Vervoort's own actions and meanings. Such an approach would have returned the story to Vervoort and avoided inadvertently siding with medical power.

## *Keeping the conversation going*

In an article in CNN sport (Woodyatt, 2023), Rapaport said she hoped the film would foster ongoing conversations about death. I hope so too. The film, and Vervoort's life and determination, visited so very many powerful and intricate themes, adding richly to a conversation that is well underway. Below I will cover some of the themes I noticed, in this spirit of continuing the conversation.

### ***The first story to tell***

One scene includes Vervoort and her parents having a conversation that tenderly reaches back into the past when they were noting the first signs of the disease. As Vervoort speaks, her parents' faces wear shocked sadness, like masks they can't take off, but I noticed they didn't interrupt Vervoort's telling. This scene made me think of the artfulness around whose story gets privileged when someone is intending to undertake euthanasia. Vervoort's story seemed to be privileged even when her parents were experiencing piercing anguish.

I wondered just what it can take for those in the networks around a person to gently place their anguish to one side at times, so the first story told is that of the person who is going to proceed with euthanasia. I suspect it is quite an achievement to do this, but that people can be supported to find ways to settle their anguish so they might be better placed to step slightly to one side. Clarity around such steps and ways to stand with Vervoort drifted into the film at key moments.

### ***Ways to stand with the person***

When reflecting on her relationships towards the end of the film, Vervoort says, "I have friends and family – they are there in good times, but most of all they are there in the bad times". She clearly states the significance of people being with her during bad times. There is such a diverse array of ways people can stand with those who are proceeding with euthanasia.

I wondered how people might be assisted to express their vision for how they want those who love them to stand by their side during this period, and of course during their final moments. I imagine this clarification to have urgency, complexity and tenderness.

### ***A life that is more than euthanasia***

I think there was an attempt in the storytelling to show that Vervoort was more than just her illness and her decision to undertake euthanasia. However, at one point there was a danger of such overshadowing. When the media made more of Vervoort's decision to go through with euthanasia than of the third medal she had won at the 2016 Paralympics in Rio de Janeiro, Vervoort's athletic accomplishments were relegated to the shadows.

Yet Vervoort was shown in the film as a person with profound friendships, powerful determination, extraordinary athletic ability and cheeky humour. When her dog, Zenn, is wildly licking her face in one scene, Vervoort says, "don't lick me like that, people will think it's a sex movie!" She also sees more than one story in her predicament. In one scene, Vervoort says, "looking at the future scares me". And in the next moment, "but hope springs eternal".

This made me wonder how we can make sure that people's lives aren't reduced to their final acts when it comes to euthanasia. I am thinking of all the colours, shades and textures in the fashioning of a life, and the varied ways lives can be remembered. Whether it is a conversation with another, some kind of activity or time alone, or whatever it takes, remembering and evoking all the different textures of a life can involve skill and deliberate action.

### ***Meandering decisions***

Around half way through the film, Vervoort expresses that she has changed her mind about having her parents' presence in the room as she dies. She tells her parents she wants them with her during her last moments. I noticed this as it made me think about how such big decisions can meander. I wondered how there might be meaningful consultations with those undertaking euthanasia and room made for meandering decisions. Making room for such decisions, especially if those decisions are difficult or complex for those standing with the person proceeding with euthanasia, is another area requiring great care.

### ***Mutual contributions***

During a party in Vervoort's honour, her friend Jan says, "When she drank kava, always in company, it would help her ease the pain". And there are many instances in the film where Vervoort is with loving and at times teary friends, presumably as Jan says, easing her pain. Her friends offer precious contributions.

This story is not straightforward, and a scene of great anguish is when Vervoort's mother and father lament that there is nothing they can do to help. I wondered about ways to reflect back to friends and family members just what they are contributing to the person who is going to proceed with euthanasia: small gestures and large. It may be kind smiles, lifts to appointments, tears shed, speaking with health care workers, organising a gathering, or forecasting and expressing legacies.

I was also reminded in the film of how contributions can go both ways. At one point, Vervoort invites Rapaport to consider that she, "might die tomorrow because of heart problems or a car that hits you". Although perhaps a little disconcerting, this appears to me to be a contribution from Vervoort to Rapaport, inviting her to consider the potential fragility of life and the unpredictability of death. To be reminded of this fragility and unpredictability might be one of the gifts of death.

I wonder how we can always be on the lookout for mutual contributions in such relationships: contributions by those who stand beside a person undertaking euthanasia, especially if those contributions are hard to locate, perhaps because the distress "tells" people that the only contribution worth anything is physical and mental health recovery; contributions made across power relations, such as the power relation between a person who is dying and another who is standing beside that person. The contributions made from those who are dying towards those around them can be hard to locate under the sway of such power. These contributions can include the gifts of death.

### ***The gifts of death***

I want to add a little more about the "gifts of death". Just the other night I was watching a television program titled "Let's Talk About Death" (Taguchi, 2023). I heard many people speaking of something like the gifts that death, or impending death, can offer. It is not the only story of course, but death can offer a strange invigoration; it can offer a "live for the moment", "treating dreams seriously" or "treasuring richness" orientation to life.

I read a poem the other day I thought eloquently evoked something like this sentiment. Andrea Gibson (2023) wrote the poem after they were diagnosed with ovarian cancer, and in it described measuring a lifespan by width rather than length. I wonder if, among the indescribable outrage that death can be, there might be ways to more richly name its potential gifts – perhaps the width, not length of life being one of them. What else can we say and have we known about this potential gift, even if this knowledge is inchoate?

### ***Final resting places***

I thought that the most beautiful images in the film were those shot in the Canary Islands, the place where Vervoort wanted her ashes scattered. While side by side on the cliffs overlooking the ocean, Vervoort tells her friend her wishes. Later, her friend speaks to the camera with tears streaming down her face: “I accept what she wants to do, but I don’t actually like it.”

Perhaps the pain of euthanasia and death plans shape a maze that is too hard to find a way out of. Yet the theme of a final “resting place”, or a place to scatter ashes, offered a soothing ambience in this film. I wonder about the possibilities of artful discussions and decisions about final resting places, or places to scatter ashes, and how it could bring something like a hush.

### ***Preparations for after***

The storyline was edited for a chronological telling. This meant that the film was close to finishing at the point Vervoort died. I missed Vervoort in the final scenes and felt their bleakness.

This had me wondering about all that we can do to prepare for the times when a person is no longer materially with us. What difference might it make to plan for just after, and then further along again? Or is leaving aside such planning, and the imagination required to do this, more helpful in enduring it all? And I wonder, are there conversations to be had that can help us clarify if we have a preference for either?

In concluding, I wish to make a few comments about euthanasia, power, overlaps between suicide and euthanasia, and finally, to return to the theme of defiance or refusal – euthanasia as a realm that is defiant or a refusal of a particular form of power that Foucault called biopower.

Before I turn to this, I want to acknowledge that I do not work with people around end-of-life decisions, euthanasia or palliative care. This means that I may miss some of the nuance of the practices.

## *Euthanasia, attitudes to suicide and questioning “compulsory aliveness”*

At one point during a Belgian writers festival where Vervoort is speaking, she says to the assembled audience, “I’ve spoken my mind without holding back ... the Flemish public should understand that”. Vervoort emphasises that the territory of euthanasia, and in particular the possibility of speaking more openly about it, is cultural.

Conceptions of euthanasia, its practice and attitudes towards it have a long cultural history. Gürhan Özpolat summarised just one aspect of this history as the interrelationship between attitudes to suicide and euthanasia:

In ancient times, euthanasia was defined as a form of suicide in which a physician allows [a] patient to die due to their suffering from an incurable, painful disease or medical condition. It is important to say that in the ancient sense of euthanasia the main emphasis was not on the act of killing but dying. Similar to the modern form of assisted suicide, the physician did not kill the patient but prepared the conditions in which [they] can commit suicide ... Therefore, the history of euthanasia is also a part of the history of the attitudes toward suicide in Western tradition. (Özpolat, 2017, pp. 17–18)

There is so much that has been written about attitudes towards suicide. Although it can’t be the full picture, Özpolat’s analysis suggests that if we look carefully at attitudes to suicide, and perhaps foster easier relationships with suicide in the different cultural contexts where euthanasia is grappled with, this could lead to some easier relationships with euthanasia.

I am drawn to Alexandre Baril, an associate professor of social work at the University of Ottawa and his term “compulsory aliveness” as a way to describe a contemporary norm. He argued that a “movement” that might be helpful in challenging “suicidism” (the marginalisation and violence that people who have suicidal experience are subjected to) would involve questioning “compulsory aliveness” and the “injunction to live and to futurity” (Baril, 2023, p. 7). I appreciate the



sentiment of collectively questioning such norms and injunctions, and imagine it could go some way towards cultivating easier relationships with suicide and perhaps therefore euthanasia. He wrote:

This movement could also be a venue to question what I call “compulsory aliveness” (Baril 2020c), inspired by the notion of compulsory able-bodiedness or able-mindedness in an ableist and sanist system (Kafer 2013; McRuer 2006). As the normative component of suicidism, compulsory aliveness comprises various injunctions (or imperatives), including ... “the injunction to live and to futurity”. (Baril, 2023, p. 11)

I would suggest that relationships with suicide would be easier if room were left open for the diverse meanings that surround contemplating dying and suicide. Just some I have been introduced to in my work as a therapist include:

- not existing as often the only place of rest when climbing a mountain that seems to have no summit
- not existing as often the only place of rest when experiencing a world that doesn't include you, or doesn't include you on your terms
- contemplating dying as a response to the isolation one can experience when it's not possible to speak of wanting to die as a result of suicidism, or other power relations, including the power relations of age where children can find it so very hard to locate a listener, or ongoing colonisation where services are of white culture
- contemplating dying as offering a place of freedom or escape from imperatives or norms that produce too much pressure or erasure
- contemplating dying as offering a place of freedom or escape from traumas that can continue to haunt people
- contemplating dying as a protest – a refusal to let go of precious hopes and dreams that appear continually out of reach, including hopes about how one should be treated or how the world should treat people
- an acknowledgment of just what it takes to end one's life, and the unspeakable courage that could be acknowledged.

Such meanings I think foster an easier relationship with contemplating dying and suicide, and therefore perhaps with euthanasia.

## Defiance and biopower

Apart from my opening comments about Vervoort's defiance, there is another way this film could be considered defiant. And that is in relationship to “biopower”, a particular form of power that Foucault, the French philosopher and historian of ideas, considered to have emerged in the late eighteenth century. This new form of power moved away from death and the achievement of political power via the threat or action of taking life, and became concerned with “making live” (Özpolat, 2017, p. 20). “It was the taking charge of life, more than the threat of death, that gave power its access even to the body” (Foucault, 2003, p. 265). Foucault suggested that biopower is concerned with “living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them” (2003, p. 265). Death, on the other hand, “is power's limit, the moment that escapes it; death becomes the most secret aspect of existence, the most private” (Foucault, 1984, p. 261). According to Foucault, biopower is therefore concerned with *making live* because death is beyond its power (Özpolat, 2017, p. 21).

By these descriptions, it seems that euthanasia could be considered a defiance or perhaps a refusal. It is refusing biopower's imperative to live and to remain under its domination, and it is refusing biopower's attempts to control through the mastery of life. Death may be a moment of escape from power (Foucault, 2003, p. 248). If we are drawn to Foucault's formulation of power, perhaps we can consider further what it offers to link euthanasia to a form of refusal or defiance of biopower. And if that is the case, it is a powerful realm of refusal, and in the general cultural uncertainty and mess that comes with euthanasia, it makes much sense.

What might it offer to see euthanasia as a refusal? I suspect we will find ways to more effectively honour the individual or collective intention or fight for euthanasia. We might place these intentions and fight in the context of a form of power that makes such intentions and fight more remarkable.

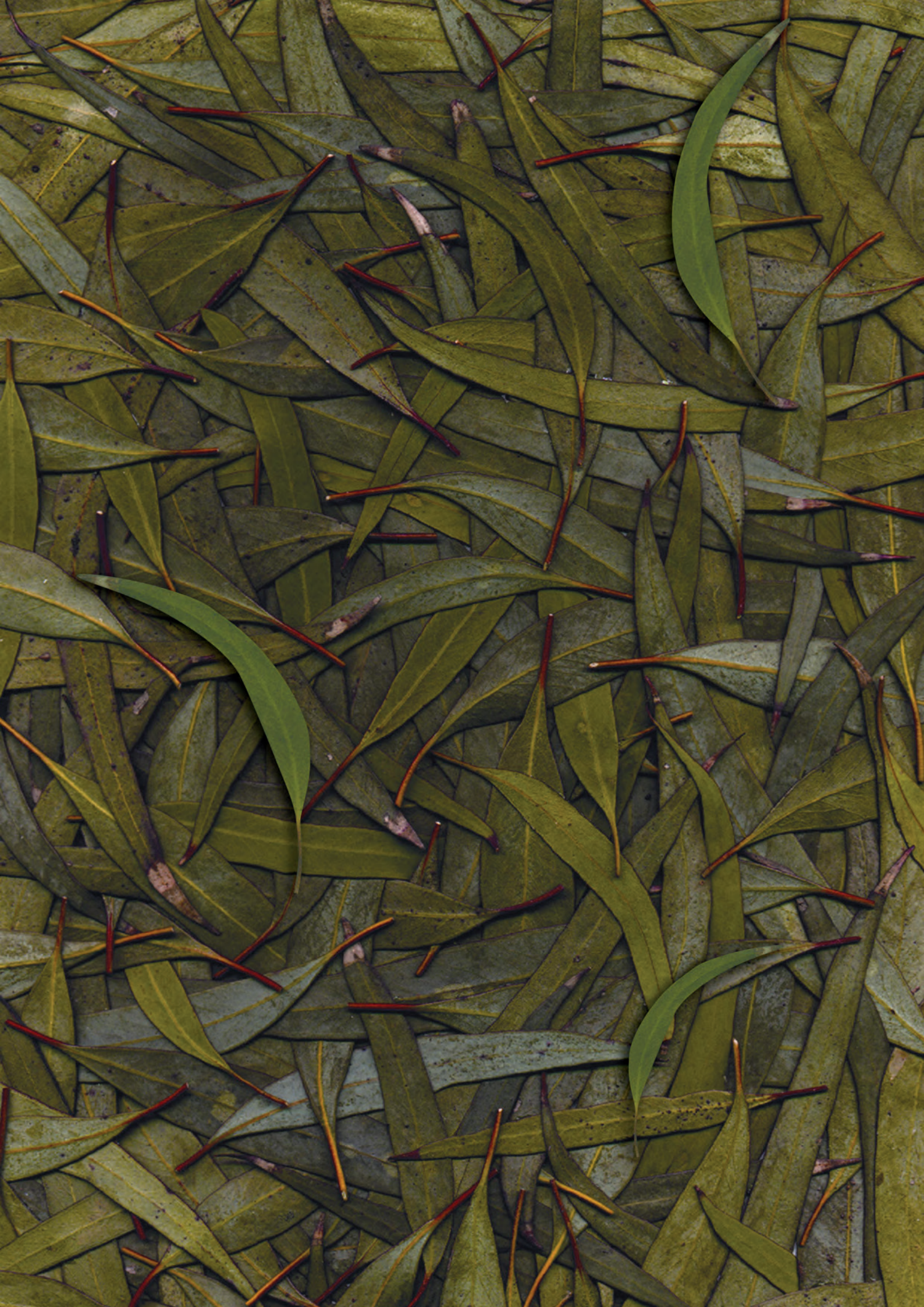
And Vervoort's defiance will burn even brighter.

*Addicted to Life*, and Vervoort's extraordinary generosity in offering to be the subject of this most intimate film, has certainly moved the conversation along.

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