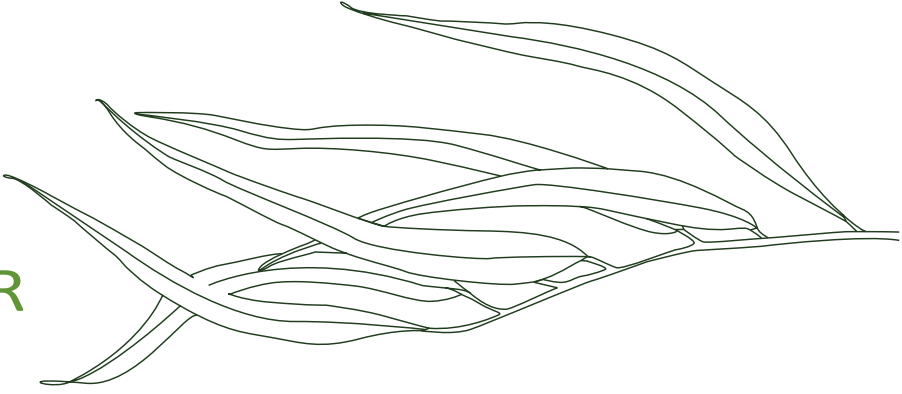




DEAR READER

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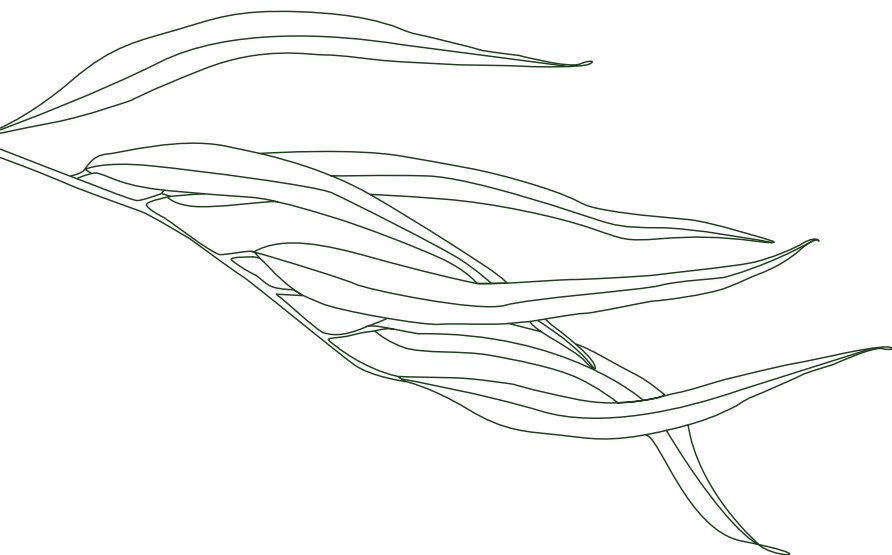
The Michael White Archive: New learnings from White's therapeutic practice in the realms of abuse and trauma

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Contemporary practitioners discuss

Narrative practice as a way of attending to gender politics and a refusal to separate practices of abuse/violence from power

This section highlights significant learnings that occurred as a result of the focus group participants' engagements with the Domain: 'Narrative practice as a way of linking emotion with meaning and action'.

Eight themes were generated:

1. turning the gaze: making visible who and what is being focused on and the political implications of this
2. making gendered discourses visible in invitational ways
3. introducing a 'car as property' metaphor
4. a renewed attention to the politics of trust
5. honouring mistrust and diverse forms of justice
6. renewed determination to establish accountability structures to render visible our complicity in dominant power relations
7. exploring further possibilities for collective historicising / historicising solidarity across generations
8. creating collective projects as a way of engaging with feminist critique of individualising of therapy.

1. Turning the gaze: Making visible who and what is being focused on and the political implications of this

One practitioner spoke to how she had started noticing *differently* when women consulting her were being recruited into pathologising themselves about experiencing abuse, and when noticing this, then making this visible and turning the gaze back on those who have perpetrated abuse.

[After the initial focus group] I kept noticing particularly mothers say, 'Why is this a pattern in my life?' [a pattern of abusive relationships]. And there was a mother I was working with who is going through the court system and has to prove what she has done to support her daughter, who has mental health struggles, but there's no focus on the father, who left them at the age of five ... [After the initial focus group] there was a turning point in our conversation, where the work was not so much clinical, but it was political, and we made really visible the broader context of how these systems work and how they often put the focus on her [as a mother],

and not on him [the father] and his role as a parent, which was a perspective that was previously not even visible to her. So, in some of our conversations, I started looking at the discourses that perpetrate and maintain [this focus on the woman rather than the man as a parent] ... And this also reminded me of this quote from the Domain: ‘Why are we taught to look for signs on the women’s foreheads instead of turning our heads to look at the person and culture that enacted this abuse?’ and ‘Why was Lily not recruited into asking “Why are practices of abuse and violence against women so prevalent?”’ (Sekneh Hammoud-Beckett)

As a result of engaging with this Domain, this practitioner spoke of a renewed determination to be ‘turning the gaze on patriarchal ideology and the effects it has on women’s experiences of the violence and abuse’.

2. Making gendered discourses visible in invitational ways

Participants spoke of wanting to take up the responsibility to make gendered discourses visible in therapeutic conversations.

In the transcript when Michael’s with Agatha and Matthew [referring to the transcript in the Domain], and he’s asking about Matthew’s ‘breaking from training in dominant masculinity’ and it was Michael introduced that into the conversation ... so that could be like influential, centring ... maybe? I don’t know ... but ... and for me, it’s like even though that’s sort of being influential, being centring, but also not, because it’s done in a way that’s invitational – so he’s not overtly saying ‘this is my position’ – you know, because for me, it’s sort of like mother-blaming, that gendered discourse around ‘it’s always the woman’s fault’ ... whether it’s a partner in a relationship, or the mother of a child, you know? It’s the woman’s – ‘she’s frigid’, she ‘doesn’t communicate enough’ – it’s like these are the stories that come up [...] and that’s a common theme ... And to me it’s like Michael is standing against the discourse of ‘woman blaming’ by introducing that observation [about dominant masculinity], but without actually making that visible ... doing it in an invitational way ... you know? Like he’s enquiring ‘is this of interest to you?’ And clearly it was of interest to Agatha – she’s like ‘Yeah...!! Actually!’ (Manja Visschedijk)

Practitioners spoke of their wish to take up this responsibility in conversations, and to do so in invitational ways. Rather than problematising Mathew in the same conversation, White located the problem in the training in masculinity that he received from his father who was in the military. Similarly, White referred to training that Agatha received as a woman to remain quiet and not let her distress be shared. Practitioners spoke of a renewed determination to make visible gendered discourses in invitational, non-individualising ways.

3. Introducing a ‘car as property’ metaphor

One practitioner, Jo Allen, spoke of a very direct influence on her practice. Since the first focus group she had introduced the ‘car as property’ metaphor from the Domain within her therapeutic conversations. In the Domain, White was quoted as saying:

The man has an enormous inability to draw distinction between his experience of the event and the woman’s experience of the event ... And I really believe that has to do with the fact that the woman is construed as property. I mean you don’t try and draw a distinction between your experience of driving a car and your car’s experience of being driven. You would never entertain that as a distinction. The car is simply property; it’s a thing.

In the feedback focus group, Jo Allen described how she had chosen to introduce this metaphor in a recent therapeutic conversation:

I used it with a woman the other day in my practice, who was in a domestic violence situation, and she was taking the responsibility for this [...] and she said, ‘I could write a book on who not to trust’ ... because she knows what to look for now ... And I said, ‘Let’s look at all of your notes that you’ve accumulated over time!’ ... but then I used the car metaphor because it was fresh in my mind ... and she said that was so helpful ... Like, ‘Yeah, I’m not car, you can’t just ride me how you want! You can’t just drive me how you want! Like drive the car you want, mate, but I’m not your car!’

This practitioner spoke of how introducing such a metaphor brought clarity to the abstract ideas of gender power relations and seemed to resonate significantly.

4. A renewed attention to the politics of trust

A renewed attention to the politics of trust was discussed in the feedback focus group:

[I have found that trust] featured [in] a lot in my conversations, which was really interesting to me ... Specifically, I was thinking about the quote from the Domain where the importance of acknowledging a woman’s right to not trust others, after experience of violence is discussed. In response, I found myself wondering: Why does our society embed trust as a foundation to all relationships? and Why is it that this theme of *trust* is so prevalent now, in our work and in our lives...? (Sekneh Hammoud-Beckett)

The same practitioner, as a result of participating in the first focus group discussion, started to research the *understandings of trust* of the women consulting her, in particular what women gave value to in relation to trust:

There were also lots of questions that came up around ‘what does trust even mean?’ ... I think we sometimes take that word for granted. For example, when I asked people what trust meant to them, some would say that trust is a belief, some would say it’s a set of behaviours, others said it was like ... a value, or it’s feeling confident and secure in the other person. Other common themes that people spoke to when they talked about their understandings of trust included things like there needing to be a foundation of connection and vulnerability for trust to exist, that trust was a signal of respect for someone, that trust required faith that you can rely on someone, that trust could promote safety and healing ... and that trust is apparent when you’re acting in ways that show you depend on the other, you believe in the other. (Sekneh Hammoud-Beckett)

These explorations had been set off by participation in the first focus group:

Yeah, so there were some ripple effects. I really appreciated it, Kelsi. And I did put it into action, but the thing that I came back to was ... can we find ways of honouring distrust? Can we hold distrust as an act of agency and resourcefulness and a survival response, instead of some sort of pathology or a reflection of ‘trust issues’? Can we find ways of further acknowledging the fact that sometimes people have earned the right to mistrust others, given their histories and their experiences? Can that not be in some way storied and reclaimed? And can we hold distrust as priceless, and as an act of agency and resourcefulness? (Sekneh Hammoud-Beckett)

This practitioner committed to further exploring the local meanings of trust and exploring ways of honouring distrust.

5. Honouring mistrust and diverse forms of justice

Tileah Drahm-Butler built on the conversation about trust and mistrust from her perspective as an Aboriginal feminist practitioner:

Mistrust is such an embedded value for so many Aboriginal people. It’s been a skill and a knowledge, actually ... I mean, there are so many stories that I could share about the ways that mistrust has protected against things such as child removal and incarceration ... So, that innate mistrust [of colonial systems].

Often, I’m meeting people in situations of crisis [in a hospital Emergency Department]. And what I’ve come to learn is that sometimes honouring that mistrust is also a way of honouring those responses to injustice.

[This involves] being able to even question what is justice, and what is justice for me, what is justice for someone else? ... There’s a story of practice that I tell about that ... where I’d met with this woman who had come in after being raped from her

ex-husband, and her daughter had said, ‘you can’t see my kids, your grandkids if you report it’.

Tileah then worked with this woman to explore what justice meant to her.

In the end, her sense of justice was around being able to pass language on to her grandkids, and not the justice of following through with the legal system and the ‘injustice system’ [criminal justice system] ... And what I learned from that conversation is the importance of having such an open mind, and always being tentative, even on what a person’s ideas of justice are.

In the feedback focus group, other practitioners also highlighted Michael White’s genuine curiosity about what justice would look like for the women he was working with. To one practitioner, this represented ‘Michael “decentring” himself from mainstream ideas of justice and what it’s right or wrong to think or to feel’ (Carla Galaz).

6. Renewed determination to establish accountability structures to render visible our complicity in dominant power relations

After the initial focus group, one participant (Manja Visschedijk) sought out a quote that was particularly significant to them and brought this to the feedback focus group. I am going to include an extended excerpt of how she discussed this.

I [Manja] just wanted to share this quote [from Michael White], which I try to keep with me all the time in my mind, and on paper, because it just speaks to me about what was discussed in this [Domain] that you sent us ... So Michael [White] says:

I want to explore how we can establish a therapeutic context that contributes to an awareness of the contribution I might be making, wittingly or unwittingly in the reproduction of power relations that could drift towards relations of domination.
(M. White, 2000a, p. 108)

So I’m [Manja] thinking in this article and throughout several of the articles, that he’s really aware of his own privilege and location as a male practitioner, whether he’s talking with, you know, Matthew about Andy, or whether he’s talking with any of the women that he interviews, it’s like to me, this is key to everything. You know, Michael White says:

It may be that I’m speaking with taken-for-granted privilege, and that I’m not aware of this. It may be that I sit or generally arrange my body in space that’s an expression of the power relations of gender, whatever. I’m interested in the options

available for rendering more visible these practices of power, as well as the real and potential effects of these on the people we're talking with, so that they can to some extent at least become available to us to modify.(M. White, 2000a, p. 108)

I [Manja] think that's the second key thing that I see with Michael throughout all of this is that he's not static; he's always changing and he's always learning from the people he meets with, and from his colleagues. And so in this one he says:

I've gone through different phases in my explorations, and in these phases I've framed my work in various ways, including the ways that inform some of the schools of family therapy. Similar experiences assisted me to break from some of these efforts. (M. White, 2000a, p. 104)

... [Manja] Reflecting on where he's been recruited back into dominant ways, because I think we all always get recruited back into reproducing our privilege, unless we have people who hold us to account.

[Quoting White] So some of these breaks were in the form of a U-turn. For example, in the latter part of the seventies, Cheryl White expressed concerns about the duration of my explorations in therapy – that these were engaging me in relational politics that were taking me away from my preferred ways of being in my life, and limiting of my considerations of the power relations of local culture, including those considerations shaped by some appreciation of a feminist consciousness, one that Cheryl had introduced me to in the first at the beginning of the seventies. So, Cheryl's expressions of these concerns, her identification of a naming of them, and her faith in the fact that I could find another way was instrumental in my return to the spirit of my earlier engagement with therapeutic practice and with the politics of therapy. (M. White, 2000a, p. 104)

So for me, it's like an ongoing awareness of the politics of therapy, and particularly in this Domain about gender politics. I think our understandings have since moved on a lot with intersectional feminism and with contributions from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practitioners and other people from marginalised communities around the world. (Manja Visschedijk)

This practitioner then went on to speak about how this orientation to the politics of therapy requires a continual establishment of accountability structures to render visible our complicity in dominant power relations:

Intersectional postcolonial feminism has really got me thinking a lot more about how power and privilege operate in the therapeutic conversation; that it's something that needs to be addressed every day; that there needs to be that kind of reflexive practice, but also accountability to teams or colleagues and also to the people who we meet with.

I'm just about to start to meet with like a preteen nonbinary person. So, I'm really thinking about who can I meet with, to consult with, to hold me accountable, because this is a whole new kind of [territory for me] ... of a very, very different generation to mine. I did try to refer them on to several other people because it's a bit scary, but yeah. But I think that's the way through, is to just be so mindful of it in the conversations and then reflexive after, and be open to changing and learning, which is what I've heard Michael [White] do throughout all of the bits you shared. (Manja Visschedijk)

A number of other practitioners concurred about a renewed determination to establish accountability structures to render visible our complicity in dominant power relations.

7. Exploring further possibilities for collective historicising / historicising solidarity across generations

The concept of 'collective historicising' was a term that David Denborough suggested to name what I had identified in a number of transcripts in which Michael White asked questions that seemed to be aimed at linking women across history. There were multiple instances in which White asked these questions like: 'Because I was wondering whether women who have gone before you have been able to take the steps that you've taken? In terms of speaking to injustice, or whether you'd be one of the first women in the history of women in your family to take those steps?'

A number of practitioners picked up on this practice of 'collective historicising' and wanted to explore it further. One practitioner spoke of always thinking it was important to address the broader historical-sociopolitical context of people's lives, but struggling to know how to do this. This practice of 'collective historicising' enabled them to 'see a practical way to do it' (Carla Galaz).

Another practitioner spoke of the significance of thickening preferred stories and finding links and histories and shared a story of this:

I had an experience recently where I was speaking to a mother and a daughter, and the mother didn't realise her own history of activism until some of the questions were asked such as: 'Were there other women who took steps in relation to speaking to injustices they'd seen?' As a result, I found out more about this mother's Chilean background, when she told a story about how her mother and a group of women were doing their own activism. And then, as a result of hearing this story, the daughter then got to bear witness to these stories about her mum and her grandmother. So, after hearing this, the daughter said, 'Oh my goodness, I

didn't know my grandmother was doing that'. And she then started talking about how she also sees herself as following in her grandmother's footsteps.

There was something very rich about creating those links, and it gives a richer understanding that it's not by chance that people take up initiatives; that there's often a history to it and we're shouldered by giants. But for some reason, those stories become hidden or buried away, and by bringing them to the surface, it often becomes clearer that you're not alone in your journey, whether someone is present or not. We're shouldered by these significant others who have paved those kinds of paths for us in some way. (Sekneh Hammoud-Beckett)

This practitioner linked this practice to Vikki Reynolds' (2011) solidarity teams, which in some ways historicise solidarity across generations.

Interestingly, a missed opportunity for collective historicising was highlighted by another practitioner. Pointing to the moment in the Domain when Michael White, speaking to a group of practitioners, offered questions that could highlight the steps a woman had taken to be able to break from intergenerational family traditions of gender:

I think it's very important that she doesn't get acclimatised. I mean she's got herself deacclimatised to violence and sexual assault and she's done a wonderful job of extracting herself from that, and I'd really like to talk with her more about how she did that. Because that's amazing. I mean she's achieved enough in this lifetime, and I would be talking with her about that, you know: 'that you've done something that no other, I doubt that any other generation, any other generation in your family has done. I expect that what's happened is that each generation has replicated the lifestyle of the last. And what you've done is you've done something: you've broken with that tradition, and in a sense, your daughters have a future that they could never have had and they have a future that no-one in your family could've had, or the family that came before that could've had ... and so you've really done enough in this lifetime already, and I'd like to understand more about how you did that'. (Michael White, as quoted in the Domain)

In response to this transcript, Manja Visschedijk proposed:

It's kind of like he's separating her from the women who went before her – as being able to do something they couldn't do – break with those traditions ... At another time, Michael might have asked what those women contributed that made it possible for her to make a step they couldn't take ... how she's standing on their shoulders. (Manja Visschedijk)

As a result of the focus group discussions, a number of practitioners spoke of a wish to explore further possibilities for collective historicising / historicising solidarity across generations.

8. Creating collective projects as a way of engaging with feminist critique of individualising of therapy

This final theme focuses on the significance of therapeutic conversations not being separated from collective projects, and how this relates to a feminist critique of the hazards of therapy in relation to individualising social problems. A particularly interesting perspective was offered by Carla Galaz, an autonomous feminist from Chile:

I have been into different [feminist] collectives and ... encounters³⁵ with women. In Latin America there's a big movement of women and we have built strong connections and there's a sense of trust within the movement. (Carla Galaz)

Carla spoke about how participating in the Latin American feminist movement provided a context in which she and many others had been able to share and speak about the 'injustices that we have gone through in our lives'. She spoke of how significant it can be when experiences of personal injustice are transformed as part of a social movement:

When you're building feminist connections and you're starting to work with other women and sharing your experience and starting to be open about your experiences [with other women] ... I view this as an anti-misogynist act ... because when society is telling you not to speak with other women, not to trust other women, to be jealous of the other, and in that sense, putting us against each other, then the idea of speaking of our experiences and saying things to each other like, 'I have been through this, how is it for you?' it leads to practices that are anti-misogynist because we are offering ourselves that experience of talking and sharing our knowledges and supporting each other.

And when, that [personal experience of injustice] has been solved or responded to within the group ... then I think that has a power that I wouldn't necessarily say is *therapeutic*, but it brings some sort of relief and freedom and trust, and that is healing in a certain way. So, to trust another woman again and to see another

³⁵ In reviewing her words, Carla Galaz wanted to clarify the following: 'Some people might not understand what I mean by "encounters" (translation of 'Encuentro'). In the Feminist Movement in Latin America, there have been feminist and lesbian "encounters" held, which include occasions when large groups of women meet together for one or several days to discuss politics and the direction of the feminist movement' (Carla Galaz, October 28th, 2022)

woman from other [non-patriarchal] eyes, not as my enemy but from a person that I can trust, that can offer a particular type of support or healing ...

So, there's so much more that happens when you have a sense of being in a collective with other women; it's not just you sharing things that you've experienced, instead it's like, 'okay I feel lighter because I shared my load with all these women, and now I know that there are other women that have had the same experience as me, and that makes me feel better'.

It's not just that. Like, when women get together and they organise themselves and they actually put themselves in the streets, they become political agents, which is quite a challenge to all this [patriarchal] history of trying to put women in the kitchen and [keep them isolated] in their houses. So when you go out, you share your experience, and you see you have common points. That's what I see consciousness raising doing. (Carla Galaz)

Carla described how, until recently, psychologists and therapists would not have been trusted by those in the Latin American feminist movement: 'Women had distrusted those [psychotherapeutic] spaces for a long time, because of how pathologising they experienced them to be, and so there has been a lot of questioning and mistrust of those spaces'.

This, however, is gradually changing because of the development of feminist psychology:

Women started seeking psychologists and trusting psychology again, because there were women psychologists and there were feminist women psychologists. (Carla Galaz)

This development of a feminist psychology, and women within the movement turning to feminist psychologists with their personal experiences of injustice and hardship, is complicated. Carla made links to the critiques by English lesbian feminist psychologist Celia Kitzinger:

Celia Kitzinger ... in the book [(Kitzinger & Perkins, 1993)] ... she's not making so much a critique of traditional psychology; she's making a critique of how feminist psychology has actually done a disservice to the collectiveness among women. So, women don't go to those consciousness raising [groups] anymore because they have their feminist psychologists that are listening to their problems now ... In this way, one-on-one therapy can be a disservice to communities and to the networks of women. (Carla Galaz)

Carla also relayed other aspects of the critique by Celia Kitzinger and Rachel Perkins (1993) in relation to the effect of feminist psychology on the lesbian feminist movement: women turning to therapists rather than friends with emotional distress; taking up psychologising language rather than political terms for their experiences; and how in this process the impetus and possibilities of collective action are diminished. Carla reported that she believed this was now starting to happen in Chile.

This all relates to the aspect of the Domain in which Michael White is speaking with Pam:

I really liked ... the way Michael worked around Pam's initiatives, and how he guided her to name it as a project [of lightening the load]. And how he used that to then take further steps to link Pam to other people who could have an influence on her life, and be with her in her efforts to take steps out of the abuse. And like, using that idea of having a project and then asking her, 'Who else could contribute to the project?' (Carla Galaz)

Carla understood this through a lens of feminist politics:

I think that's something that Michael did to translate ... a feminist way of bringing justice ... by linking women's experiences. And it's also a way to remain decentred. It was as if Michael was saying: 'I'm not the one who's going to offer everything on this process, but there are other people who have knowledges around this and that can offer support' ... And so, I think this can help women who are taking steps towards autonomy, and I don't know how you say it in English [Carla clarified that this particular transcript, in which Pam's project of 'lightening the load' was named and made visible, provided significant learning for her, and this was learning] not just [from] Michael White, that's me [also] learning from Pam how she made it through ... Michael White just named it and helped her name it and put words and expand this project ... and I saw it as Michael saying: 'Okay, this doesn't have to be ... an individual project. Who would you like to invite to this project?' (Carla Galaz)

Carla linked this development of collective projects in therapy to what has more recently been named collective narrative practice (Denborough, 2008), and how this, in turn, is an attempt to respond to Kitzinger's critiques.

I don't know if Michael White ... provided an account of ... how powerful that [project-making] can be. I think David Denborough went a little bit further with that idea, like how linking women's experiences, or people's experiences from a particular community, can lead to political action ... In this way, I think collective narrative practice has taken things a step further from Michael White's work.

It's not like we can just discard therapy, but ... the question that was raised by David Denborough [is] how can therapy contribute to social movements, and not ... [as] Kitzinger ... pointed at ... [continue] harming social movements and psychologising and pathologising our experiences? (Carla Galaz)

Carla went on to name how 'seeking outsider-witness practice with women who have had a similar experience'; 'encouraging women to listen to other's experience or to share their experience with others'; 'linking women's lives historically'; 'creating contexts for women to be listening to each other, thinking and creating together' and generating projects around which people can take some action can counteract:

What psychology has done to our relationships ... it's the experience of collectiveness that we have been cut off [from by individualising and psychologising] ... so putting the historical perspective, and linking ... to other women brings back that sense of collectiveness. (Carla Galaz)

Other focus group participants also spoke of their wish to create contexts for collective projects to emerge from therapy conversations as a way of engaging with feminist critique of individualising of therapy.

Carla reported that this has already made a difference to her practice. Referring to a recent therapeutic conversation she said:

At the end [of the conversation], I invited her to consider the idea of us doing a project together, and I have no idea what that's going to be ... but we're going to have a conversation on Friday, and I invited her by saying: 'let's do a project together'... So we will see how that goes. (Carla Galaz)

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