

Working with death through art and story: A collective biography

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Abstract

In this essay, the author works with stories and artwork generated in a collective biography workshop about death. The project was a methodological experiment to think about what is made possible when memory-stories are brought back to the body through art-making and autoethnographic writing. The people who participated in the workshop, including the author, were art therapists working in end-of-life and palliative care. This essay is an entanglement of stories, new materialist and post-humanist theory, art and death, and asks: *what happens when stories become art become stories?*

Keywords

Art-making as inquiry, collective biography, new materialism, post-humanism, entanglement, death, palliative care

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Let her weave her story within their stories, her life amidst their lives. And while she weaves, let her whip, spur, and set them on fire. Thus making them sing again. Very softly a-new again. (Trinh T. Minh-ha, as cited in Barad, 2014, p.83)

The embodied and entangled memory stories and artworks that I labour with here explore how it is to work as an art therapist with people who are approaching death. It is a weaving, whipping and singing softly anew, in coming to know ourselves and our memories differently, by becoming-with-others, human and otherwise.

In a collective biography (Davies & Gannon, 2006; 2012), the participating art therapists wove their material and discursive stories together, radically de-centering themselves as individual therapist-participants, without effacing the specificity of their stories and artworks. As such, the stories and art presented here are “individually authored but multiply rewritten” (Halberstam, 2014, p.138). They do not *represent* the therapists or their individualised, autobiographical version of themselves, but are a collectively entangled inscription of breathtakingly intimate and imbricated subjectivities:

The collectivity of collective biography is vital to the methodology. Working together in the space of being listened to; being open to each other and to being affected by each other’s memory stories; listening without judgement, but intent on knowing in one’s own body the story that is being told, creates a spacetime in which each embodied being is collectively emergent – the assemblage of researchers is a becoming being, unfolding, refolding the moment of knowing and being: knowing/being together. (Thomson et al., 2018, p.6)

Collective biography is memory-work (Davies & Gannon, 2012; Haug, 1987), diffracted through feminist poststructural and, more recently, new materialist theory. It is a trans-disciplinary, dynamic research strategy rather than a prescriptive method. In a collective biography, participants work together with memory-stories in response to a specific research question, speaking and (re)writing intense moments of being in ways that “move beyond the clichés and usual explanations” (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p.3). These memory-stories are then read aloud to the collective, who critique and question the teller until the final written iteration by the original memory-holder becomes, in a sense, collectively generated, and written in a way that is vividly

imaginable to others “*from inside themselves*” (Davies & Gannon, 2012, p.359, emphasis in original). In this study, the trigger question was: *what is it like for you to work as an art therapist with the dying and the bereaved?*

Following the collective biography work of Gannon and Gonick (2019), this project was envisioned as an affective assemblage that was “simultaneously discursive, relational, and material, always precarious and continuously in motion” (p.220). The aim was to explore what happens when stories-become-art-become-stories, and to explore the conceptual and affective¹ work made possible by these trans-formed stories of being imbricated in death and dying.

The four people (including the author) who participated in this research were all experienced end-of-life and palliative care art therapists and visual artists, thus familiar with the qualities and potential of various art media, and with aleatory visual story-telling. While some collective biographies have been led by or included one or more art therapists² and used visual and other art forms as well as story-telling,³ the intensive focus on art-making as inquiry, *and* as analysis, is new to collective biography – and the methodological synthesis of collective biography with new materialisms and close attention to materiality and making is new to art therapy research.

Informed by elements of the new materialisms, poststructuralist and post-humanist theory,⁴ this collective and collaborative experiment in *doing theory* entangled memories, words, knowers, historicities/desires, thing-matter, movement, touch, light and air, time and space as a material ecology of forces and intensities, in a “*direct material engagement with the world*” (Barad, 2007, p.49, emphasis in original). According to Barad (2015):

Theorizing, [as] a form of experimenting, is about being in touch. What keeps theories alive and lively is being responsible and responsive to the world’s patternings and murmurings. Doing theory requires being open to the world’s aliveness, allowing oneself to be lured by curiosity, surprise, and wonder. (p.154)

The lure of this research was to think with others about how it is to be and become an end-of-life art therapist – the haecceity, or ‘just this-ness’ of working so closely with death,

and the matter/ing of art media and making. The curiosity that inspired the study was about the ways in which the materiality of our work *performs* surprise and wonder. Following McCormack (2015), “[i]t’s about how movement and thought think you: about how ideas have you; *about how things work you out*” (p.102, my emphasis). As Barad (2015) reminded us, “[a]ll life forms (including inanimate forms of liveliness) do theory. The idea is to do collaborative research, to be in touch, in ways that enable *response-ability*” (p.155, emphasis in original).

In this material|discursive⁵ experiment, memory-stories were brought *back to our bodies*, and trans-formed through layered auto-poetic mark-making – writing orally through story-telling, and materially through art-making and poetic autoethnographic prose (Speedy, 2015). Here, the intercession of extemporaneous visual art-making, made in between the verbal and written story-telling in a collective biography, opened up a space for thinking/being/doing and becoming in ways that exceed traditional qualitative interview methods.

It was a slowed attentiveness of being-with, becoming-with media and spaces, opening ourselves to a sensory awareness, and materialising our affective responses. The aim was to think-with what was produced by working *within* the entangled kin-aesthetic forces, lines and intensities of memories, recording devices, deafening rainfall, bodies of furniture and literature, and bodies passing by; and *with* the sentient languages of paint, pastel, pastel and ink, keyboard and paper, to see, feel, smell and touch, to see where thought then took us.

It was precarious listening (Linnell et al., 2008; Speedy, 2015). Verbal stories became artworks and artworks became written stories, folding affect and cognition, sensation and thinking – transforming an intellectualised this-happened-then-that linear account into one of “collective attunement” (Stewart, 2010, p.340) that resonated in our bodies, from which other, profoundly changed stories could emerge.

What we touched in this collective encounter, was that working with/in an entangled web of stories-becoming-art-becoming-stories disrupted and unsettled previously sedimented ways of storying our experiences in productive, although not always positive, ways. The tactile and material

encounter with paint, pastel and glue shifted affect back to the body, burning open a space of vulnerability, both inside and outside our 'selves' and each other.

In the collective biography workshop presented here, the four therapist-participants⁶ began by recounting specific memories of therapeutic encounters with people who were dying and their families. Provoked by our own and others' entangled stories and images, we each then made an artwork and wrote a story, which was then read aloud to the collective. We worked together in an old and echoing university science lab-come-art therapy studio, lit by skylights, dusty windows and a single propped-open door with a view towards the car park and distant gum trees.⁷ The air hummed with expectation and anticipation, the smell of coffee, and the deafening sound of rain. There was an eagerness and excitement in our questions and conversation, which began even before we sat down on the first of two consecutive days, in a room filled with kindness, tolerance, curiosity, humour, respect and trust.

The one specific story, or collective of stories woven into each other, that we each materialised in art and writing, was about an encounter that had settled indelibly into our bodies, yet was difficult to think or speak about. These are the stories that *stick*, seep and crawl under our skin, and become "relics of affective encounters, the sticky sites of emotional residue, historical fragments that tell us what we can bear to remember about ourselves" (Harris, 2019, p.5). These were memories that had affected us in ways that became, through repetition, "sedimented into our becoming" and had "become us" (Barad, 2007, p.394).

This project worked to find ways to disrupt and stir up the sediment – to exceed and transgress the habitual stickiness of what we already thought we knew,⁸ and instead, to work toward *performing our unknowing* – "to animate rather than simply mimic, to rupture rather than merely account, to evoke rather than just report" (Vannini, 2015, p.318), and to provoke something lively and different about our sense of humanity, responsibility and response-ability (Barad, 2014) in working with the dying and bereaved.

In the art-stories that follow, the force of art-making was made visible in whipping, spurring, and setting on fire the protective and habitual professional barriers that keep us safely removed

from the people we work with, exposing the embodiment of absent presence, and the enduring and affective nature of working with death in end-of-life and palliative care.

Stories becoming art becoming stories

In this section, I present the four stories from the workshop encounter that were trans-formed through art and writing. Each followed many hours of talking together as memories sparked other stories, punctuated by rain pelting down on the skylight above us, and the wind slamming the studio door.

The stories we told were about the time pressures of hospital work subjugating our own needs for self care; about the ways we think about our own deaths; about an outward detachment from pain and suffering; about feelings of inadequacy; about the sometimes materially toxic environments in which we work; about the ways in which longer-term community-based relationships can become loving, meaningful and inspiring; about the ways in which art therapists often fall outside the support systems offered to medical and other allied health professionals; about how easily our work and professionalism may be dismissed as 'just art'; about the difficulties we face in finding people for whom art therapy is actually appropriate; about fear, anxiety and emotional burnout; and about the unresolvable nature of part-time work when people die unexpectedly before we return.

In each of the following four stories, the story-tellers' comments, spoken in the flow of conversation, are in italicised text, and their written narratives are boxed.⁹

One

This was initially told as a story about the complexity and incongruity of working with a young adult who later took her own life, and as part of a multidisciplinary team in palliative care. It came from a moment in time, when the story-teller looked through a small gap in a hospital curtain, to see a family surrounding a dying woman with whom she had formed a strong and loving relationship. The story became, through art-making (Figures 1, 2), an evocative narrative, which was then read aloud in the workshop.

The artist's words about her artwork, and the making of it, were as follows:

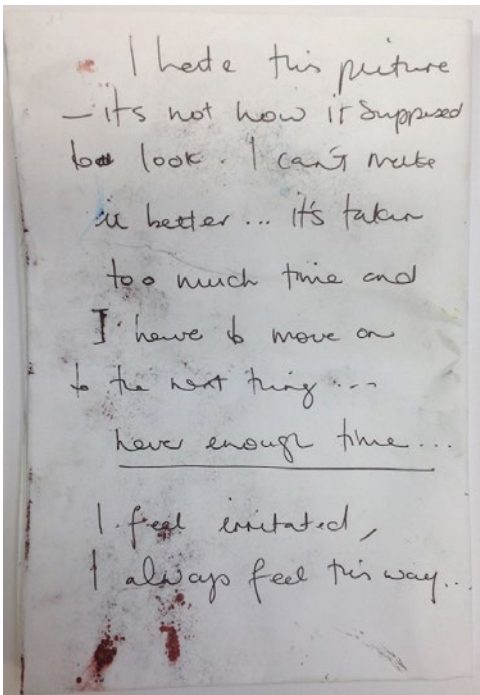


Figure 1. Participant, *Untitled*, 2018, mixed media, 297 × 420mm.

Figure 2. Participant, *Untitled*, 2018, paper and ink, 297 × 210mm.

Ink and wool. I can't create more than an impression of a memory of you. I felt myself wanting to define you more, but I can't, it's out of my control. I'm left with a presence of your absence, it feels fleeting. How do I hold on to it? It's present in my body but for how long? ...I'm too late, you are gone... Now I'm reaching for the pencils, I need to define you more... That sense that the pencil was scratchy and harsh and not permanent or worthy in its mark of your existence. Now putting myself into this drawing, splattering ink, it feels messy, uncontrollable, it's moving too close to feeling something... it feels fleeting. Fingerprints, I was here, we were here. I'm careful not to touch you in this picture.

I want to add colour, it doesn't seem to work. A medical imaging film I was surprised to find, yet fitting, taped down crudely hiding the impression of myself. The biomedical pushing me into the background. Already I am losing a sense of you, the absence of your presence already fading.

On another piece of paper, stained with ink, she wrote:

I hate this picture – it's not how it's supposed to look. I can't make it better... it's taken too much time and I have to move on to the next thing... never enough time... I feel irritated, I always feel this way.

The following is her auto-poetic memory-story, written immediately after the art-making:

The impression of your body now dead, the only memory of you and gone again.

Your family here grieving. No place for this therapist, existing on the outskirts of your life, of the medical world, of this room that became your world, your sole experience, existence at the end.

There is no room here for me, no room to grieve, no recognition of my experiencing of your impending death.

Validation? What does this mean anyway.

Do I have the right, or am I hovering to satisfy my own need.

Is this even about me?

And so each time it becomes easier to move on.

But then that rare time in and amongst their grief that your family member noticed me and thanked me – “Mum loved spending time with you in art therapy, she talked about you all the time”.

You held my hand the last time we met, told me I was your adopted daughter. The sudden understanding that our time together was significant for you...

the realisation hitting me deep inside – it feels huge, too big.

I feel the need to play it down, at the same time knowing, the knowing bringing tears to my eyes, stinging as I try not to let the emotion well up inside.

My limited time at the hospital, finding me here now, looking and finding no trace of you the person I knew, to be lying here in this bed now made up, immaculate, tight, clinical. There is no memory of you here and in a moment, a new face, body, old, decaying, and there is nothing of you here. Gone again.

Where have you gone? No time to think about you anymore

Everyone has moved on in my absence. I'm too late.

But I'm used to this now

The age-old armour getting thicker and thicker ...

I let it down for a while in a different context let the world come seeping in cold, hard and dark the memories from the past the triggers breaking it down in a different context – confronted, having to confront, nowhere to hide.

The slow unravelling
I could feel it inside
the darkness inside
cold, hard, dark
yet coping on the outside

only just

held together

by a thread.

The darkness reflected back by those I worked with – a different relationship with death.

Death reflected back.

An unwillingness to live or go on.

I can feel it even as you're not voicing it.

And now I find myself faced by those who want to live and can't, and those who don't want to live

a stark contrast

a real head-fuck as someone once said.

I knew I'd get through it, this unravelling, come out the other side of the darkness, a better person

telling myself again and again and again, you're almost there.

Feeling the blood rushing back
a connection to life
feeling I'm working this place

Feeling strong, almost there, but then the opportunity to go back to the familiar detachment afforded by the medical model detachment, invalidated emotions cold and aloof.

It's somehow easier this way, it's safer where you're going.

They're expected to die, aren't they? You can't be responsible or prevent it

It has to happen this way.

On the second day of the workshop she commented:

Last night when I got home after doing this artwork, my partner said "how are you" and I said "it's messy". I had ink all over my hands, even after washing them, and when I was in the kitchen he said to me "what's that brown on your hand", like he thought there was something wrong... "oh, it's just ink". It's just ink, but I think it was probably more than that.

Two

The artwork (Figure 3) that begins this story emerged from the collective story-telling during the first morning of the workshop. As with the previous story, the boxed text is the story-teller's written narrative.



Figure 3. Participant, *Untitled*, 2018, mixed media, 297 × 420mm.

Of the experience of making this artwork, the artist said:

I started doing a watercolour and I was mopping, mopping it, and I thought – that’s what I feel like I do – I mop up stuff – I mop up people’s sad stories, people’s grief. I was going to throw this in the bin, but I thought no, I’m sticking to the artwork. What struck me about it is that the colour is muted, and I usually use bright colours. For the last few months, I’ve been feeling jaded in my work and blocked probably, stuck and a bit washed out and rundown. People’s stories do affect me and I suppose it’s accumulated – I’ve been doing this for years, but since then, something’s changed ... And you can’t clean it up effectively – you’re just mopping up the bits that are running off the page.

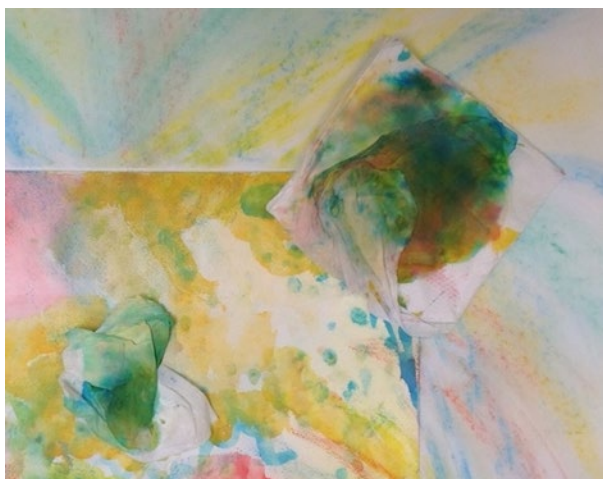


Figure 4. Detail of Figure 3 – Participant, *Untitled*, 2018, mixed media.

The following boxed is what emerged as her auto-poetic memory.

A boy had died, they told me. He was 23. They were harvesting his organs down in ICU. The staff were on edge. This doesn’t usually happen up here. Not like this. Yes people die, but there is plenty of life on a palliative care ward. He was coming to the ward so family could say good-bye... I felt out of my depth... I was shocked. Twenty three. My son is turning 23 this year. What must the poor parents be feeling? I felt my heart break as I imagined my own son dying. And having organs harvested – sounded so weird to my ears. So cold. So clinical. Precious pieces being

taken from their beloved child. The baby they rocked in their arms. And yet this helps others live. The absurdity was not lost on me. I went downstairs and took refuge in my office. A colleague who works in ICU was there, I asked if she knew anything. ...The boy suicided, jumped off a bridge. He lived in a suburb right next to mine. I knew his school. My heart broke. I couldn’t help thinking how I would feel if this was my son.

Why? How? Why? Depression? Did something go wrong? Did someone break his heart? I tried to rationalise as I slowly walked back to the ward. The body was in the room. I poked my head in looking for mum and dad. I caught a glimpse of a tall, thin young man lying very straight and still. Body tucked far too neatly with a hospital blanket. I couldn’t see his face for the curtain. In the room was a young nurse... She said she was there so the patient wouldn’t be alone. That she had been with him through the whole process. My heart melted at her compassionate voice. I felt gratitude for this nurse keeping time by this boy.

I began to feel more unsure of myself and what I could offer these parents... A thanksgiving for his life, his gifts, his presence. I wondered if we could incorporate some art into the ritual? Would it be appropriate? Some symbolic images they could dedicate to him? Or express their grief with?

People started to stream into the patient lounge... Oh dear, it’s not just the parents. Siblings, relatives, friends were coming to say good-bye. They look forlorn. I panic. How do I manage a crowd? I can be with the parents, but no more. Please no more. About 15 people arrive. Insecurity and fear envelop me. It’s too much. I sense that the whole ward was uncomfortable with the situation and don’t know what to do or say. Too close to home I thought. For all of us.

The school chaplain arrived... He knew the boy. I saw that they were comfortable with him. A familiar presence... Relief flooded my body. I wait in the wings in case I’m needed. My hope is that I could be one on one with someone. But they didn’t need me.

The nurse came into the room where I was waiting. The one who accompanied the boy. She is sniffing. I ask if she's okay as I hand her a box of tissues... "I do this all the time – but this one is hard. Such a beautiful family. This is so hard for them". I leave the ward with a measure of peace. But I grieve for this family in the weeks that follow. I am thankful for my son.

Three

This story begins with an artwork (Figures 5, 6). On the second research day, the artist said of this art-making experience:

I'm not sure I should have done this yesterday – it took me to a very dark place last night. That's what grief's like for me – like the world as I've constructed it in my own mind cracks open – reality cracks open – the reality I wanted cracks open and loss just begins to open up, and that [the hole in the centre] can get bigger and bigger, and that [the swirling vortex] can engulf everything.



Figure 5. Participant, *Untitled*, 2018, mixed media, 297 × 420mm.

This artwork emerged from the talk, the storytelling and the art-making of the collective, and provoked the auto-poetic memory that follows.

B was 70, dying of motor neurone disease (MND) slowly over about a year. We worked together for nine months until two weeks before she died. At her home, we would sit beside one another at her dining table looking out through leaded windows over which roses climbed beautifully... [and] quickly formed a deep and loving attachment... We worked

on healing her relationship with her husband, a retired professor, who was intellectual and emotionally remote. We also worked on her life-long depression – her voice trapped, unheard, in her own darkness, the unheard voice of a young girl emotionally abandoned by her parents and physically abandoned to life in a convent in which she was mercilessly bullied, abused and humiliated by the nuns. The voice that could not be heard was the one that was ignored by her parents and too dangerous to be heard in the convent. She 'had no voice' as a child and throughout her life, and this was now brutally mirrored in her MND – because of the disease she could no longer speak, a cruel fate for a talented psychotherapist. Now, with MND, she was terrified for the future-knowing that the disease would render her helpless yet again...

On this particular day, her terror was palpable where I sat, right beside her. I somehow remained calm despite my own childhood history of fear and attachment trauma.

Somehow I managed to maintain trust in the process and the depth of our connection. Her picture of her terror – *The Abyss* – showed her in her wheelchair at a cliff-edge, looking down into the terrifying depths of the unknown, imagined as a realm of monsters. She wrote Nietzsche's words on the picture – "The abyss is looking back at me with all its dreadful possibilities". She was poised at the edge of doom, alone and terrified, a helpless 8-year-old yet again, expecting the worst at any moment. And I was there, sitting beside her, not knowing, empty of ideas and feeling her isolation and fear – in that moment I was as helpless as she was.

Then from somewhere, from nowhere, I asked the question formed in my mind, what would she see if she looked behind her? What a moment! The question hung in the air for only a moment, because she instantly knew the answer. "Why my husband would be wheeling me away from the abyss to safety, and right behind him would be my daughter and you, all looking after me and keeping me safe."

She drew the scene, just as she had voiced it, acknowledging the self-pity that had

swamped her, and more accurately assessing her degree of helplessness as she realised there were realms of her life that were still under her control. Perhaps most importantly, she wrote about the healing that would result from knowing she was no longer a frightened, powerless 8-year-old open to bullying and humiliation... but a capable woman who was solidly supported by several trusted others who would ensure she was well looked after... Relief! Hope! It was like heavy clouds broke open and we were bathed in sunshine. From that moment, a calm descended on both of us. She had found her voice, and I now knew she would be OK... Soon after, she wrote a poem which she gave to me... about the climbing roses outside the window at which we sat beside one another [that] would eventually fall, just as her own fall was imminent. But it had become okay to fall, maybe even safe to do so now, so unlike falling into the terrifying abyss.

Of the art-making experience, he said:

I'm sure this is why a lot of older people are silent and sad, or silent and angry too perhaps, because they're just in a sense waiting to be swallowed by 'this'. I get why people suicide, and I think it's when 'this' just overwhelms, opens and overwhelms – what you thought life was like, suddenly it becomes something else and absence kind of takes over.

...the openness here can be interpreted many ways... I think loss opens your heart too, and I think that's the only benefit of loss. You can either close your heart – I could close that up and pretend that everything was okay, but it's still there, or you can open to loss and then you've opened your vulnerability. Your vulnerability is wide open to the world and therefore you're vulnerable – that means you feel your pain very fully, as I tend to do, but I also feel joy very fully at the same time... when you let down that armour or that protective layer and it floods in, everything floods in, and it is overwhelming – the hard stuff, the painful stuff, but it's also all of the good stuff as well... To have an open heart – it just opens you to immense suffering, but also opens you to joy.



Figure 6. Detail of Figure 5 – Participant, *Untitled*, 2018, mixed media.

She changed me, she deepened me, and the way in which I worked, and in many ways she was like a mentor. It was a beautiful poem. I've still got it. I keep all their stuff. This is how I deal with this I suppose, is by keeping mementos. I've got thousands of pictures [on my phone] that people have done, and probably ethically I should destroy them after so many years – but it's palliative care – I can't do that – those people are still alive for me.

That little figure standing on the edge of the abyss is meant to be there. You see this crack can open and engulf him, and that's the fear. That crack was an accident, because I didn't know what I was doing. I used water for some reason – I thought, what am I using water for it's really fucked up the centre of the image, and the paper developed its own crack through the water. Then I thought, that wants to open up. So I opened it up. I knew, as I was opening it up, I thought ... I know what's behind here ... when this splits open and you're in danger of being engulfed by emptiness, by dread. This is an image of dread for me.

Four

The story that became the following artworks – the first made during the workshop (Figure 7) and another made a week later (Figures 8, 9) – was about long-term art therapy with a young family in their home, both before and after the mum died from breast cancer.

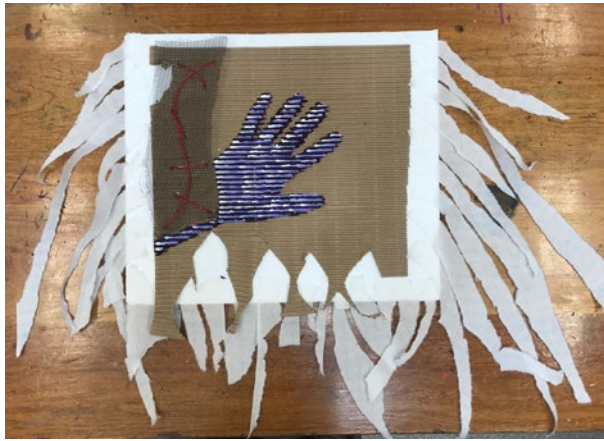


Figure 7. Participant, *Untitled*, 2018, mixed media, 325 × 410mm.

The artist wrote of this art-making:

There was a lot of ripping and tearing, shredding and piercing – gluing shards, sticking to the edges and overflowing the page. A two-coloured hand, the mum’s and mine, mothers together-apart, reaching for something, perhaps an impossible something. I had traced my own hand, and laboriously painted the ridges of the corrugated cardboard in different colours, trying not to let them mix together. Almost succeeding.

Coming back into that experience to make an image was something that I felt anxious about, and I procrastinated. I left my artwork in the bin after the workshop, wanting to distance myself and walk away. It was too intense and confused – all those stories mixing together about experiences in which we were open, jagged and vulnerable.

I later regretted throwing it away. I didn’t think it was good enough. It was still visible, sticking out of the bin, when I left the room – there, but partly hidden, an absent presence. I had wanted to stay longer, to do more, make a new artwork, slow it down, but it was time to leave – as one of us said, never enough time.

I came back a week later to do another artwork. It wasn’t avoidance, but a space to breathe after the intensity of the workshops. I pulled a bunch of old magazines from the shelf, and the pictures that jumped out at me came together as a collage (Figure 8).

Materialising my experience of these children made me aware of the heartstrings that



Figure 8. Participant, *Untitled*, 2018, collage papers, 297 × 420mm.

stretch taut when we allow people in, whose stories of loss and pain flicker in our bodies as a double-take. Like the two identical walls of ice in my image, one on top of the other, and a tiny boat rowing away through the ice-floes, splitting the pattern of the landscape of their lives in half.



Figure 9. Detail of Figure 8 – Participant, *Untitled*, 2018, collage papers.

Dare to feel. Daring to feel the experience of those three young children through my own encounter with death as a too-young parent. My job was to row the boat for as long as I was needed – to feel with this family the intense cold, the fear, the unsteady boat, and to stay with it into the sunshine.

Diffractional thinking

The work of this project was to bring *memory-as-affect* back to the body, and to perform affect through art-making, writing and speaking.¹⁰ My analytic process might be described as diffractive (Adams St Pierre, 2013; Barad, 2007; Davies, 2014; Haraway, 2008) – as thinking *through*

or with the stories and artworks as a material encounter, both in my experience of the workshops and in the analysis. My diffractive reading of data was not to interpret or codify text, but to map the interference of matter in the performative event of art-making in an otherwise (human) linguistic exchange. According to Haraway (1992):

Diffraction does not produce ‘the same’ displaced, as reflection and refraction do. Diffraction is a mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection, or reproduction. A diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear, but rather maps *where the effects of difference appear*. (p.300, my emphasis)

My work, then, was to map the affective differences *that matter*, in “an enactment among researcher-data-participants-theory-analysis” (Mazzei, 2013, p.732) and to make visible what thinking-through art materials and other more-than-human bodies made possible in bringing memories back to our bodies. As Stewart (2010) argued, “[w]hat matters is not meaning gathered into codes but the gathering of experience beyond subjectivity... Everything depends on the dense entanglement of affect, attention, the senses, and matter” (p.340). In other words, a mutually affective and *entangled subjectivity* that is attuned to the “rhythms and harmonies, the fractures and fusions” (Gale & Wyatt, 2012, p.469) among the collective, that unravelled through our multi-textual story-telling, that traced the shape and shadow of the “unthought known” (Bolas, 2017).

A diffractive visual response: Doing theory

The poetry and art of the stories and artworks have invited you as reader inside the experience of working, as art therapists, with the dying. Rather than risk the closure (death) of interpreting or analysing what these intimately woven stories and artworks might have told you, I offer them to you, and ask you to respond to the “bodily affect and effect of each story, seeking to know what it is to be this person, in that space and time” (De Schauwer et al. 2017, pp.278–279), and to know intimately for yourself what the art and the stories can tell you. I have asked you, as I have taken you through these four stories, to attune yourself response-ably to the movement

between art and auto-poetic story-telling that took place among this collective of art therapists who have found images and words that bring their experiences to life on the page.

The first story was about the incongruity of working with someone who wanted to die, at the same time as with those who yearn for health and life, which was transformed through ink, fingerprints, pencil and plastic into a story about exclusion, frustration, attachment and detachment. The second story emerged from an entanglement of stories spoken in the workshop, and became one about a young man who killed himself, and a mother’s exquisite and incapacitating sense of recognition in mopping up pale and weeping watercolour that bled off the page. The third story, following an immersion in the collective memories, became, through the force of pastel and water, one of tearing resonance – of love, helplessness and dread/ful attachment, in working with an abused, incapacitated and fearful woman facing the abyss of death. The fourth and final story, about working with a bereaved young family, became, through an encounter with shards of paper, cardboard and collage, about navigating the space between avoidance, inclusion and (self) compassion.

Yet questions remain. What was provoked by the productive yet unsettling thinking that emerged in our collective work together? What did the centrality of art-making by art therapists in a collective biography make possible, in “being open to the world’s aliveness, allowing oneself to be lured by curiosity, surprise, and wonder” (Barad, 2015, p.154), in thinking together about what it’s like to work as an art therapist with the dying and the bereaved?

The following artwork and story respond to these questions in a return to Trinh T. Minh-ha’s invitation (as cited in Barad, 2014) that opens this essay, to diffractively spin and weave together our stories and lives. Through stories-become-art-become-stories, this textural and textual art-making was a reaching toward the as-yet-unknown, incomprehensible and unthinkable, to map where the affective force of pastel, paper, sunlight and ink took me, in singing our stories softly a-new.

What follows is my diffractive visual response of “force taking form” (Manning, 2012, p.16), and ‘writing to it’ (Gale & Wyatt, 2018), in gathering the research assemblage back into my body.



Figure 10. Jody Thomson, *Untitled*, 2018, paper and ink, 250 × 150mm.

Wool dipped in ink, painting randomly with me across and off the page; across the frayed edges of old and loved melodies. Wayward flecks of indelible black ink adding to my already stained apron. Wet droplets blown into starbursts through a straw, diluted by my saliva; such impossibly beautiful and delicate lines. It's hard work, and I feel dizzy from all this blowing. The only thing it seems that I am able to control is when to stop – to decide when it's enough – when the time has come to walk away and let it dry, outside.

As I sit beside the artwork in the warm autumn sun, I listen to the rhythm of what it has to say, as my thoughts shift across the edges and valleys of the workshop art-stories. The sunlight starts to curl the spine of my picture open and creates an uneven threshold that splits the image in half. It forms a barrier – like a hospital curtain, the lip of a bridge, the edge of an abyss and the sheer wall of an iceberg – as places where we pause, watch and cannot cross.

Moving back into my studio, I feel an urgent need to find some kind of form in this uncontrollable randomness, so I work inside and outside the lines with pastel, rubbing and s(m)oothing, seeing through my skin.



Figure 11. Jody Thomson, *Untitled*, 2018, mixed media, 330 × 440mm.

Something stops me touching the messy starbursts on the other side – where melody becomes mess. I work around the lively mess, softly with pale yellow, enclosing a shape somewhat like a fish. Inside the inky lines, I blend and smooth the stories together: blue, red, white and purple. Thinking with/in the lines and edges bumps me up against a counterfeit border or margin of 'othering', of where we (can) belong, and what we will, do and cannot touch in our work with death. I think about the inevitable reciprocity of affective touching and being touched, and am reminded of Barad's (2015) words: "Is touching not by its very nature always already an involution, invitation, invisitation, wanted or unwanted, of the stranger within?" (pp.206–7).

Coming back to the artwork later, it feels too neat. For me, the songs and stories of death are never tidy, and never finished. They stick (around) and become permanent



Figure 12. Jody Thomson, *Untitled*, 2018, mixed media, 330 × 440mm.

marks, like the black India ink, which is lightfast, permanent and waterproof when dry. However, the pastel stories have not been sprayed with fixative and are still alive with tint. I sacrifice my desire for structure, aesthetics and form, smudging, blending and softening – and complementary colours, contours and shades of understanding emerge: the affect of inclusion and exclusion (Figure 12). The eye (I) of recognition becomes the focus. A tiny smear of blue pastel crosses the threshold. It is a mo(ve)ment of belonging and of becoming un-done.

Afterthoughts

The collective telling, listening, making and reading aloud opened an affective and vulnerable space of being and becoming. Our encounter with each other, and with the lively assemblage of paint, studio, paper, wind, water, pastel and ink opened us up to palpable moments of intense fragility, mis|recognition, and inclusion|exclusion. What had initially appeared to be binary thinking became ‘and, and,’ working together like lines of ink, melody and pastel pressing in on each other, breaching and breathing across our professional borders. Tears were shed and involuntary sighs of understanding escaped during the telling and listening, as we opened ourselves to the force of the stories, and the collective force of art media and making, in which matter and spaces were our collaborators and confederates.

My experience of the workshop continues to be one of joyous connection, intimacy and cohesion, together with a disenfranchised sadness. I am brought to my knees for those who walk, and those who walk com-passionately with them, towards the borderland of death. In singing-with the stories and artworks, “weaving, whipping, spurring and setting them on fire”, I now walk the world differently, “very softly a-new”.

Endnotes

1. A key resource in this work is a Deleuzian conceptualisation of affect as a pre-conscious, a-subjective and non-linguistic intensity sensed by the body. For a critical overview of contemporary affect theories see Leys (2011). See also Wetherell (2012, 2015), Bille & Simonsen (2019) and Gregg & Seigworth (2010).
2. See Linnell et al. (2008), Davies, Zabrodska, et al. (2009), Thomson et al. (2018).
3. See, for example, Davies, Browne, et al. (2006), Davies, Gonick, et al. (2013), De Schauwer et al. (2017), De Schauwer, Van de Putter, & Davies (2018), Gale et al. (2013), Gannon & Davies (2011), Gannon et al. (2014), Gonick (2013), McArdle et al. (2013), Van de Putte et al. (2017).
4. For readers unfamiliar with these theories, very simply put, new materialism and post-humanism are keenly interested in engagements with matter (both physical and virtual), and entertain no anthropocentric binary between nature–culture, body–mind, and human–other than human. This ontology abandons any idea of matter as inert and subject to predictable forces, and envisions agency as distributed in mutually engaged knowledge production between humans and other bodies.
5. I use the vertical bar ‘|’ as an awkward but useful trope to indicate a simultaneity rather than a bifurcation, meaning ‘and and’ rather than either/or, at the same time.
6. None of the research participants had worked together before in a collective biography, and some were meeting for the first time. All came from different end-of-life or palliative areas of practice: hospital-based adult palliative care; community home hospice; hospital outpatient; and not-for-profit home-based care; and from different theoretical scaffolds.
7. Davies and Gannon (2006) note that the place or location of a collective biography workshop significantly shapes what is made possible.
8. Much of the literature about the experience of the art therapist working in end-of-life, palliative and cancer care is contained in three seminal texts (Connell, 1998; Pratt & Wood, 1998; Waller & Sibbett, 2005), and the author’s recently published earlier work (Thomson, 2019a; Thomson, 2019b). Reported in this small and largely phenomenological qualitative work are themes such as existential concerns, the importance of maintaining professional boundaries, supervision and self-care, work-based frustrations, and the privilege of accompanying the dying and their families in bereavement.

9. Boxing the participants' narratives in this essay is for clarity only, and not to reinstate a binary between the story-tellers' words and the body of the essay, nor between words and images. The spacing of this text is indicative of the pauses in narration.
10. This strategy differs from 'response art' (see Allen, 2017; Fish, 2012, 2013; Moon, 2002; Wadson, 2003), in which the therapist makes images to 'process' or reflect on past events, rather than bringing a collectively sensed and affective encounter back to the body in the moment of inquiry.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the three amazing art therapists who participated so generously in this research with me, Sheridan Linnell and Bronwyn Davies for their insight and critique in developing this essay, and the two anonymous reviewers whose comments and suggestions were enormously helpful.

Funding

This research was funded under a research training scholarship by Western Sydney University.

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AUSTRALIAN AND NEW ZEALAND JOURNAL OF ARTS THERAPY

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Published by the Australian, New Zealand and Asian Creative Arts Therapies Association

ACN 63 072 954 388

PO Box 2391, North Brighton, VIC 3186, Australia

www.anzacata.org

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ISSN: 1833-9948

Design and production Vic Šegedin