

KEN GALE AND JONATHAN WYATT

17. TWO MEN TALKING

Performing Selves in Emergent Relational Space

We have been writing collaboratively for eight years, using an approach, ‘nomadic inquiry,’ drawn from the French 20th Century philosopher, Gilles Deleuze, (e.g. Gale & Wyatt, 2009). In this approach we exchange writings, via email, to which we each in turn respond. We might respond directly to what the other has written, working with the ideas, stories, figures or form of the piece; or we might, as Deleuze would put it, take ‘lines of flight,’ or work with it ‘rhizomatically,’ allowing the other’s writing to lead us elsewhere, somewhere, anywhere.

We see this collaborative writing as inquiry (after Richardson, 1997; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005; Speedy & Wyatt, 2014; etc.): we do not know where the writing will take us. We write, together, in order to find out where we are going and what will be created. We inquire into understanding and/or troubling notions of subjectivity; and/or perhaps we are inquiring into friendship (Gale & Wyatt, 2009).

The writing that follows is based upon a longer piece, ‘Two Men Talking’ (Gale & Wyatt, 2008a), that we originally wrote five years ago as we were producing our joint dissertation at the University of Bristol. Our writing had only recently begun explicitly to consider questions of gender. In Gale & Wyatt (2008b), written during the same period of time as we were writing *Two Men Talking*, we began to explore our process of “becoming men.” In that writing we exchanged stories from our childhood and early adulthood about boarding school, hair, sexuality, mothers, relationships and more. After Butler (2004, 2006), we discussed the provisional nature of gender, and how in our collaborative writing—our “collective biography” (Davies & Gannon, 2006)—the experience of writing to and with each other about gender was central to our process:

Because of what has gone before, and because of our shared present and prospective shared future, we can perform these versions of our masculinities today. (Gale & Wyatt, 2008b, p. 251)

In this writing, we continued our Deleuzian dialogue about being, not being, and becoming men.

We have presented ‘Two Men Talking’ at a number of conferences; the text offered here is a re-working of that ‘performance’ script. It differs from the journal-length version in both obvious and not so obvious ways. Obvious, in that it is shorter and that much of what we think of as being core to the journal version is cut out. (We suggest that it becomes something different, not ‘less,’ despite—because of?—what is missing.) The not so obvious difference is that in this

version, we speak, as well as our own words, both each other's and those of some of our 'characters.' At a recent presentation of this script a member of the audience enquired how much we performed each other's words. We responded by saying that although most of the time our words were 'our own' (are our words ever our own?), at times one of us gave voice to the other's. We explained that we structured the piece this way in order to generate more pace for a listening audience. We realise, though, that such a muddying of 'belonging' also works to embody a blurring of the singular Ken and the singular Jonathan, a blurring congruent with the material we immerse ourselves in here:

- K: In our recent collaborations we have examined subjectivities. Over the past two years, as part of the doctoral programme we are undertaking, we have written to each other through the exchange of texts attached to emails (we live many miles apart, Jonathan in Oxford, me in Cornwall).
- J: We are undertaking a joint dissertation, where we are working, using writing as our methodology, in pursuit of understanding (our) subjectivities and what Deleuze refers to as 'becomings.' During this time we have not, until recently, explored our subjectivities as 'men.'
- K: We have grappled with this. Have we been avoiding the subject of gender? Were we concerned about how we would deal with it? How much of our apparent avoidance of the subject was itself gendered? We have recently written a collective biography piece about our early experiences of a gendered world. We found working with gender difficult, challenging, and anxiety provoking. This, we suspect, is why our curiosities have not proceeded beyond tentative inquiries.
- J: We meet when we can, we email, we text, we phone. We talk. We are two. (Aren't we?) We are men. (Aren't we?) I live with Tessa. She, more than once over the past two years has said to me:
- K: "If Ken were a woman, I wouldn't be happy."
- J: I have taken this to mean that she perceives an intimacy between us that disturbs her. Once, while I was in Bristol meeting Ken, I failed to contact her during the day. I was caught up in our discussions, preoccupied with Ken and me and our work together. Later, she and I spoke on the phone. She asked me, lightly and with humour (I think):
- K: "Where were you? What were you up to? Were you having sex with a furry Cornishman?"
- J: She calls our writing,
- K: "Up-your-bottom stuff."
- J: Referring (I think) to its theoretical content and to its focus upon us. Ken and I are up ourselves. I also live with Holly, who's 16. One summer evening, Holly and I were talking at home in our living room. She was asking me what all this writing and reading and talking to Ken and going to Bristol was about, and what was a doctorate anyway. I was telling her

- about the writing that Ken and I were doing together at the time. And I also mentioned that we (the family) were going to meet up with Ken later that summer. She asked me, with that slightly sneering directness that teenagers seem so adept at:
- K: “What is it, Dad? Are you and Ken gay or something?”
- J: To which I replied an entirely non-defensive “No. Of course not. Don’t be annoying.”
- K: Jane—our supervisor and witness—has often commented how she experiences reading our writings as ‘ear-wigging,’ a rare opportunity to listen to two men talking. She may, we remember, have used the word ‘voyeuristic’ in describing her sense of this experience.
- J: When I told Tessa that Ken and I were doing this piece together about being two men talking she pointed out,
- K: “But you and Ken don’t count. You’re not proper men.”

- J: Here’s a puzzle: I have ‘mates,’ friends, maybe half a dozen. Most I have known for years. My friends are important to me and I would be happy to describe my relationships with them as intimate. But I think that the point is this: my intimacy with them has not provoked the kinds of questions from the two women in my family—taunting? joking? uncomfortable? One question is what is it about our relating to each other, about being two men talking—or, primarily, two men *writing*—that is disturbing, I wonder? And does it disturb us?

- K: Two men talking: what’s so unusual about that? Is it what we are talking about? All that ‘up yer ass’ stuff and not about ‘wimmen,’ or football, or telling racist or homophobic jokes. Is it that? Is it because it does not conform to the stereotype? That seems too simple but Jane’s sense of being the voyeur, Holly’s acute teenage observation and Tessa’s mature inquisitions all tell us something about what we are doing. They are performing their selves to us, they are reading us in particular ways, they are curious. Is this because we are two men talking in ways that surprise them, that encourage them to express forms of disquiet? Jane almost appears gleeful that she is able to peep in to see what we are doing! Tessa’s enquiry suggests a reading of us that is perhaps a little threatening: threatening because it is unusual?
- J: Women looking at men.
- K: Women who care about these men? When we first started writing together my partner at the time expressed one jot of curiosity. She encouraged me. She asked occasional questions about what we were doing but she never looked at our writing or showed much of an interest

- in it. If she had thought that I was having sex with a tall sensitive (male) therapist she would probably say ‘Well done’! And what does this say to something else that Tessa said:
- J: “If Ken were a woman, I wouldn’t be happy.”
- K: It is almost as if our friendship, our writing together, our intimacy would mean something different if I were a woman? If I were a woman is it likely that Jonathan would be having sex with me? Odd though it is, we can be trusted as two men talking; we are not going to engage in anything amiss, we are only having ‘up yer ass’ conversations! But Jane, the self-confessed voyeur, feels that she might be party to a party! She appears to sense that she is becoming privy to intimacies that are, perhaps, suggestive of something more, the mysterious, exotic (erotic?) frisson of two men talking.
- J: Two men talking ...
- K: Jonathan talks about other relations he has had with men and observes that it is not like ours. I can reflect similarly upon my friendships and agree with the tentative conclusions that he is making but this does not surprise me: I sense Deleuze’s figure of bodies-without-organs, I sense an emerging reluctance to talk about these generalised gendered wholes, these ‘men,’ these ‘women.’ I sense a uniqueness in him and me. I know he inhabits a male body, though, as Judith Butler points out: “sexual difference is not a given” (Butler, 2004, p. 178). However, I do not feel that this is leading me to talk generally about Jonathan and me as ‘two men talking.’ It feels to me we are talking; there are verbs and the nouns are not necessary. I *recognise* him as a man, I *recognise* me as a man, whatever being a man might mean, but I do not therefore feel that this alone inscribes him in a special relationship to me. It is true we are ‘two men talking’ but it feels to me that the ‘men-ness’ of this is subordinated by the ‘talking-ness.’ I am not sure if I want to compare Jonathan with others. I have started to do that in my mind, I have started to try to uncover diversities, my friends, lovers, other ‘men,’ other ‘women’ and all that does is to provide me with rich complexity, thickness of description, multiplicity and connection but little gendered generalisation. Jonathan says:
- J: What is it, my furry Cornish friend, about our relating to each other, about being two men talking—or, more accurately, two men *writing*—that is disturbing, I wonder?
- K: And I think, yes, this is an important question. Tentatively I am going to suggest that ‘two men talking’ *is* disturbing and it is to do with the way in which men (and women) are culturally constituted as gendered wholes. We are familiar with Foucault’s discursive effects, with docile bodies and the hegemony of type and specification and it feels to me that what we are beginning to do here is to disassemble all that. If gender as discourse, gender as text, makes our talking and writing together in these ways ‘disturbing,’ then that is part of what we are doing. It feels to me

that part of what we are doing will involve us in troubling the ways in which sex and gender (whatever they are and however they are related) are always brought together into categories, types, or what Foucault prefers to call, 'species.' We are 'male' or 'female,' 'masculine' or 'feminine,' 'heterosexual' or 'homosexual': it is always nouns; it is always presented as black and white. There is a language of nouns but what does this language do? What is it for? What do these words do? Their significations establish them, fixing them with meaning that takes them across the boundaries of place and time but grounding them in self and other. Their identity as nouns generalises, colonises, disciplines. I can't stand it: it all seems to be so shallow. A language of verbs, of doing and of action suggests transgression and possibility. The processes at work here are all to do with the idea that we can somehow *discover* identity rather than engaging in a consideration of the way in which these identifications are made up at different times and in different places. We have here a set of constructed categories of knowledge that appear to govern us; establishing patterns of conformity and framing our norms, values and beliefs, so it seems to me very exciting to be disturbing these things.

- J: I participated recently in an intense experiential group dynamics conference where I found myself becoming acutely conscious of my middle-class, Oxford-connected, straight, Englishness. I spoke about this, aware as I listened to myself of my accent and manner. In amongst the effort to identify who we were in this context I found myself cast in this role, moulded. I felt stuck in this persona and could not break out of it. And then, after brooding for 24 hours I managed to say that I was tired of this, that it was not all of me. I have an ancestor who led an English rebellion. He was hopeless as a rebel but he had a go. I wanted to speak up for my rebel. I remember saying, in this group of over thirty people, that I felt inhibited, because here we had to label, we had to box ourselves in. If I told a man that I found him attractive I would have become one of the gay men. We had conveniently located all the 'gayness' in the out gay men. The 'straight' men did not speak of their attraction to each other, nor much, it has to be said, did they do so to the women. For fear of what? Of being ascribed an identity, I think, or of generating confusion about our identities. I was party to that. But no, there was a multiplicity of feelings, thoughts, desires, that flowed through me. I struggled not to be boxed in as straight or gay, English or Irish, middle class or working class, or whatever. I would not be.
- K: In reflecting upon this story we mostly dwell on *multiplicities*. Our work on bodies-without-organs has made it clearer that Jonathan's experience was a noticing of what Deleuze has described as "connection of desires, conjunction of flows, (and) continuum of intensities." But I find myself preoccupied with how *writing*, our methodology, contributes to this. When I am writing, this writing and its struggles feel far more important

than saying ‘I am Ken,’ or ‘I am a man.’ The writing and the struggling are me. It feels that in the chaos, interconnectedness and multiplicity of Deleuzian thought and feeling we are de-centring ourselves and displacing the self-conscious ‘I.’ By drawing upon Richardson’s inducement to use writing as a method of inquiry, we are acting transgressively, preparedly unaware of beginnings or ends, opening ourselves to what emerges and being ready for the unlikeliest of consequences. Bronwyn Davies talks about ‘writing as a place that is blind, where strangers and unfamiliarities meet.’ Nomadic inquiry can take us through the plateaus and territories of Deleuze and Guattari’s topographies of space, resisting the certainties and stabilities of the *logos* of striated space, where language is only interested in the closure of the denotative utterance, and exploring, through the application of strategies of territorialisation, the doubt and uncertainty of the *nomos* of smooth space, where language celebrates the openness of the connotative utterance.

Pause.

J: I feel dizzy. I am unable to hold any of this still: Ken, me, writing, our inquiry, my gender, his gender, my sexuality, his—nothing is fixed, it feels, even for a moment. These are all flows and intensities ... and it seems too much. I long for groundedness—but as soon as I say the word I am destabilised by questioning the metaphor and its implicit binaries (ground/air, low/high, earth/sky). I feel destabilised. In this frame of mind, and trying to allow myself to stay destabilised, I go back to how Ken talks about writing. When I write, I write with Ken in mind. Ken is in my mind, in me. I have a picture of his reading as I write, in his office at home, or, having printed my writing out, in his kitchen with a coffee. I imagine how he might be responding—how he might write in the margins, handwriting at an angle to the text, words, phrases, question marks. I imagine his wanting to rush to respond, trying to find space amongst the demands of his children, his work, and his relationship. I have all this—Ken—in mind; I have my experience of the writing, feeling, thinking Ken within me. And therefore, this is one way in which “we” write together, even when we are apart. Without Ken—or Kenness? Or is it Ken-ning, the verb?—there would not be my writing. So here is another take, then, on the ‘disturbance’ that our relationship has engendered (an interesting word!) in my family, where Tessa asks “were you having sex with a furry Cornishman” and Holly asks if Ken and I are gay: I would suggest that our writing together is indeed a kind of love-making. I think that this is what Deleuze means when he says, “Writing carries out the conjunction, the transmutation of fluxes ... one only writes through love, all writing is a love-letter” (Deleuze & Parnet, 2002, p. 38).

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Ken Gale
Institute of Education
Plymouth University

Jonathan Wyatt
Counselling and Psychotherapy
The University of Edinburgh