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18. BARE ARSED STORIES

As with any collective biography, this text draws upon the writing, speaking and remembering of my co-biographers, namely Ann Rippin, Jane Speedy, Marina Malthouse, Anne O'Connor, Peggy Styles and Louise Younie.

INTRODUCTION

Collective biography as a method draws upon the earlier memory work of Haug et al. (1987) in its form, bringing together a group of 'biographers' to share memories of a common experience, in this instance 'love,' and through talking and writing develop a collective 'biography' which "produces a web of experiences that are at once individual, connected, collective." (Davies et al., 2006, p. 18). Richardson uses the crystal as an image for new, different forms of qualitative writing practices and collective biography is one such form of writing, a crystal face through which the individual writers reflect, refract, grow and change both collectively and individually (1997, p. 91). The many angles and variations in the shapes and forms of crystals give us a sense of the diverse, multiple voices of a collective group of writers.

The starting point for writing together in this collective biography group was 'not knowing,' and despite the fears and anxieties, it felt as if we set out as equal collaborative researchers to participate in the continuous process of creating and transforming meanings about love (McLeod, 1997, p. 104). There was a sense of Laurel Richardson's "fields of play" that would give us permission to loosen the hold of received meaning (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005) and see where it took us.

At its most basic, this piece gives an example of collaborative writing. It is a piece extracted from an extended piece of writing that a group of five women created as part of their formal study on a collective biography unit as part of a professional doctorate. It outlines some of the methods we used, and gives examples of the writing we produced. Our collective biography was about love. The group consisted of seven disparate women, from one who is at the beginning of her career to one who has been retired for some time. Although we were brought together by an instrumental need to complete our coursework, we wrote for some time after the unit ended through the sheer joy of writing and inquiry. Over time, perhaps we strayed from the strict spirit of collective biography and at times we have acted as a support group for each other going through various physical, spiritual and emotional crises. In this way, perhaps we modeled a form of love. This chapter, however, engages with a pressing issue for collaborative writing groups: how much to trust other members and make oneself vulnerable and how

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much to hold back and protect the self. How much, in fact, one is free to bare one's bottom, and has the confidence to do so, and how much one needs to stay safely covered up. We talked about this as a group in terms of taking off all our clothes and jumping in.

TAKING OUR CLOTHES OFF AS A METAPHOR

Taking off all our clothes and jumping in was a metaphor used in our first proper round of writing and sharing, on the first day of the collective biography module. We had done some warm ups, writing in response to a poem and sharing experiences of being loved (practicing the collective biography discipline of write, speak, respond). The conversations about love wandered widely as we sought for areas of common resonance. We were about to try on critical scrutiny; how would it be to respond using the starting points of 'what struck a chord for me,' 'what I vividly imagine,' 'what was not clear to me was ...'? We were discovering each other very rapidly for, "In (other) peoples stories we hear their feelings, thoughts and attitudes" (Etherington, 2004, p. 75).

Later, reflecting on our journey-so-far together, we noted that some of us started by taking off all our clothes and jumping in, others were more circumspect, waiting to be sure. The diversity of approach to surfacing/choosing memories to share enriched the process, and mirrored our experiences of love—sometimes we had needed certainty, at others we had just fallen for it. We commented that:

Taking your clothes off is easier now than at the beginning ... we have developed intimacy ... Perhaps easier with our mature relationship ... [otherwise we] might have created a space to write but not a place to share ...

We realised that our hearts had to be engaged in listening to these stories because this was not head stuff only-, it was embodied work (Cixous, 1997¹; Davies et al., 2004²). Whatever our chosen theme had been this was going to be rich and messy, and working with love as our topic only made it more so. As Foucault (1997) urged:

In order to establish the right relationship to the present—to things, to others, to oneself—one must stay close to events, experience them, be willing to be effected and affected by them. (Foucault, 1997, p. 18)

Later, having created through our writing cycles a mass of material showing our shared experiences which disrupted and challenged the borders between culture and agency (Speedy, 2008), we could successfully move on to better cultivate an attention to the conditions under which things become evident, and how they can then so easily become seemingly 'fixed' (Rabinow, 1997). But at that point we talked about the push and pull of sweaty romance, we spoke of the encodedness of '*... and they lived happily ever after,*' asserting that there was more to it than that; the sustaining of love, the sheer hard work of it. Then, to counter the anxieties about what it was to do collective biography which some group members were voicing, we decided to just start, to try doing 'it,' and through doing it find out

more about what ‘it’ was. So in a way we all jumped-in at this point, but some kept their clothes on, some donned bathing costumes, and some of us just dived in buck-naked.

The ‘jumping’ metaphor continued and was used in the performance of the work we had produced together on the unit, which we presented to the other group of students on our programme. We had a shot of cliffs and the sea as a backdrop, and in discussion with other students after the presentation we talked about the process as involving jumping-in, being on the brink *and* stepping back; “it didn’t progress neatly, it was a bit like a spiral.”³

The term ‘*taking your clothes off*’ came to be used for writing that made the writer vulnerable. When writing of our experiences of love there were multiple dimensions of nakedness/vulnerability. These included writing fearlessly, exposing emotions, and sharing stories of intimacy. Later we started to speak (via email) what had been previously unspeakable: the rants; the diversities that were somehow not attended to, including the queer and Crip stories (McRuer, 2006); the feelings of exclusion in our own group process. We were, in the words of Davies et al. (2004, p. 369): “learning to write and tell stories of self against the grain of hegemonic discourse,” and in doing so understanding more about our subjugation (Foucault, 2000) and it was unsettling and exciting. We sought to explore the ways in which we, “as individuals are made social, are discursively constituted in particular fleshy moments” (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 4), and we explored how these distinct lines of power exerted themselves in all of our lives, not just those *incorporated* (Drewery, 2005, drawing on Davies & Harre, 1990, and Sampson 2003) or *othered*⁴ (De Beauvoir, 1949; Rose, 1995) by sexual preference or disability.

One member of our group had written:

I remembered you: the excitement, the ambivalence about ‘here we go again’ as I fell in love with your ideas, found a common place of radical passion ... with you there might be so much unspoken common ground, so many conversations we started and knew we could continue over years, with long breaks and short breaks, but no breaks in our connection.

Since you died last year I still keep up my end of the conversation, and yours. After 29 years I think I can do that ...

While reading her writing she had to stop, silenced temporarily by tears. She commented later:

I remember sitting in the group, unable to meet anyone’s gaze, feeling exposed but also heard, supported by a circle of women who did not rush to comfort me, to stem the tears, but gave me the space to re-find my voice and complete the reading. This experience of moving into intimacy with the group, and at the same time managing my own boundaries by choosing to make eye contact or not, and by the tone of voice I used to read, were as important to me as the nature of the content of my writing.

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Later in the life of the group other examples of managing our boundaries, and our intimacy emerged: Members sometimes chose to send writing to the group by email rather than reading it out loud, or held writing back until they felt confident enough to share it.

As we reflected on the round of readings and responses, it became evident that we had different styles of approaching the writing; that a small subset of the group had chosen to *take off all their clothes and jump in*, but that others had other approaches. This was a helpful piece of facilitation at a time when no-one was quite sure of what was expected of us, of what we expected of ourselves. It enabled the members of the collective to be themselves. As two of us wrote later that first afternoon:

... Working in pairs felt 'safe,' working in a group made me want to find a place to hide my vulnerability from penetrating, possibly critical, eyes. So I took refuge in abstraction – and a very modest degree of emotional striptease—voicing my concern and admitting to what I perceived as a 'weakness' brought me the support of fellow group members and this was immensely comforting—they had earned my trust – whether I shall be able to jump off the cliff, dive into the deep end or trust myself to teeter on the tip of the love pyramid—only tomorrow will tell.

Attracted and repulsed wanting to jump off the cliff into the waves below, frightened, will I, won't I? I want to say ... One of the starting points for me is ... No, I can't ... One, two, three ... I've jumped. Jesus, the water's freezing, best not linger, keep moving.

One of the jumpers later noted in her own process of '*will I? won't I?*' on that first evening:

So where am I in all this questioning?

Is love yet another arena for self-doubt and uncertainty?

Waiting to make sure the invitation is aimed at me.

Glancing to check I'm doing ok ...

How much should I reveal?

What will happen if I expose how I really feel?

Should I just play the 'being-cool' game?

What happens when Sue takes off all her clothes and stands on the canal bank naked?

One of the group wrote about an incident on a canal bank and returned to it on the second day, developing it into another story, one of full blown and consummated passion:

What happens when Sue takes off all her clothes and stands on the canal bank naked? I'll tell you what happened:

We went for a walk. We were still playing at being friends, being neighbourly. I don't remember who suggested it, the walk in the dark along the towpath, over the lock and onto the canal bank. Lying together in the still-warm grass I watched the rain falling on one side of the (ship) wide canal. I swear it never rained on us as we lay there. Not that I would have minded the rain. It was 1976, a long dry summer, and rain became just a memory to us.

There was a magical feeling about the night; everyone else in bed in the farmhouse we shared, the lights out in the houseboats moored by the lock. Seeing the edge of the rain shower—being protected from it—seemed to perfectly fit the mood. After all if I could have you like this, then I could have anything, everything.

When we finally rose to return home I couldn't bear to put my dress back on, but strolled wrapped only in a shawl, the long silk fringes sliding on the backs of my naked calves as I walked, bare footed and bare arsed.

I remember too our perfect parting—you standing in the doorway of my half of the house, silhouetted against the moonlight. The white horse in the paddock moving to meet you as you walked past to your own door.

I lay in my wide bed later, awake and thinking of tomorrow, and tomorrow. A long moment of trust-without-fear, rare and seldom repeated.

It was this piece of writing that gave the group another descriptor; *bare-arsed* writing. Not that all love entails the brazenness of 'bare-arsed,' but most love requires commitment of some sort—requires the lover to jump in. Our vocabulary was growing.

BARE-ARSED STORIES

There were a multitude of forms of emotional striptease from group members, and each contributed to naming and making the lines of force or power visible (Foucault, 1980).

We spoke of the frenzied stage of passion, and the less spoken about process of subsiding into a rich maintenance cycle:

She loved me right through that beginning love and loved me into ... [whoops] well a bit of a frenzy really, and then into a kind of steady passion ... not often spoken of, steady passion, but then again she loved me still through long painful years of separation, as I loved her. We are old-ish now and have been together for a quarter of a century. It is not a restful peaceful kind of loving, it is a love of domestic disharmony, of loud voices and shrieking and broken doorknobs and smashed plates and tearful remorse. It is not an easy kind of love. But there is, nonetheless, a slow, passionate,

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humdrum everydayness to our love, which we would once never have dreamed of, never have believed would be possible or, perhaps even allowed ...

We explored adolescent passions and the pressures on young women to dance ‘the fringed edges between slut and saint’:

Discovering that girls who are bubbly, kind and smile an awful lot are popular, go to parties and have pucks of friends. They lure with glossy hair and spotless faces enhanced with runny egg yolks, used tea bags and cooling cucumbers. They dress in fashionable ‘up to the minute styles,’ wear just the right make-up and dance the fringed edges between slut and saint. Obviously the way to go. No boy in his right mind, I learn, will pick a grumpy, acne-faced, demanding girl, who lacks both style and submission. I willingly capitulate and fall madly in love with the male line-drawings, always taller, incredibly handsome, kind and protective. I resolve to become their cartooned counterpart. Only then may I have the possibility of living happily ever after.

Pedagogy and love kept appearing, with its distinct power relations between students and tutors:

I continue to be fascinated by the seduction element in love, by the unspeakable element of seduction in the pedagogic relationship. Because it is so unspeakable doesn’t mean that it’s any the less real ... They may, we may, perhaps have to be seduced into learning. The condition necessary for leaping off into the unknown that real learning entails might require the recklessness of the heady rapture of cheap love songs.

I do not want to have affairs with my students. I do not want the excitement of illicit evenings down the dark end of the street gazing into their eyes over candlelit glasses of rioja. But I do want Lorde’s erotic charge ... I want the escalation of energy that Lorde describes. I want the zest that Joyce Fletcher describes.-

... What can I say about ... the enormous pulling power that ‘difference’ has and how cautious tutors have to be, of WHAT A TIGHT ROPE WE SOMETIMES TREAD ...

... How can I explain convincingly that the most unlikely sex object of an overweight middle-aged lesbian like myself becomes a sex object simply because of this fascination for otherness, this desire for exotica tangles with ascribed and systemic power relations between students and tutors.

One of the aspects of bare-arsed stories is the sense of the writer being overtaken with desire. Sometimes this desire was for objects or experiences, and sometimes we remembered yearning for a time when we would be able to walk bare-arsed:

... she went back inside the dark hallway and came out with one of those cards, all gold and silver shooting stars and hearts dripping with blood ... a totally glamorous and mystical kind of a cigarette card ...

Are you a catholic my child, she asked.

No I said and opened my mouth to as I really wanted to add, 'but I could become one if you want' but nothing came out ...

Ah, she said well never mind never mind, thank you so much, as she slid the card up somewhere in her sleeve with a conjurors grace and shut the door.

Bugger, I should have said yes.

... But by then I wasn't interested in the hems at all and as they unravelled from the long tacking stitches I hit on the idea of trimming the fraying hems back to a 'neat' edge – and for a short while you could barely see the difference between my cut edge and the other girls' hemmed ones.

Eventually of course I was found out, chastised and humiliated, but not before several weeks of trimming-off the frayed edges, seeing my mat gradually reducing in size, with no way back. However in those weeks I got to do the chain stitch, the cross stitch and the stab stitch, I discovered that, for a while at least, I could have my way and get to do the fancy stitching without the labour of the hems.

I adore the freezing, numbing sea that turns my fingers and feet a ghostly white. He teaches me to swim, holding my chin in the icy waves while my frenetic wiggling keeps the rest of me afloat and I dream about the moment when I am brave enough to launch myself alone.

Out of my beloved sea, a special treat, I wear his tweedy sports jacket and feel its rough, warming, smoky weight melting my limbs. My ravenous face is filled with crisps and bread and love.

She knew she was seriously out of time when she got back to the cruiser. She had just an hour to get back over the bridge and log back in at her base. She broke off the bar-chain and unscrewed the bleeper. She was an outlaw now. No matter. This was her moment. This was what she'd been waiting for.

Within some writing issues of coercion and infatuation appeared:

We walked along the beach between groups of people, all it seemed included bare breasted women, all with intimidatingly pert breasts. It fed directly into my lack of confidence in my physical self ... of course we too lay down, I too took off my clothes. I too walked along the line of the seemingly tideless sea, topless.

Love, lust seduction, infatuation, they are all related ... and most people, or rather most who fondly imagine they are living normal lives have never had to really think about much of this, never mind articulate it , examine it, have

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it pored over. They have no language for all this, the syntax is missing from their lexicon. That's the problem I think and the exotic in them, the canal-walking bare arsed, I wonder if I'd like it if ... unexpressed part of them gets over excited in the moment.

Our walking bare-arsed feels risky, exciting and inciting because it challenges the social hegemony, questions taboos, is transgressive. Mary Douglas (1969), writing about the distinction between nature and culture, uses the emotive term 'a polluting person' for one who has developed some wrong condition or simply ... crossed over some line which should not have been crossed and this displacement unleashes danger for someone (1969, p. 4).

We were noticing the lines: both crossing them in our talking-together, and telling each other stories of crossing-over, of being 'a polluter.'

THE INTER RELATIONSHIP IN/THROUGH THE WRITING—
WRITING THAT 'CALLS'

When we met up again the following February we very rapidly identified the inter-relationship in our writing. The pieces sent since we had last met, most of them over the Christmas period, had an impact for everyone in the group; stinging/inciting/encouraging others into more writing—or not-writing. One member of the collective spoke of a 'considered silence' as she struggled with the realities of her relationship with her father as others of us wrote about our own relationships with our fathers. A choiceful disengagement became another part of our shared writing/responding grammar, a decision to keep our clothes firmly on and our vulnerabilities protected. As she said later 'there's something about NOT responding to somebody's writing.' The same group member wrote, noting the significance of the unsaid:

Some have written from their homes and then emailed the group. Some responded with warm comments, of sisterhood, or with more writings ... I kept silent, but that didn't mean to say that I didn't have a response or a reaction as I read the emails. Far from it!

I am struck by ... the unsaid in narrative. This morning, we were talking about our relationships with our fathers. This was because Anne and Sue had written about their fathers over the Christmas period, one in response to the other, across emails. Whilst explaining why I hadn't responded, my heart pounded in my chest as I spoke about my father. When I received their emails, I was angry with him, for his hurtful and rude behaviour towards me in response to my efforts to be kind ...

She also tracks the unearthing/surfacing ability of the collective biography form, as one piece of writing 'calls' a response from others, and the way that this can be experienced in an embodied manner (Davies & Gannon, 2004):

Recounting that recent memory resurfaces other similar memories. It's as if the effect of each one is additive one upon the other, and the strength of my heartbeat is equal to the amount of adrenaline produced by a lifetime of disliking his behaviour.

So the jumping-in, bare-arsed nature of one member's writing can draw forth responses from others and enable a new level of sharing at times. This changes across the lifetime of the group. Those of us who did jump straight in can remember both anxiety and permission in the group as a result of our 'taking off all our clothes' in the first round of writing. Some were intimidated, others encouraged to undress. Later in the Collective's life, members' responses to pieces of personal/intimate writing shared over the Christmas period was to use the evocative nature of the writing as a springboard:

I found your piece very evocative, it really had the sense of being an after Christmas present, it also gave permission to show writing, very personal writing. It was a brave role play.

'Me taking my clothes off again.'

'I loved that it gave me a chance to be naked too ...'

And again:

'It [the collective biography] is very important at this moment in my life and my study ... when X's email came through it was like this gift... it felt like she was setting the stage for something, it was very important ... and I felt here I go: one, two three ...'

'It sounds like you had a response but of a different kind ... lovely.'

'I'm just thinking what an act the withholding is, the concrete not doing it ... when looking at narrative it's the unsaid the silent, so much about the unsaid, what I could think ...'

Writing about the process—to jump or not to jump?

'Maybe that is where I am—for the moment. I feel excited by the prospect of moving into unknown areas but at the same time I like the idea of weaving some familiar strands—content, process and readings ... My priority is to stay connected with the energy and creativity of last week in whatever way possible so quickly I attach and send.'

The discovery of the silent response, the unspeakable and the unspoken has enabled a moving-on at times, a release from stuckness. As in relation to the exchange of writing and speaking about fathers (below), where one of the speakers retrieves forgotten memories of her father as caring and trustworthy (teaching her to swim and to ride a bike), through the process of sharing stories of absent fathers with other members of the group⁵:

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‘The one moment I softened to Bronwyn Davies was when she wrote of a photo of her father holding her as a baby looking loving. Interestingly I’ve been thinking about a photograph of me sitting on my father’s lap, its easy to get stuck in anger and not be able to remember the good times; my father holding me, teaching me to swim, and the bicycle. It’s easy for me to think of him as useless as a father ... the themes are in the air ...’

Working in the group engaged and enabled one in Foucault’s terms to “get free of oneself,”⁶ free of one’s inhibitions one might say. Resulting in enjoying what Cixous described as:

Writing’s ability to take us beyond the limitations of the self to a terrain where other understandings and perspectives come into view. (Cixous, 2004, p. x)

Opening the doors for both writer and reader, this willingness to disclose oneself then supports the process of co-creating meaning through the unearthing or evoking of memory, feeling and response to each other. We were using writing as a method for “producing different knowledge, and producing knowledge differently” (St Pierre, 1997, p. 175), allowing the reader/listener to viscerally inhabit a world, and so be engaged.

As we spoke of this facilitating aspect of the ‘taking off all my clothes’ writing gesture in the group, one of the group wrote of our process in her notes:

Giving the gift, breaking open the space for others to follow on, as they will.

For, as Davies wrote of the experience:

It allowed us to transgress, in moments of bliss. (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 96)

One of the group who includes clowning as one of her methods of inquiry wrote:

And I was reminded of a movement, and imagined how that movement or gesture might be enacted by the clown: where the clown takes a bold forward jump, only to then demonstrate her acute misgivings; backing away, hand over her mouth, looking anxiously at the audience, ‘should I have?’ But the clown would then find her courage and move forward again, boldly, brazenly ‘oh hell, let’s do it!’

Over the lines she crosses.

AN EXTENDED GRAMMAR OF SHARING

Together, over time, we have challenged those pressures that kept us from breaking cultural taboos (Butler, Douglas). We have worked to develop our own version of Davies and Gannon and Haug’s strategies for staying close to events (Haug et al., 1987), for exposing our enmeshment in multiple, hidden and seemingly fixed lines of power.

Early on in our collective biography process one of us wrote, drawing on Davies and Gannon:

We asked ourselves what our first memories were of:

- Power as multiple lines of force, adding one’s own line of force to one’s own submission to another.
- Conducting the self as appropriately submissive, desiring to submit to another.
- Becoming a line of force, desiring not to submit, refusing submission.
- Working to change thought and to change relations of power.

To do this we have developed an extended grammar for how to share the data that is our lived experience, and to help us not to re-create oppressive lines of force in our relations with each other.

We have deconstructed terms, and repossessed them:

To continue to use them, to repeat them, to repeat them subversively, and to displace them from the contexts in which they have been deployed as instruments of oppressive power. (Butler, 1992, p. 17)

This includes: jumping in *and* wavering on the brink; getting bare arsed *and* keeping our clothes on; finding our voice *and* staying silent; choosing between email *and* face to face communication; writing that is considered *and* recognising and legitimising ‘rants’⁷. And what we have attempted to do in this piece of writing is to highlight the importance for us of working through and with our vulnerabilities: deciding when to jump off cliffs and when to remain on the edge at a safe distance, and when to stay comfortably fully dressed and when to run into an encounter with the world gloriously bare-arsed.

NOTES

¹ Cixous writes that memory is stored as language on the deep surfaces in/on the body, and that memory is embodied language (Cixous & Calle-Gruber, 1997).

² Davies and Gannon describe this process as producing ‘a truth that is worked on through a technology of telling, listening and writing’ (2006, p. 5).

³ Video of post presentation discussion. Filmed December 2008. Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol.

⁴ Rose (1995, p. 116) explains this process of constructing the Other or Othering as ‘defining where you belong through a contrast with other places, or who you are through a contrast with other people.’

⁵ Davies and Gannon stress that this process is not uncovering ‘buried’ memory (2006, p. 5) or a ‘real self’ underneath (2006, p. 7), but making the workings of power on us visible, the lines of force (Foucault).

⁶ Foucault wrote of being driven by ‘not the curiosity that seek to assimilate what it is proper for one to know, but that which enables one to get free of oneself’ (Foucault, 1985, p. 8)

⁷ Ranting was positively encouraged, once someone had the courage to start to rant, as this email shows:

Hi X—replying to your rant—OK to rant—and doing it by email means you/we can rant quietly (being told THERE IS NO NEED TO SHOUT makes me f-f-f-furious). My cousin (who had seven children) lived in a house called ‘Ranters.’ I thought it appropriate. luv X

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Sue Porter
Norah Fry Centre, School for Policy Studies
University of Bristol