

Wisps of smoke that linger: poetry as reflexive writing and living theory

Karen Partridge

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Abstract

This paper is a personal account of the use of poetry as a means to elaborate and explore the inner talk of the practitioner in order to open space for the generation of new meanings, challenging single stories to create the possibility of multiple other tellings and creating reflexive space. Poetry is described as a way to challenge traditional knowledge and honour alternative knowledges, harnessing creativity to enrich thin tellings, deconstruct strong emotion and critically explore the positioning of the practitioner. A means to open space for creating new ways to move forward in therapy, in systemic training and in the development of decolonial practice. In this process a number of challenges are raised as questions for further exploration; how to create ethical positionings from which to write first person accounts about clients, therapeutic relationships and striking emotional encounters and how to address issues of consent and the potential appropriation of others' stories. As systemic therapy moves into a new era these questions come to the fore in terms of creating new knowledges, moving towards epistemic witnessing, decolonising practice and training and creating "lenticular futures" (Pillow, 2019).

"We like to think we live in daylight, but half the world is always dark; and fantasy, like poetry, speaks the language of the night."

Ursula Le Guin, 1979, p.11

Citation Link

For as long as I remember I have collected stray snippets of poetry and quotes, like plucking a hair from the shoulder of a loved one, a strand at a time, encapsulating something important about that moment, that visceral experience. One of my earlier memories of this fragment gathering was at the beginning of a lesson in the early years of my secondary school; we girls filed into the stuffy classroom and settled at each individual wooden desk, worn with ink stains and holes where compasses had drilled in interminable moments of boredom. Suddenly there was a frisson among

my closest allies, there on the blackboard in chalk was scrawled a quote, like a tantalising tendril, which we grasped with eager greediness. It was a fragment, incomplete and teasing, opening space for dreaming.

"There are moments like wisps of smoke that linger and I believe"

This was a beginning.

I think what was important about this quote, which was then hastily copied onto dog eared teal-green rough book covers, was its incompleteness, its openness to multiple interpretations, the pointing to something bigger whilst at the same time being so completely and uniquely situated in that moment. A speech act (Jensen and Penman, 2018) evoking multiple levels of meaning whilst also being viscerally tangible as a striking bodily experience. John Shotter and Arlene Katz talk about social poetics and the elaboration of striking moments and the way in which rich story development can occur in a single poetic moment (Shotter and Katz, 1998). Even now, over fifty years later, I can smell the classroom, the dry dust of chalk, the milling of schoolgirls around the teacher, the swishing of hair, the rough texture of green school tunic, slouched socks around ankles and creeping stifling idleness and boredom suddenly awoken into excitement, rippling and spreading-like-a-rash amongst the small group of devotees.

Into adolescence, like many young people, I began to write poetry, never shared, often of unrequited love, but also of stray encounters, moments that struck me as odd or unusual. This process has continued throughout my life. Sometimes poems are linked to significant life events, a death, a birth, a life-threatening illness (Partridge, 2020) but more often they are linked to a specific encounter or event which has in some way struck me emotionally, stopped me in my steps, winded me, perhaps for the same reasons as that quote, pointing to something bigger yet uniquely situated in the encounter of that moment. Tom Andersen (1993) describes the way in which he paid specific attention to these "striking moments", moments that are "living", "poetic" and "arresting" and it is these moments which have captured me and created a force for expression. Meaning is not so much a meeting of individual minds as what Lowe (2005, p. 4) describes as the "shimmering dynamic of inter-bodily movement and dialogically structured encounters", whilst Karen Barad describes intra- action as primary, "a dynamism of forces in which all designated 'things' are constantly exchanging and diffracting, influencing and working inseparably" (2007, p. 141). Gail Simon, in writing about silence in therapy says:

"Sometimes I have a sense of ghostly presences, out of focus movements between people, indecipherable texts, muffled communications and the massive dimensionless silence which can follow an explosion."

Simon, 2012, p. 4

This describes the reverberating bodily sensations I experience which lead to a desire, an urgency to write. This dabbling in poetry could be seen as an exploration in inner talk, arising out of the profound intra-actions of life, a relational knowing or "knowing from within" (Shotter, 2016).

There is a long tradition of using poetry and other forms of creative writing in therapy and more recently in research (Etherington, 2004; Silverman, 2008). Kim Etherington describes the deep value of reflexivity and reflection on our own practice and personal life, the importance of story and

narrative in understanding both ourselves and our clients and the effectiveness of paying attention to the whole range of our own and our clients' experiences including the physical, social, spiritual and emotional. In poetic inquiry, an increasingly prominent form of arts-based research, researchers create poems from qualitative interview data and are expected to become both social scientists and expressive artists (Faulkner, 2019). Dawn Thibert demonstrates this process in her article in the previous edition of *Murmurations* (Thibert, 2022). Susan Walsh (2016) combines art-based practice and contemplative practices in research and teaching to focus on honouring presence in educational settings. Laurel Richardson has written extensively about the power of writing through her ethnographic narratives which have been described as unflinching and boundary-crossing in the way in which she speaks to her own life experiences, through illness, dementia and dying, creating an interplay between literary and ethnographic writing (1990, 2004, 2022). Wanda Pillow (2019) writes about a new engagement with research which she terms epistemic witnessing, requiring active engagement with feminist, queer and decolonial scholars and other knowledges, a decolonial attitude and reparative reading in order to move to a position of ethical responsibility and to the multifaceted forever shifting, changing quality of "lenticular futures" (Pillow, 2019).

Since writing poetry was and is an intrinsic part of my lived experience it inevitably also became part of my experience as a systemic therapist. In this article I hope to illustrate the way in which I have used poetry in my work as an ethnographic journey, a journey in which I am fully present and open to both my own and the other's narratives, in work as a therapist, supervisor and trainer. I know that in sharing some of my innermost thoughts and feelings I am taking a risk. This is in itself important to me. We invite our clients, students and supervisees to expose their deepest dilemmas and share their inner talk and it feels to me an ethical duty to be prepared to do the same as a therapist, supervisor and trainer. Writing this article has been a challenge in how to share powerful and potentially provocative thoughts and feelings in a way which does justice to my clients and my readers with moral integrity. This writing can be seen as some preliminary clumsy steps to writing in a more embodied and personal way, opening space for other forms of creativity and expression, in an attempt to encourage reflexivity in my readers and to open space for learning. In particular I hope to show how I have used creative writing to challenge myself, face difficult thoughts and emotions head on, explore them in close detail in order to create reflexive space. Breathing air into constricting corners which unprocessed could lead to knee-jerk reactivity or frozen paralysis, with the aim of developing the courage and resistance to move into generative, reparative, decolonising practice. I hope to be "leaning-in", to becoming what Vikki Reynolds describes as a "fluid and imperfect ally" (2010, 2013). I hope that the sharing of hidden "inner talk" will provide learning for colleagues and that the use of poetry as material in non-academic form may encourage reflexivity in other practitioners.

Two Legs in one Hole: A tale of reflexive repositioning

This first poem is probably the most straightforward. I am including it in its entirety as I hope it illustrates within the poem itself the reflexivity I am exploring further in the subsequent, more complex snippets included later. The poem sits with a few others which have "systemic subtitles" meaning that I see them as being useful as systemic teaching tales. I have shared this poem on reflexive re-positioning recently with supervision students. I hope it raises a humorous smile! The poem tells the story of how I, aged five, went to school with two legs in one hole of my knickers, and was endlessly and incomprehensively uncomfortable. At lunch time my grandma, "Nanny", noticed

what the problem was and sorted it out. This tale speaks to a familiar process in systemic practice, once stuck in a discourse, reflexivity is needed, to notice, to step out and to make a choice to step back into an alternative more helpful story, pivoting between discourses as Kevin Barge (2016) would say, and exploring different positionings (Partridge, 2007).

Two Legs in One Hole

Age five, the nursery class

Home corner, class singing

Warm milk souring.

Nadia's sharp nails impaled in

Heather's pale flesh.

Mrs Montague

Scratching her bottom.

Storytime

I am constrained,

Restricted.

Can't move, jump or run

Painful elastic twisted and tight

Eats red tracks

Into plump pink thighs.

Legs bound together,

A teetering, shuffling

Two legged

Three-legged race.

Home for dinner

Nanny says

"You've got two legs

in one hole of your knickers"

And rights the problem

Days since

It strikes me

Such bondage

Is all too familiar

How often since

Have I felt thus restrained?

When all that is needed

Is Nanny's touch

Step out

Replace both feet firmly

Back upon the ground

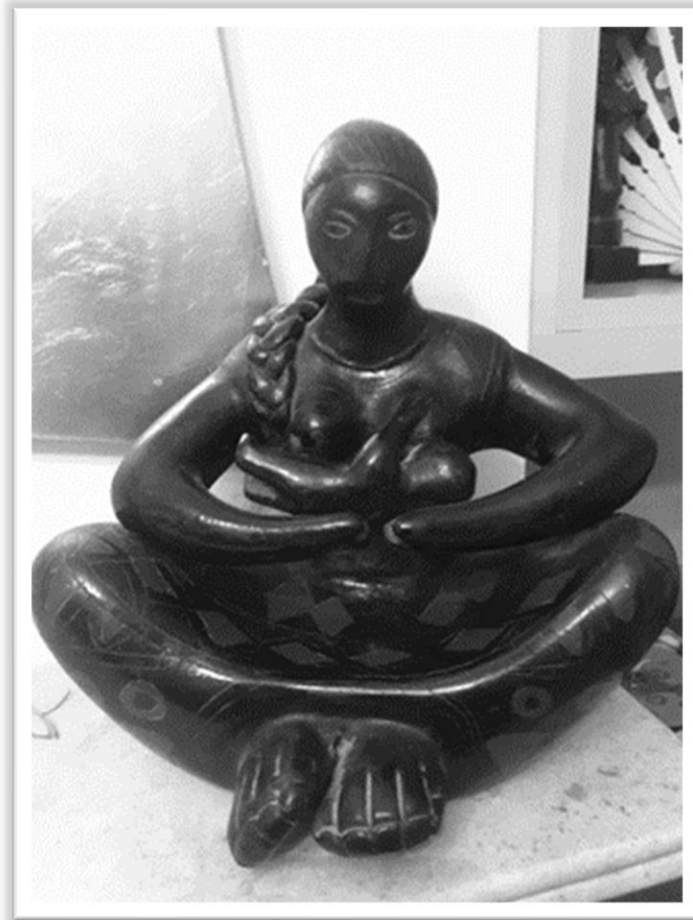
One leg

In each hole

Black Pottery Figure: Knowing from within, a narrative of deconstruction and construction

Sometimes I share with systemic students my “Bundle of Treasures”, a collection of objects symbolising important ideas informing my life and work (Partridge 2010, 2021). Each object in this bundle can be described as a fulcrum or lightening conductor for a certain set of meanings, relationships and theoretical ideas. The Black pottery figure, illustrated below, is one of these objects which has special meaning for me.

This poem is an example of poetry enriching and elaborating narratives leading to the possibility of new emergent meanings, allowing me to explore my own experience and become reflexive to it. The poem tells a story at two levels, the overt story tells of the purchase, accidental breaking and repair of the Black pottery figure. The covert inner story runs alongside, through the three trimesters of my pregnancy, telling of the “breaking” of hope and rupture of relationship, through the arrival of fear and the subsequent troublesome “repair” of my relationship to my partner and also to myself. I use this poem to illustrate the concept of dominant / “boastful” and subjugated / “shy” stories, the dominant story here being the repair of the figure, illustrating the possibility of deconstructing a “problem” story and weaving new, more generative and hopeful stories from the fragments. The subjugated story is the story of my pregnancy, fear of an “abnormal” baby and the pain, difficulty and potential impossibility of repair, given what has come to the fore.



Together these intertwined stories are richer, though more painful, shifting from what Boje (2001) describes as a “terse telling” to a more complex multifaceted telling.

“A terse telling is an abbreviated and succinct simplification of the story in which parts of the plot, some of the characters and segments of the sequence of events are left to the hearer’s imagination.”

Boje, 2001, p. 1

I use this as an invitation to students to look beyond the initial telling of a story to explore depth and detail, to slow down and invite further elaboration.

A cracking,

Crunching,

Grinding,

As red African clay

Fragments

Beneath car wheel

Pressing red into yellow

This episode encapsulated in the poem came to illustrate a process of deconstruction and construction, the pulling (or crashing) apart and weaving together of fragments into new meanings whilst writing the poem enabled me to explore contradictory and disconcerting emotions and thoughts. The writing creating a significant shift from the specific and ordinary episode in contextualised time to the extraordinary, universal and timeless. A teaching point, initially for myself but potentially for others. At the time of the purchase and breaking of the figure I was pregnant with my second child, which no doubt is what attracted me to this cross-legged nursing mother figure. Full of expectant joy and trepidation, my hopefulness was crushed by what felt like the devastating news that there were markers indicative of potential Down's syndrome. I felt I might consider a termination, whilst to my German partner this was an abhorrent echo of Nazi eugenics. A shard was wedged between us, a rift disrupting our relationship and threatening my pregnancy.

Expectant father

Cleaves to

German soil

Deep brown

And green of

Teutonic forests.

Unwanted heritage

Thrusts

Its ugly

Perfect dream,

Eugenics,

the final solution

He cannot

Condone.

The Black pottery figure was painstakingly repaired from a multitude of fragments by my partner, our relationship was restored, and our child was found to be "normal". All apparently in its place - except for the shocking exposure of the fact that I could have considered termination as an option, echoing societal discourses I was vehemently opposed to about the "worth, productivity and labelling" of those who are different within our society.

All is clear.
A perfect
daughter
thrives within.
We are delivered
From the edge of hell,
Yet we have met
The genocide within
And have not
Firmly
Stood against it

In this example poetry captured an extraordinary juxtaposition of time and place, what Michael White (2004), borrowing from what Bourdieu (1988), described as “exoticising of the ordinary or the domestic.” This inner talk (Rober, 2008) explored narratives of love and hate, life and death, worth and worthlessness, nationality and persecution, history and inheritance. The uncomfortable, but ordinary, contradictoriness of being. I see this poem as reflexive writing informing my work and teaching.

“The sociologist who chooses to study his own world in its nearest and most familiar aspects should not, as the ethnologist would, domesticate the exotic, but, if I may venture the expression, exoticise the domestic, through a break with his initial relation of intimacy with modes of life and thought which remain opaque to him because they are too familiar. In fact, the movement towards the originary, and the ordinary, world should be the culmination of a movement toward alien and extraordinary worlds.”

Bourdieu, 1988, pp. xi-xii

In this way I think that poetry has enabled me to “exoticise the ordinary”, offering a different lens for infinitesimal exploration of a relatively ordinary everyday occurrence which might have passed by with little comment. Poetry can be a means to illuminate the way in which “the ordinary” can become a portal to exploration of the extraordinary, a step into mystery, opening a kaleidoscope of other potential meanings and a commentary on our shared human experience. In this way the ordinary and the extraordinary can speak both to the detail and immediacy of everyday human experience and to the unknowable mystery of the cosmos.

Lessons in Death and Colonialism: A therapeutic story

A particular poem has been the impetus for writing this paper, or rather a particular therapeutic relationship has been the inspiration. It is the story of how I actively chose to work with a person I knew was dying, although I had the choice not to, how I treasured our rich connection and deeply mourned her loss when she died, having known from the start that this is how it may end. I hope that it shares my deep admiration of my client and hope that others may be inspired by this. I have called her "B", although that is not her initial and I have checked that she cannot be identified from what is written here. This in itself is awkward, I would like to be able to shout about her from rooftops and when she died, I remember having the fantasy of her face and name on the sides of buses. I greatly admired her. However, no story, no poem is ever innocent in its rendition, and raises questions about the politics of writing "about" others. This work with B had a powerful effect on me and I felt I had learned an extraordinary amount from her. From the moment we met she was challenging and confrontative, undoing my therapeutic stance and challenging me to meet her where she was.

*B. determined,
navigates stairs, chairs, lifts,
and arrives.*

*This is not an ordinary arrival,
not a slide in quietly and discreetly arrival.*

This is a Coming.

An out-of-the-ordinary arrival.

this is B.

making her presence known.

We met weekly for over two years and quickly the focus became talk of my whiteness and her Blackness, of racism and colonialism, of nationality and slavery, art and religion, alienation, neglect and abuse. We entered into "death talk" (Fredman, 2018) and spoke of life and death, the possibility of a transplant which may or may not be successful, funeral plans and afterlife or none. We explored what it would mean as a Black woman to have a white or a male organ donor in the context of past abuse by men and the oppression of racism.

In those two years I learned in an acute, visceral way about her life and the effects of colonialism, slavery and racism on her history in the West Indies and in England. I learned of the racism experienced in the health system and the consequence of her missed diagnosis. Most of all I learned of her ongoing resistance and fight to be recognised by her family, her relationships and by society as herself. Before working with B, I had a strong sense of social justice and the injustice of racism in our society and felt the imperative to explore differential power and the effects of the "Social Graces" (Burnham, 2018), with clients and colleagues. The work with B taught me so much more about the implications of racism

in everyday experience at an individual and intergenerational level (Afuape, Bisimwa, Jemmott, Jude, Nijabat, Olorunoje and Simpson, 2022) and also at a global level where racism was the ideology driving the colonial past of the empire. This warmed the context for me to be more fully open to the challenges raised by the Black Lives Matter protests (Kelly, Jérémie-Brink, Chambers and Smith-Bynum, 2020; Harris, 2020). As a result, I am in an ongoing process of embracing further learning, engaging with reparative reading (Pillow, 2019) through joining reading and discussion groups, creating brave spaces and joining listening spaces for exploration (Arao and Clemens, 2013; Jones and Russell, 2020). Laying a foundation from which to explore the effects of white supremacy and the dominance of western knowledge, reclaiming queer and indigenous knowledges (Butler and Byrne, 2014; Reynolds, 2020) and moving towards decolonising practice in systemic teaching, supervision and therapy (Hendrick and Young, 2017; Simon 2021; Chin, Hughes and Miller, 2022).

It was such a privilege to work so closely with B. When we first met, she brought her artwork to the sessions to show me, paintings of flowers and horses. She expressed a desire to do an art foundation course. B had been diagnosed too late with a terminal lung condition and the first shift into embodied art on this course was the exploration of this experience in a piece she called “Whitewash”. This involved a constructed pile of all the letters sent by a series of medics, ignoring and minimising her concerns about not being able to breathe, fobbing her off as “anxious”, as “not using an inhaler properly”, as “a hypochondriac”. All this was blanked out by thick white paint – the whitewash of racism. This piece was quickly followed by vivid depictions of cells, almost three dimensional with paint, and finally at her end of year art show with two enormous red and black canvasses entitled “Les Poumons” (French for the lungs). B had created new lungs, at last, allowing her to breathe.

This is particularly pertinent in the context of the murder of Eric Garner, Jimmy Mubenga, George Floyd, and the many other Black people who have been murdered after saying they could not breathe in police custody, by security forces, in psychiatric settings in the US, UK and elsewhere. It also evokes those who died at Grenfell, many suffocated by smoke, the subsequent sabotage and suppression of attempts to hear truth, seek justice and challenge the ongoing acceptance of violence against those who are disadvantaged by our racist society.

Below is an extract from the poem I wrote about B, our relationship and my learning from her. She had given her consent for me to share her story if I thought it might be helpful to others – as if she was offering it as an outsider witness account (White, 2000), although B is not now here to witness its sharing and impact for others. Writing about conversations with B but without her, the poem has felt like a howl into the abyss but it is also my attempt to “say hello again” (White, 1998) to a person and a life very significant for me.

I sit before you watching,

with mounting pleasure

and excitement:

The slow transformation

taking place before me.

Your slow

powerful integration
Documented in art,
from still life;
bottles, plants
and soul-less sunflowers,
to red hot, hot blood.
Pouring and coagulating.
Red compounds and white
raised fiercely
from the page.

The glimmering,
glittery, glossiness
of "Les Poumons".
A monumental testament
to your lungs,
your courage,
your vigour
in embracing the chasm
separating life and death.

Your teacher described them
as, "flashy but deep."
"Just like me", you said,
a deep, rich gurgle
erupting from far within.

The poem is a long and raw and exposing version of my experience of B and relationship with B. It is full of love and admiration for her courage and also expresses the deep and terrible loss of her life, sorrow for the suffering she endured within it and admiration for her magnificent reclaiming of it. Writing the poem exposed a desire in me to somehow claim B, keep a part of her alive. Her friend who informed me of her death asked me if I would like one of her paintings, I felt I should say "no" as I was

afraid of the strength and immediacy of my desire to possess, this stopped me from saying “yes”. It felt forbidden to acknowledge my strength of feeling for B and how much I would have loved one of her artworks. I became curious in the poem of my motivation, fearful that it might be colonising rather than a straightforward act of love. I said to her friend that I thought her art should be kept together as a testament to her life, though I doubt that this happened. I regret this, who knows what became of them?

I sit before you

noting my own desire

to hold on to you.

Keep you alive.

Possess a piece of you.

Own a painting.

Grasp, hold, steal?

Behind closed doors

to make a part of you

my own.

I sit before you,

recognising this

as the seeds of abuse

the germ of racism,

buried within me.

Corroding my insides

and corrupting professionalism.

Noting this yet knowing that,

I must scourge this out.

Never to act upon it.

Can we speak of this?

The most forbidden of all sins,

how seeds of abuse

might colonise

the relationship set up to heal.

This noticing of strong “forbidden” feelings overlaid my sense of loss. It connects with my encounter with the dynamics of eugenics in the Black pottery figure poem, both poems revealing uncomfortable, potentially unacceptable feelings in need of further exploration. Writing these poems has been a way to deconstruct my experience further, allowing me to become curious and reflexive to my lived experience and to choose to do something different in response, creating a systemic pause, a space for choice to choose “small acts of resistance” (Wade, 1997) in situations where inaction means being complicit with the dominant discourse.

“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”

Viktor Frankl, 1985

In any one moment in our deeply ingrained racist society, it is possible to step into malignant positionings (Sabat, 2003) which oppress by creating “otherness.” This has been the dilemma in writing this paper, how to write about another without “othering” - maybe that is impossible because it is impossible to step outside of the power relationship of client and therapist, Black and white, dead or alive.

B presented her art work in the end of year show of her course, I was invited and was privileged to be able to attend and talk with her tutor.

Here is B in her own words in publicising her exhibition:

“My work at present is about a journey and exploration. The journey is one of self knowledge and acceptance of the inevitability that life eventually comes to a close. It is an artistic journey to find my creative voice and my artistic identity. The exploration is that of blood cells, both white and red and the macabre beauty of respiratory bacteria.

I’m exploring white blood cells because of its relationship with the immune system and the relevance it has to my current illness. By doing this I hope to make it less frightening, a known, rather than the unknown enemy.”

I feel a deep sense of relief and calm that at last her voice was being heard and celebrated. Her exhibition was written up in two local newspapers, telling her story and including pictures from the exhibition.

Art and Writing as Therapy and Celebration

I recently had the privilege of attending another end of year art show where systemic therapist and artist Liz Day, and fellow artist Suzannah Goulding were exhibiting artwork generated through their own experiences of living with cancer, dying, death and grief (Flourish, 2022). Liz has previously written with her late partner on “Living with Dying and Bereavement, Reflections on repositioning through performance” (Day and Charing, 2018). These artworks resonated deeply with me. The detail and specificity of both Liz and Suzannah’s exquisitely explored individual experiences pointing to our shared human condition, transcending the particular, revealing the universal and in doing so creating a repositioning which is liberating. The power in the artwork and the artists’ courage in facing death

and grief head on reminded me of B and her artwork - stark reminders that death and cancer affect us all but that embracing the experience beyond flinching can be beautiful, creative and life affirming. Art has the capacity to create new meanings and new identities. Art, music, poetry, film and song can be ways to create space to listen, experiment, allow meaning to emerge, to hold life's challenges in reflexive space, breathing around them, leaning in rather than avoiding, enabling reflexive repositioning and embracing other knowledges.

This writing. A decolonising process

When the call for papers for this edition of Murmurations arrived, I sent the full poem about my work with B with trepidation to the editorial team. It was an imaginary conversation based on our "real" conversations – an inner conversation between my voice as therapist and my imagined voice of B. I would argue that in our work, there is an ongoing need to imagine the other with an ethic of care (Byrne and McCarthy, 2007), in order to feel in tune, deeply connected and fully present. It is also important for the creation of ideas and hypotheses, to help formulate questions and check understanding and as illustrated above to interrogate strong feelings and positioning, exploring relational reflexivity in the same way that a psychanalytic psychotherapist would explore their countertransference. I worried that in creating B's voice my writing was potentially colonising. Was it inappropriate for me, as a white British, privileged woman to imagine B's voice, to attribute thoughts, meaning? Was I imposing or appropriating her voice despite the fact that it was my internal voice and I was in dialogue with it? Something didn't feel right but it also felt important, and important here to draw attention to the dilemma. I could not let it rest. I felt a pressure, that there was something in this experience I wanted to share. The reviewers encouraged me to write into my process of writing and learning. This jogged my memory. I suddenly remembered that a short time after B's death I wrote another poem which I sent anonymously and was published in Context magazine. It was about my mourning of B, which felt like it had no place and I had no space to grieve – only the empty space of the Tuesday morning session which should be hers, no-one to share this with when my non-systemic supervisor saw me as "too involved".

This second poem was a watered-down account, a "thin" telling of the richness of my relationship with B. At that time, I felt I should hide the strength of admiration, love and grief that I felt. One poem too strong, too raw and the other pale in contrast. Perhaps this paper is an attempt to bridge that gap, an attempt to negotiate that liminal space between life and death, between deep connection in the context of a time, of the lived experience of the client and the therapist, of self and other. Gail Simon (2020) speaks to these dilemmas in her article on ventriloquism and ghost-writing, how to write from an inside and an outside position of one's own position whilst taking the utmost care, creating a "supervision of solidarity" and embracing the responsibilities of being an "imperfect ally" (Reynolds, 2010).

Turning towards the difficult

Looking back, I notice that my work with B was my first encounter of working closely with a client approaching death. Writing this now I am also curious about the way in which this confrontation with illness and death was helpful to me when I myself was diagnosed with breast cancer some years later.

I think poetry has helped me to face what emerges, to sit with it and not turn away, to be fully present, both in my own life and in the lives and of further clients. Another snippet sustained me whilst I was undergoing lengthy treatment for cancer.

... "Be gentle with what is" ...

There has been in recent years a relentless pursuit of the positive in some approaches in family therapy (Flaskas, McCarthy and Sheehan, 2007). I have found this stance uncomfortable as so much of my own subjective experience seems un-held and un-heard by the focus on the positive. Poetry has been a way for me to explore, "be gentle with what is" and to exercise some compassion. In helping me to re-position it has also enabled the beginnings of what is called in Buddhism, fierce compassion, that is the way in which one acts for justice in the world (Harris, 2014; Tropea and Ward, 2021).

I am hoping that this article may invite readers to consider how they can honour themselves as responsive feeling people who cannot help but be affected by the work we do, and who in fact *need* to be affected in order to deeply connect as fellow human beings and be helpful to their clients. In CMM, "deontic operators", the rights, duties, affordances and constraints of every action are embedded within every action (Pearce and Pearce, 2000). We need to be rightly preoccupied with developing relational ethics which are flexible, responsive and agile to meet every new situation.

This article raises many questions. For example,

- How can we write about ourselves as practitioners and speak to the significant specific detail of those we are working with, and our relationships with them, in a way which can create learning for others whilst also safeguarding confidentiality?
- How do we decide on boundaries in our writing or teaching? How can we create ethical ways to write about professional relationships which are robust but fluid and flexible enough to do justice to different situations, different contexts?
- How do white people write Black people into their narratives in ways which ensure respect, moving towards a decolonising approach?
- What do we do when people have died? Is that different from people we just are not in touch with anymore?
- How do we share stories without appropriating them?

These are questions for ongoing discussion and debate which raise some of the core challenges for our times, as we move into new paradigms which require different constructions of knowledge, inviting first person tellings, collaboration and a decolonising stance. Some of the recommendations for new paradigm research might fit well here (Reason, 2014). Is this aesthetically appropriate, politically timely, is it useful, does it enable systems to language themselves in new and multiple ways, does it open space for new meanings, new ways to go on? These are echoed in Gail Simon's eight criteria for quality in systemic practitioner research (2018). Poetry can be seen as a form of systemic practitioner research.

Drawn Thread Work

I have thought of the poems I have written as “drawn thread work”, an ancient form of embroidery which my grandmother and aunts practised, in which threads are drawn out of the fabric and the remaining strands are used to create lacelike patterns. I have some of these drawn thread work pieces which were created by my great aunts, which used to be placed under glass on dressing tables. I think that in writing poetry I am tugging at a narrative thread, it can be painful and raw, sometimes joyous, requiring utmost honesty and an exquisitely close connection to the words, feelings and events arising in relationship as speech acts in which these narratives have arisen. It is what we do in therapy and in teaching and supervision, creating space and hoping to create patterns together. Here I have used poetry as a self-reflexive act, an invitation to practical ethical theory making, a space holder – holding space, for pattern, for otherness, for deepening awareness, a means of connection with clients and colleagues opening possibilities for multiple interpretations. A reminder of the temporality and spaciousness of our existence. This invitation to write about writing has been liberating, bringing into focus a process on the edges of my life. I hope to use it more and more explicitly in future with clients and colleagues and in teaching and training. Poetry, like singing and art creates space enabling these wisps to breathe into life through the privileging of mystery in practice, enabling suspension of time and timelessness, spacious moments, like wisps of smoke that linger.

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Author

Karen Partridge, PhD, is a systemic psychotherapist and clinical psychologist currently working as course lead for a systemic supervision course in the NHS and independently as a consultant, supervisor, therapist and mindfulness teacher.

E-mail: karenpartridge@icloud.com

URL: <https://karenpartridge.co.uk>

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