

Our multi-storied bodies: in practitioner-centred conversations

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Abstract

We will share five fragments of a collaborative exchange where multi-storied bodies practices are brought to practitioner-centred conversations. Our written dialogue woven throughout will illustrate how these practices create opportunities to disrupt professional binaries such as personal/professional, thought/feeling, and individual/collective. We will show how each turn in our exchange was taken and how this has shaped the practice. The story of this collaboration is at its heart, and we will therefore begin there.

Welcome

Helena and Poh met online at the end of 2021. It was Poh's first winter in Quebec and Helena had moved in with her parents following her father's diagnosis of terminal cancer. Helena was looking for something but did not yet know what this was. She got in touch with curiosity about Poh's narrative therapy consultancy practice after learning about her 'storying experience cards'. They agreed on engaging in a couple of practitioner-centred conversations as an experiential way of encountering ideas and practices. The video fragments included in this piece were from their second conversation. Their collaboration has grown from these conversations to include facilitating a workshop together and co-writing.

When we saw the 'Beyond Binaries' - Call for Papers from Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice we welcomed this as an invitation to explicitly explore our shared conversation through the lens of binaries and hierarchies which has been a treasured aspect of this shared conversation and our multi-storied bodies practices. The space existing beyond binaries starts to give language to a location we found ourselves encountering in conversation. We wanted to lean in and exchange around this emerging space that seemed to welcome and host a multiplicity that lay beyond binary's singular truth-seeking gaze. Together we found it wasn't simply a task of naming a singular binary in action but rather

tentatively and creatively navigating the intersecting and overlapping dichotomies, ladders and rankings. As we would learn, opportunities to expose the competition, hierarchy, and processes of disqualification that prop up these ladders and rankings would become available to us through some unexpected and surprising conversations.

Helena

I was drawn to the idea of the multi-storied body with a growing determination to disrupt some of the practices I'd become uncomfortably comfortable with over time in my work (Rose, 2009). As a clinical psychologist and systemic family therapist in the UK, I saw an importance was being placed upon particular structures and methods of practice that risked closing down curiosity, limiting opportunities to encounter alternative identities, disciplining particular methods of storytelling (e.g. *psychological formulations*), and maintaining the status quo of professional *technologies of the self* (Foucault, 1988).

However, sudden and prolonged experiences of illness, change, and death in my own life had left me wanting richer and more heartfelt connections with the people I meet and consult with. The musician and songwriter, Nick Cave (2020), writes so tenderly about grief and how it invites us to become *witnesses to the thrilling emergency of the present — a series of exquisite and burning moments, each extinguished as the next arises*.

Michael White (2005) invited us to consider our expressions of pain and distress in terms of movement rather than dualistic categories such as affect/cognition, emotion/thought, mind/body. Rather than being static or separate, these expressions can be seen as dynamic movements that transform us, helping us to evolve and become different from who we were before. Our human expression is an interconnected process that actively shapes and changes us.

I had arrived in a liminal space in my personal and professional life, a place of transition, un-learning, and moving between what was *known and familiar* and what might be *possible to know* (Vygotsky, 1986). Together, with Poh, we have embarked upon co-researching the multi-storied body in a professional context to develop practitioner-centred practices that have the potential to both disrupt and enrich the conventional approaches to conversations such as *supervision* or *consultation* that take place in our workplaces.

Poh

I first described 'multi-storied bodies' practices in 2015 in a series of workshops about 'narrative practices responding to trauma and contexts of uncertainty'. This naming supports me positioning in a counter-movement to the objectification and commodification of human and more-than-human bodies. In practice it helps to keep an accountable eye on how practices of extraction seek to influence the architecture of relational space, co-research and how we engage with our lived experience. I find explicitly referring to *our* multi-storied bodies invites us to consider our collective participation in the lives of all bodies (human and more-than-human) and what becomes possible

when we depart from ideas of individual ownership and competition in an era of neo-liberalism.
(Freedman and Combs, 2020).

This form of decolonial feminist co-research (Epston, 1999; Epston, 2014; NiaNia et al, 2017; Watkins, 2019; Federici, 2020; Vergés, 2021) is a labyrinth of ethics, positioning, and practices (not methodologies) that resist *solely* clinical, biological, and scientific approaches to consulting with our bodies, by acknowledging them as having multiple members each with their own stories, relationships, and access to power. These practices have been emerging alongside people and groups across diverse contexts, especially in response to experiences of displacement, injustice, and exclusion (Brady, 2018; Lee, 2018, 2019, 2023). A central question has been - how can we engage with our (or others) lived experience in an ethic towards non-extractive ways. In doing so, refusing to reproduce power structures that have us stacked up against ourselves and each other.

The term practitioner-centred invites us to begin by situating ourselves through our own experiences when reflecting on a theme that arises in a therapeutic or collegial exchange rather than commencing by describing (our perception) of the 'other(s)' location, experience and (often clinical, diagnostic or evaluated) histories. Practitioner-centred is also used to refer explicitly to the dissolution of artificial borders between categories of practice (professional/personal, informal/formal, paid/unpaid) and to start from a wider landscape of practice. Commencing the co-research from the position of lived experience invites participants of the conversation to explore themes and ideas that can be relationally negotiated rather than starting with what is permissible or acceptable within professional and normative constructs. In the spirit of deepening the shift towards practices *with body members* as opposed to practices implemented upon *our bodies* we cast this research question into our communal practice - How do we have conversations that are practitioner-centred as a form of super/peer/co-vision that starts with the practitioner's lived experience? And together define and design the co-research project as shaped by context, intentions, limitations and ethics.

Our multi-storied bodies invites us to attend to how our definitions of what constitutes a body are shaped. When you read *our multi-storied bodies*, what constitutes body for you? What or who is immediately available when you think of *body community*? On account of your unique location in the world, what or who was overlooked? You might have a sense of where your physical body is ranked on the hierarchy of bodies (Taylor, S. R., & Brown, B, 2020), or your dearly beloved pet, or the tree outside your house, or the river that's been covered over (Lee, 2024). Making visible the ways in which bodies are ranked and assigned value create the possibility for us to intimately and ethically co-research how value is assigned between different members of body community - we can both notice how members are ranked and also what kinds of relationships are happening between members on account of this. Collectively we can accompany each other to expand, through remembering, our landscapes of community - more-than-human figures, bodies of knowledges, bodies of rituals and practices, ethical and political bodies.

This practice is asking us to view every conversation or exchange as community practice and refuse what our eyes have been frequently trained to see - an individual conversation/exchange with an individual body.

Fragment 1: Linger between movement and meaning (4. 25 mins)



Helena

This fragment introduces a political dimension through descriptions of being *imprisoned*, the silencing of ‘other talks’ and the experience of ‘all eyes on me’. There is resonance here with Foucault’s metaphor of the panopticon as a method of social surveillance and control (Foucault, 1977). The fragment begins to show that voices are not granted equal rights, and are heavily influenced by professional discourses around legitimate expertise and knowledge (White, 1997). These *contested discursive territories* of the professional disciplines shape and distort our relational landscapes and can close down our conversational possibilities with those who consult with us (e.g. Rose & Edwards, 2024).

The questions that are offered, for example, *what kind of moving up is this*, invite an experience-near engagement with the politics of practice and professional knowledge. I remember feeling sparked by this question - to name this movement as a *retreat* brought forth the idea of pulling back (i.e. contracting) towards safety as an action with intentions. This now makes me curious about why this position seemed to promise safety (and what kind of safety this may be).

Poh

Metaphor landscapes such as that exemplified in “all eyes on you” invite us to shift from binary notions of ‘the problem’ versus ‘preferred’ stories. Metaphors offer us the possibility of co-researching experience without predetermined ideas (often advocated in clinical circles) of dividing the problem from the preferred stories or “negative” and “positive” stories. In contrast, metaphors offer multi-directional movement. Metaphors invite us to be rigorous in the search for experience-near language through working simultaneously in different realms - imagination, body, intellect, spiritual, different time scapes. In such a way, metaphors offer reprieve or pause from the ongoing onslaught of highly influential ideas. Imagination and play allow a different way of moving, as well as refuge from scrutiny (Lee 2019; Wang & Lee 2024).

In this fragment I notice that each time there was a sense of ‘coming to an answer’ we slowed down and lingered at this juncture, resisting the temptation to continue the story in a linear fashion or rest

on a quick conclusion. Whenever there was a description of something changing, we were looking to describe the movement. Binaries can form between the movement and the meaning. Suspending meaning making and taking time to engage in close, nuanced co-research made it possible to step out of the binary's shape and intentionally wove spaciousness (Wang & Lee 2024) around the experience. Suspending and staying in between movement and meaning made it possible for other members of body community to contribute if they wished. This centred multi-storied explorations of experience rather than adhering to a hierarchy of whose account of the experience was heard and valued (at the exclusion of others). Exploring how other members of the body respond to experiences of 'everything moving up' draws on the ethics of collective participation in the project of engaging with lived experience.

Fragment 2: Moving between timescapes (6.16 mins)



Helena

The invitation to consider changing timescapes created possibilities in the relationship between head and heart, an opportunity to make a response to the experience of being *wounded* or *put down*. I wondered how the response might differ if it was made in the timescape of the past compared to the present (more reflective, wanting repair), or perhaps in the future (an image of how the relationship could be, how it is wanted).

Griffith and Elliot (1994) suggest that we meet each other in *emotional postures* which include our attention to the self/others, how we are poised to respond, and how this positions the other in turn. They differentiate between postures of *mobilisation* (poised for action; attention focused outwards) and *tranquillity* (relaxed, reflecting, daydreaming; attention focused inwards). This conversational sequence considers emotional postures across different timescapes - how these members of the body community met, or might wish, to meet one another.

This question about timescapes seemed to come from noticing a shift in the body and feeling - articulating sadness - from something more active to a more *reflective*, almost tender experience. The movement created the question - *shall we stay here?* and there were disagreements about this too (e.g. being *pulled back* to the episode - which body member was asking this?).

Poh

Thanks to Helena's questions about timescapes we can get explicit about *engagement with* and the relationship *between* time, space, place and body (Caycedo et al., 2019) Naming 'Timescapes' invites me to consider 'realms of time' that might not be captured by linear colonialist constructions of time. While linear time invites binary thinking whereby we consider that something is happening either in the present or in the past, circular time or a perception of time as simultaneous disrupts this paradigm. It invites an expansive conceptualisation of the different ways we might comprehend, sense and move with time.

Locating within timescapes is in itself a category of questions. As Helena described, it was important to be explicit from *when* and not only *where* we are asking. This connects me with those moments, responding to trauma, where it has become apparent that we can be attending to the consequences or the effects of trauma in the present moment, and it has simultaneous effects for other timescapes. It has been immensely relieving for those I've consulted with to know that they can choose from which timescape they attend to trauma and its effects. As a practitioner I have found it freeing to discover that we can work in different timescapes and that doing so will have ripples and consequences for other moments in time.

'On account of what we are doing here in this present moment, if you check back in with that pocket of experience or that timescape, is anything shifting or becoming visible or apparent that wasn't noticeable before?'

Fragment 3: Helena and Heart exchanging (7.20 mins)



Poh

In asking Helena about coming down from the attic I was attempting to stay with a steady moment-by-moment movement in the storytelling of the episode which resists jumping on the dramatic arch, or the epiphany, or the key moments. This is different to some of the ways I have been schooled in eliciting lived experiences. It brings into question - *when are conclusions drawn and set down and who is instrumental in this process?* Trapped in the attic risks becoming the conclusion to the experience. If I hadn't asked what happened next and whether a counter movement (coming down from the attic) occurred, I imagine this would have had an influence on the conclusions reached or

the meaning made. Asking what happened next or how it was that Helena came down from the attic makes visible parts of the story that could have been overlooked.

Helena

The conversation shifts when Poh asks if I want to put this question to the heart; even the process of constructing a question for the heart has the effect of clarifying something important - *what keeps you going with this?* I am asking this question of myself, and yet also recruiting subjugated voices to enrich the response. In narrative terms, this form of rich story development departs from the more familiar plot/counter-plot movement across time and context, and introduces contributions from the body community. As I re-watch this fragment, I have a sense of who or what the *wider voice* might represent for me, and it fills me with emotion - there could be an opportunity to re-member these figures and develop the story further.

Poh

When the 'I' doesn't know or is unsure and uncomfortable with the individualised burden of responsibility to decide or conclude, members of the body community offer the 'we' to co-research.

This initiates and re-initiates a collective process towards what is possible to know.

By asking Helena to ask Heart, my hope was to place the initial question that elicited an *I don't know* back into the collective, communal space so that all who are present and interested to participate might have a chance to respond to the question. I remember being so warmed by witnessing the conversation between Helena and Heart. I witnessed a change in tone, words came really quite quickly. I was very moved by that particular moment. On account of our shared experience, I now often invite people to take the questions I've asked or suggested, and translate them or play with different way of languaging the question to see if it is resonant for different members of body community.

Helena

I've written down and love this question. This created intrigue, it was energising and intriguing because I felt quite stuck and was thinking "I can't reach for an answer here". When the conversation is 'peopled', such as when you are with a family or a group, new things become possible because there might be new contributors, new conversations can be had. Inviting the heart in as another participant felt like, "ah, I never even considered that!" It felt creative and fun.

Poh

We can be talking with our multi-storied bodies and yet in a single moment, I can notice how those relationships or that community gets *disappeared*. This disappearing isn't by chance, it speaks to the body/mind/earth split (Moreton-Robinson, 2000) and forcible disappearing and subsequent forgetting of who we can be in relationship and exchange with. I remember when you said, *I don't*

know, I wondered, “is this a moment where Helena might move back up to the attic as community is disappeared by the idea of the individual? One of my responsibilities as a co researcher, is to continually nourish the community metaphor. It is through relational collaborative practice that we keep community visible and accessible. Mia Birdsong (2020, pg. 14) powerfully reminds “*All of us have ancestral memory of what it’s like to live connected, interdependent lives. We may be cut off or too far away from these traditions to claim them, but we can listen to our needs, our longings, and through ritual, rite and practice build a way of being in the world that honours and makes tangible our connections to one another, to nature, and to spirit.*”

Helena

You can see the effect of this practice later in the conversation. Inviting the heart’s contribution makes a re-positioning possible when I talk about the ‘we’. In fragment 1, the heart is imploring, feeling forgotten or dismissed: “I thought we had a deal?” By fragment 4, the ‘we’ has shifted and the wise, ancestral voice has said - “we’re going to redefine this...” where *this* is the experience of a rising up, a solidarity of voices, and a reclaiming of power.

Fragment 4: A Different Kind of Power - re-distributing power between body members (7.26 mins)



Helena

When Poh asked me about ‘politicising’ this re-positioning between the heart and the attic, it invited me to examine the power relationships at play. When I responded with ‘*it’s a different kind of power*’, I could *feel* the effect of the questions. There was an awakening to the possibility that this was no longer a game I needed to play, that we’d redefined the terms somehow, and that stepping outside of traditional structure and practices (the ‘technologies of the self’; Foucault, 1984) was an act of re-distributing power between body members.

In remembering (though paraphrasing) Audrey Lorde’s famous quote, “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (1979), there was a connection to her critique of feminist academia for its white, heterocentric bias, leaving out marginalised voices, and using the same logic that

justifies oppression to attempt to disrupt oppression. Bayo Akomolafe (2023) also cautions us: *'Activism is increasingly instrumental, meaning it's a form of power that is tied to the logic and algorithm of the status quo. This makes activism, even in the search for justice, a creature of the status quo, which renders hope and justice, as ironic as that sounds, a creature of the things we're trying to leave behind'*.

In this fragment, I recognise that silencing or dismissing marginalised voices, and using the language, form, and practices of the professional classes was not helping me to disrupt the power of the attic and the culture of the professional disciplines that supported its dominance (White, 1997).

Poh

I don't want to subscribe to the idea that the Heart is innately good in a bid to stay away from totalising practices founded upon dualistic either/or frames (White, 2007). To do this I need to be aware and suspend dominant cultural ideas about Heart to stay close to a more naïve inquiring position (Mataira, 2023). If we only stay with Heart, or the other 'capital cities' of our bodies (Gut, Stomach, Head - in my particular cultural context) we play into cultural stories that keep us looking in one direction. We exclude interested and implicated members of body community (and neighbouring bodies) from what's available and permissible to be co-researched.

When we pass this through the lens of binaries, we can feel the tug to choose one over the other. How do we resist elevating Heart or any member of body community at the exclusion of others? Yes, at this particular moment in our conversation Helena named it - Head had more access to power and is wielding that power in certain ways that evokes the Strict Teacher. However this does not disqualify Head from other contributions, knowledges and positions at different moments and in different contexts.

Fragment 5: Meeting Hands outside of the Binary (11.19 mins)



Helena

Poh is talking with me about *the wrestling* and I wonder how this conversation could be easily re-located within a more standardised framework of psychological intervention. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) for example, offer possibilities for acknowledging and turning towards this wrestling whilst moving towards actions that are guided by personal values and commitments (Hayes, et al. 2012). What other possibilities, however, would be lost by such an attempt to re-language and re-position my experience? Perhaps the spontaneity or humour. More likely, however, would be the opportunity to *politicise* the experience. Batia and Priya (2021) demonstrate how “*psychology is, wittingly or unwittingly, complicit in advancing the neoliberal discourse of self*” (p. 423) through the export of Euro-American psychological discourses such as self-actualisation and mindfulness training to the Global South.

We invite contributions from other body members, and something has interested my hands. The potential for an experience-near yet politicised conversation becomes visible when I notice how hard the hands work and yet how unacknowledged they are. The conversation feels liminal at this point, able to move in any direction, and yet the noticing takes me to an appreciation of how some members of the body community (and their contributions) are privileged over others.

There is a link made to how power is distributed in England across the “North-South Divide”. The Toxteth Riots in Liverpool in 1981 (the year I was born, less than 20 miles away) were a response to the police reputation for stopping and searching young black men in the area. The economy was in recession, unemployment was at a 50 year high, and this was one of the worst-hit regions in the country. The Conservative chancellor Sir Geoffrey Howe suggested that, instead of investment and regeneration, the area should be subject to *managed decline*.

We might consider how consulting outside of these well-worn binaries such as mind-body, head-heart, thought-feeling might open doors to our own marginalised and forgotten voices. It also invites us to consider the *process of disqualification* of these voices.

Poh

I am moved when Helena names the North-South divide. No longer is the experience of division solely located on a single body. The distance closes between body and land. Shared experience and solidarity for the effects of dividing practices.

I do not see our task here as one that reverses privilege. And yet binaries attempt to seduce me into imagining that I am addressing power by doing so. The job is done - ‘*listening with the heart instead of the head*’ sounds so familiar. I recognise it from cultural stories of which I am raised in. But if we get caught in the head-heart binary we are still going about moving at the exclusion of so many other members of body community (and neighbouring bodies).

Making visible the relationship between head and heart, in this experience is not the objective, it is the beginning of the practice of dismantling binaries to co-create alternative shared spaces and to explore the possibilities that emerge from opening up the co-research to be inclusive of different members of body community and neighbouring bodies. Re-appearing community to establish a collective foundation from which to attend to experience.

What does shared space look like when not governed by hierarchies and binaries? What does it mean to extend welcome when difference has not been used to divide and rank who is worthy and who is not, of who is included and who is not?

These practices are dedicated to creating the possibilities of *re-membering or re-appearing* members of body community and neighbouring bodies who have been *disappeared* from view by powerful discourses and systems. Welcoming a different relationship of consultation and inclusion of community members has grown the visibility of *power-over practices* (Batliwala, 2019) I reproduce within and upon myself and that inadvertently travel through the questions offered to others.

Listening and crafting *with* the contradictions and differences has been most influential on experiencing unexpected movements, unlikely agreements and radical collaborations emerging from community.

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About the authors

Helena Rose

"Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world..." J. Jack Halberstam, The Queer Art of Failure, (2011)

I first encountered narrative practices nearly 20 years ago in my first steps as a clinical psychologist in training in the UK. I was prepared and ready to learn and apply the *technologies* of psychology, to formulate and design *interventions*, to *evaluate* the effectiveness of my work using *standardised* questionnaires and tools, and to be true to the established *evidence-base*. I knew this to be my task and yet it did not sit comfortably in my heart. My passions lay in film, literature, language, politics, and subversive and satirical comedy. I will be forever grateful for those supervisors and mentors who showed me the art of narrative conversation, crafting questions to travel with people to unexpected places, who taught me to pay close attention to *the small and the ordinary* moments that make up our lives on this earth, and nurtured my unwavering love for disruption and resistance which finds such a welcoming home in this narrative work.

Poh Lin Lee

*"I grew up with the bird song of kookaburras, galahs and magpies. With blue tongue lizards and dugites. Alongside creeks, bush and the open ocean. With bottlenose dolphins and stingrays. I breathed with humid air thick with spices and pandan leaves. With pepper plants, monsoon rain and dusky leaf monkeys. In relationship with snow and rivers these days.
Meeting marmots, belugas and squirrels. Amongst pines, juniper, bluets and lichen."*

At the heart of my practice I'm committed to non-extractive and decolonial approaches to engaging with lived experience, whether this be in therapeutic, community or creative processes. I like to practice at the intersections of different bodies - narrative therapy, social work, co-research, writing, teaching, and film/creative consulting.

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