An Aleatory Experience Using the Spontaneous Playing with Words That Led to a Chance Encounter with Self and with Writing Poetry as a Valid Form of Inquiry

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Abstract

This paper explores how writing poetry came to make a significant contribution to an exploration of writing as a form of inquiry which questioned whether the process of writing can uncover and successfully express tacit, felt sense of knowing – aesthetics in the sensory embodied sense. An initial aleatory exploration with words led to the discovery of the potential of poetic language to express the inexpressible creating a poetic moment, where object merges with significance, the former opening up the latter. The writing also suggests that writing as a form of inquiry opens up opportunities for a more ethical writing through which there is increased capacity for researchers to 'enter into the experiences of others' with greater sensitivity and awareness. The documentation of the stages of the dynamic process of writing demonstrates how writing as a form of inquiry moves through a series of written representations suggesting that there is no difference between writing and field work as the fieldwork and writing blur into one, increasing the problem of representation.

Introduction

Without question, as researchers, we are neither politically neutral, nor objective observers who are able to stand outside of the world, and it has long been established that a 'gendered historical self' is brought to the research process (Denzin 2001, p. 3) with this in mind I remain constantly mindful that all inquiry reflects the particular standpoint of the inquirer.

Using writing as the research methodology, the text that follows this introduction, is a representation of how writing as a form of inquiry becomes a process that can trouble further and destabilise that standpoint, opening up and bringing into the areana, other possible, sometimes previously unknown selves, that constitute the 'gendered historical self' of the writer. The writing process demonstrates how other versions of self are encountered when 'accidental poetry' appears in the writing field work, bringing to the foreground and giving body to otherwise embodied, felt or aesthetic,tacit knowing. (Van Maanen 1990, Einsberg (1998) Denzin (1997) Taylor (2002) Harding (2003)), as Richardson (1997) proposes, poetic representation reveals the process of self construction, the reflexive basis of self knowledge, the inconsistencies and contradictions of a life spoken of as a meaningful whole' Richardson (1997, p. 143).

The writing and the poems that follow are described as 'perfomative' after Kostera (1997) and, in this instance, the poems in particular are 'performative definitions' Kostera 1997, p. 347) – where the characteristics of phenomena, in his case aesthetic knowing, are too elusive to be captured in description. The performative definitions – the poems have accidentally captured how I have felt as a daughter, working in a family business, an Educational Organisation, whilst male members of the same family remain on the outside. This is a somewhat 'thin' description of the context (Denzin 2001) and the aim of this paper is not to pick up and rationalise these themes or those exposed within the performative definitions. Instead its intention is to demonstrate how writing as a form of inquiry blurs the boundaries of the research process and how poetry, as acknowledged by Kostera (1997, p. 345), can successfully express the 'ambivalence and volatility of the managerial experience', or as in my case an ambivalence of identity and perhaps intention within the work place.

From the chance encounters with self, facilitated by the field work writing, I have taken a critical stance on Denzin's (2001) explanation of acts of interpretation and understanding. As a result I suggest that researchers have a responsibility to constantly interpret and understand, their own position, before they seek to interpret and understand those of others thus avoiding what Denzin referred to as 'shallow, empty, spurious and one sided interpretations of others'. (Denzin 2001, p. 138) For writer/researcher to take responsibility for their standpoint, position is to take responsibility for what is written it is an ethical move. To write ethically is to move towards those criteria, ethics and morals that Denzin (2001) suggests should be used to critically evaluate qualitative research of the 7th movement.

The text that follows is a writerly text that performs as it progresses. For Barthes (1986 in Van Maanen 1990) research does not merely involve writing, research is the work of writing, and this writerly text, is therefore in itself, an act, a performance of research as well as an act and performance of writing. It is 'work' (Barthes 1986) that has invited theory in as it progresses, where theory, writing and thinking about writing, together co construct new meanings and understandings as the performance progresses. An iterative process. Given this understanding the introduction and conclusion and the tentative positioning of myself in these is somewhat of an adhoc rationalisation of the work.

The first four poems included in this paper were originally written as part of an inquiry and exploration in theories of Organisational Learning. The poems now, have particular value for me because they represent my initial encounter with writing as a form of inquiry. The final two poems are again 'performative definitions' but his time attempt to perform how it feels to be spoken for and spoken about. They evoke caution and embody the confusion, and betrayal that has been felt when being 'represented.' All of the poems embody risk, both in their sometimes clumsy form and in their content, and I take a risk in sharing them with you now.

I work in a family business and the writing of 'accidental' poems was my first experience of releasing previously unrecognised and, as yet, unarticulated thoughts about my working life. Writing poetry was never my intention, I have never thought of myself as a poet in fact I have never really liked the idea of poetry and admit that I have seldom engaged with it. I shied away from the apparent impossible linguistic conundrums that seemed to be designed to test my, or prove someone else's intellectual abilities, or, on the other hand, professed embarrassing, sentimentalities. But I have always believed in creative potential, visible or invisible, I have always loved language and I have often been troubled by the experience of intense, unarticulated 'knowing' that I have felt compelled to illuminate.

For my part writing in any form needs a provocateur, something that troubles and provokes the writing, my writing is often driven by some form of conscious or unconscious cognitive dissonance. A sense of lack of 'fit' where something that is felt contradicts and will not sit comfortably with what is more conventionally known. I have identified with others Harding (2003), Taylor (2002) Denzin (1997), who have described this as an aesthetic form of knowing where the 'knowing' is an embodied, emotional response in relation to some externality, and the aesthetics belong to the individual rather than to the externality.

My experimental writing which evolved into a more poetic form was an attempt to represent through language, my own aesthetic experience of organisational actions. Muske (2005, p. 9) describes writing as an 'intuitive process', she urges writers to trust their intuition. A risk that Denzin (1997) has acknowledged, 'the poetic self is one that is simply willing to put itself on the line' the risk in this instance being predicated on a simple proposition, that the writers' experiences are worth sharing. I felt something that I hadn't been able to articulate and so I trusted my intuition, took a risk, picked up my journal, a pen, and wrote.

As I wrote, I watched and listened as patterns and rhythms emerged from the initial scrawl within the lines of my note book. I noticed that the writing was bringing to the surface, recurring, thematic patterns that played around with organic story themes and images.

Within my writing I had found myself in a different space, I was playing in gardens bounded by intimidating high stone walls, I was digging deep in rich soils, unearthing nourishing, but inedible foods, and I was pitting myself against mythical monsters, finding myself imprisoned and escaping from imposing towers. For a while I enjoyed a temporal experience in a world evoked by the words of my text, such as Van Maanen (2005) speaks of.

But I also noticed that feelings had written themselves into the text, becoming entwined around the images; feelings that I was beginning to recognise and name as shame, guilt, desire. Questions about identity, ownership and rights had also pushed their way through the potential stories, bringing to light ambiguities, doubts and uncertainty.

It appeared that within these initial pieces of writing I had inadvertently provided a space into which was thrown a previously, unspoken, or repressed and overbearing sense of shame that I associated with my role at work. It was if I had surrendered my embodied sense of knowing and my 'other' selves, into a third space that my text had created. From this space these questions arose, 'If I work in a family business with a surviving parent have I really grown up? Is there still a significant part of me that remains a 'child' within an adult's world?

I wondered whether the writing had exposed and pressed on painful tensions located within the transition between child hood and adult hood.

Could this be an example of an 'addressive moment', 'when a text suddenly speaks to us in a manner that validates our experience'? Van Maanen (2005, p. 238) is it possible that the textual space in which I found myself had created a third position where embodied and embrained knowledge, Blacker (1995, 1023-1024) could meet and work together in mutual 'surrender'

Benjamin (2004, p. 8) Could I be moved to experience reflectively the meaning of my aesthetic knowing at the level of sensory and pre-reflective awareness, (Van Maanen 2005, p. 238) along with a more reflective, conceptual, embrained level?

I had become a reader of my own text, as Van Maanen writes, I was 'possessed by the allusive power of the text – taken touched and overcome by the addressive effect of its reflective engagement with lived experience' (Van Maanen 2005, p. 238). I recognised my sense of shame and from this position, new texts were born, ones that appeared in poetic form, in quick succession as part of a dynamic process that is written about here.

It was from this 'shameful' perspective that the image of the 'interrupted child', the first poem, was delivered. She stood there, right in front of me refusing to move. It was through her that a new direction to the writing emerged, a new space was created, one that abandoned the earlier themes and images as if they were discarded toys.

The Interrupted Child

Frozen in guilt, by guilt.
Paralysed.
Standing foolishly
in the once resplendent frills
that failing fast now mock
the pale petrified face.

I stand ashamed.
Caught red handed
in the debacle of an interrupted
childhood experience.

The 'interrupted child' was the first poem to arrive in my writing, and from this point onwards I found the writing taking on the mantle of the child's advocate. Firmly located within a child's world, the words that subsequently flew from the advocate's pen quite naturally and instinctively fell together into tiny vignettes that mimicked rhythms and images from familiar nursery rhymes.

The Rat and the Child

Have I sold my soul
To the Pied Piper?
Have I followed the sweet sound of security and comfort?
Am I lured away to live in exile
In a child's house
With children
In a child's role

Did I ransom my future
For a broken promise?
Did someone cheat on a deal?

Which part
Of this pied performance am I
The rat or the child?

The House

I hide in the house
But still tremble in fear
I am naked, recoiling
The pink fragile skin
Offering no protection against
the stick bones that make
this inadequate hide away

I lie shivering, waiting
I am naked
I am silent
I am impotent
I am doomed
As the huff and the puff
Of the past draws nearer and nearer.

The Impostor

Whose chair am I sitting in
who has the right to this throne?
Whose house am I standing in
whose futures are embedded
in these bricks and this stone?
Whose tenancy is this, whose land?
Whose present whose past
whose right and whose home?

Whose bowl am I eating from
To whom does it belong?
Whose sustenance lies within it?
whose mouths should be fed from it.
Who made it too hot
Who made it too cold?
Who cooked it?
Who seasoned it so well?

In retrospect I understood that each piece of writing alludes to important, known but silenced, aspects of my organisation's history and of my work along with the emotions evoked by them: promotion, remuneration, deals and compromises, bullying, power, and control.

Presented in Nursery rhyme genre, these aspects of work are, in effect, being played with, but at the same time the use of this genre transports us into the world of the child from which place emotions are experienced with raw, undigested intensity; emotions that are often born from misunderstandings, where acts of listening and speaking have failed to make sense or have even failed to take place.

Childhood, my work, any work, are places were so many intolerable, injustices can exist, as Höpfl and Linstead (1997, 8) acknowledge, 'frequently we experience our working feelings as painful, even torture.'

However, I enjoyed playing with the form and the content of the 'poems'. I was pleased with the mixture and ambiguous identities of the innocent and the sinister, the playful and the pained, the thief and the Queen, the victor and the victim. I enjoyed hearing the voices of the writer, the writing and the text, speaking as the self and other.

As a result I produced an 'artefact' a hand written book, an artefact that both presented and represented my' knowing' about my identity at work.

The book has become sacred in the secular sense; it provides a haven, a casket, a strong box that contains the words that convey the aesthetic knowing which was previously unheard, unrecognised, unnamed, but deeply felt.

There is so much more to discover and uncover from the work, as Linstead (2000, p. 82) so succinctly observes; 'the poetic moment is the merging of object and significance in which the former opens up the latter.' An opening up that provides opportunity for further inquiry.

Linstead (2000) considers whether poetry can have any place in the sociological or anthropological study of social and organised life. He presents his arguments with the caveat that precision and validity are criticism of such an approach, for example Van Maanen (1995) and Kunda (1993) cited in Linstead (2000, p. 84), but putting these doubts aside for the moment, my experience of playing with words and the ensuing 'poetry' has provided a way of telling the untellable about my work. It invites new possibilities.

It has also released me from what Taylor (2002, p. 827) would describe as 'aesthetic muteness' where the 'discourse about the aesthetic aspect of day to day experience is not legitimate.'

As Taylor (2002) warns, to not talk about something can lead us to deny that it exists.

From a post-modern perspective, it has brought into the foreground that which has been suppressed and silenced, and as is well known, stories of people trying to figure out who they are figure predominantly on the landscape of postmodern times.

Arthur Frank (1995, p. xiii) states 'Those who have been objects of others' reports are now telling their own stories. As they do so, they define the ethic of our times; an ethic affording each a right to speak her own truth, in her own words.'

According to Linstead (2000) poetry uses language to express the inexpressible. I experienced this for myself, albeit it in an amateur fashion, I have attempted to use poetic language to embrace that which is uncomfortable and troubling, as Ward (1979) cited in Linstead (200, p. 78) says: '…[poetry] does more than merely attempt mellifluity, it seeks to extend language beyond itself to say what language can not say to explore its limits in the face of experience.' Just in these small ways the use of poetry has opened up new learning possibilities for me and many further lines of future inquiry into my work and my organisation.

Finally, I wanted the poems to also speak for themselves; I wanted them to have any meaning for any one who encountered them, regardless of the meaning that my aesthetic experiences brought to them. I wanted readers to experience a collaborative relation to the text such as Newlyn and Lewis (2003, p. 74), speak of, in the sense that I wanted to provoke multiple and other latent meanings which could only be realised by reading and re-reading the poems.

When I originally 'performed' the poems I had intended to remove myself, literally from the finished product and though the pieces are recorded in the first person, my personal reading is tempted to locate the subject in the third person. Perhaps this transfer of subjectivity and relocation of the object will effect some relief in the painful pressure embedded in the child/adult transition as well as encouraging any other reader's own unique response,

but it may also be a subconscious attempt to remove myself from the work as a form of protection, an unconscious attempt to keep my voice on the sidelines Charmaz and Mitchell (1997). Perhaps on reflection it would be bolder to face the pain, and relocate myself back into the work, in this way these poems could be an example of how as Linstead (2000, p. 85) suggests, poetic language can engage in social science, as a 'form of self –exploration in coming to terms with aspects of the self revealed in the encounter with other…Where the field becomes the ethnographer's self – self and other merge as the other speaks within the self".

The finished product, which was originally presented in a bound notebook, was not meant to be self indulgent; the process may have been both indulgent and at times embarrassing for myself. A less critical perspective would recall Denzin's words, and recognise that I took a risk in writing the poems, a risk that was predicated on the proposition, that my personal experiences may have been worth sharing with others (Denzin 1997), they are perhaps examples of a 'writerly self, that spills over into the world being described with a particular hubris that is neither arrogant or insolent' Denzin (1997, p. 225).

As Davis (2005, p. 20) states, 'we talk about living inside poetry giving ourselves over to its voice sacrificing, if only in gestural ways, self consciousness, self concern, in order to liberate the primal life of poetry'

The work leading to the four poems, progressed through three different stages, the first as described above, took place in my journal, scribbles, ideas, thoughts, where the process of writing created a textual space into which aesthetic knowing spilled and exercised and played forming fluid emergent unself-conscious narratives the second was the production of the poems themselves, inspired by the addresive moment encountered when the writer becomes the self reader, this was the point that poetry became the most powerful and natural way to articulate the previously suppressed embodied knowing, which were finally presented and preserved as handwritten pieces in the small, sacred book. The final stage of the process was the reflections on the writing, a much more embrained process that worked with the embodied experiences and aesthetic knowing that explored the significance of writing and poetry as a valid form of inquiry. Each stage fed and developed into the next stage creating an organic process of writing, thinking, writing and thinking. a 'dialectic of inside and outside, of embodiment and disembodiment, of separation and

reconciliation', an example of how writing gives appearance and body to thought and as it does so, we actually, disembody what in another sense we already embody. Van Maanen (1990, p. 127)

The whole experience reflects the stages of self reflection that writing as a form of inquiry moves through referred to by Denzin (2005, p. 19), attributed to Richardson and St Pierre (2005) as, 'a series of written representations' where, 'the field worker's texts flow from the field experience, through intermediate works to later work and finally to the research text.' Denzin (2005) suggests that there is no difference between writing and field work, that both phenomena blur on into the other and this has been my experience during this process of encountering writing as a form of inquiry.

Conclusion

So, what can be understood about my organisation or my work from this process? Can this aleatory exercise contributed anything to my own or other's learning?

This paper, is essentially about methodology, and it asks more questions than it chooses in this context to answer. A judgement about its validity, its contribution will have to consider whether the methodology produces texts that provoke, open up and create spaces into which previously unconsidered understandings can become extant. Places where new thinking can enter, where previous felt, but not understood, or perhaps, not even known positions, that the writing self can occupy, are illuminated. The validity of its contribution will also be judged in how effective the text has been in showing how poetry can, in Kostera's (1997) words, be powerful, passionate and disruptive;

'…Poetry is powerful in that it does not avoid passion. It is disruptive because it is inconclusive; no final voice to end the discussion with a (disinspiring) recapitulation. Quite the contrary poetry is in my opinion not only an open text but an exploding text, a dangerous mode of expression, shattering space and embracing the reader with an invitation to reach out into the blank fields beyond 'information' outside the relatively safe territory of the orderly textual experience.' (Kostera 1997, p. 346)

In the Seventh Movement of qualitative research, characterised by a willingness to experiment with new representational forms, Denzin (2001) posits that the criteria for evaluating critical qualitative work are both moral and ethical. If we are as Denzin hopes to avoid those spurious, shallow, empty and one sided interpretations and understandings, we are required to engage with a category of understanding that Denzin (2001, p. 139) refers to as 'true or authentic emotional understanding' To do this we must 'enter into the experience of another and reproduce or experience feelings similar to those felt by the other' Denzin (2001, p. 139) To do this for others we must be capable of doing it for ourselves.

This exercise in writing as research and research as writing has demonstrated how the evocation of the untellable, the appearance of perfomative definitions of the felt but unknown, has invited into my writing the possibility of other positions of self. This has enabled me, as writer, to encounter these other selves and enter into the dialectic of 'inside, outside, embodied, disembodied and separation and reconciliation' Van Maanen (1997, p. 127). As a writer I have attempted to recognise, relate to and empathise with the experiences of my written self, increasing my experience of empathy and recognition of shared experience with the other,

It is my opinion that writing as a form of enquiry and particularly poetic writing can reach out into Kostera's 'blank beyond information' and, when 'passionate powerful and disruptive', (Kostera 1997) the writing can invite the reader in and take them there too. In this way both the writing and the reading are processes than can effect change and create greater understanding about that which is not always visible, knowable and in the foreground.

As Kostera (1997) suggests the outcomes of the writing process can never be in themselves concluded. The more positions that the writing/reading can evoke the more possibilities there are for entering into the world of the different selves that the writing connects with. In this way as either the writer/reader or both, we can continually detach ourselves from any fixed inflexible standpoint or position, becoming more open in recognising difference and alternative possibilities in ourselves and others, and consequently writing ourselves and our research into more ethical and moral places that will stand up to the evaluative criteria for critical qualitative evaluation that Denzin (2001) suggests.

These final two poems, referred to in the introduction are again 'performative definitions' but this time attempt to perform how it feels to be spoken for and spoken about. They evoke a Denzinian caution against those spurious, shallow, empty and one sided interpretations and understandings, as they embody the confusion, and betrayal hurt and misunderstandings that have been felt when being 'represented.'

The Diaspora

Crowned in arid wig
That bat
That black winged beast

Knows nothing of us,
Just his cv
His dinner date
His cricket match.

But watch him deftly fly
And flit from left to right
Observe the devilish precision
With which he swoops and dives
In and out
of dark and mysterious chambers.

Be wary of this confusing configuration
And stand back
As his world collides with ours
Protect yourself
As shards of his omnipotent knowledge
Pierce and shatter our world.

Weep for the abandoned, confused
diaspora, lost in a landscape
forged by language we do not understand,
in a world we did not know existed
and did not know we inhabited.

The jackdaw

It jerks its head and calls impatiently;
Quick, look at me,
Quick, look at me,
and when you turn at last reluctantly to look,
what do you see?
Each jerking squawk reveals a shiny bricolage
Each twitch and croaky strut, displays the stolen bits of others
Worn shamelessly,
Like cheap costume jewellery
And there amongst the tarnished tat
Appliquéd to the feathered breast
You can see,
Pecked off, stolen, bloody bits of me.

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