

Working with death through art and story: A collective biography

Jody Thomson

Abstract

In this essay, the author works with stories and artwork generated in a collective biography workshop about death. The project was a methodological experiment to think about what is made possible when memory-stories are brought back to the body through art-making and autoethnographic writing. The people who participated in the workshop, including the author, were art therapists working in end-of-life and palliative care. This essay is an entanglement of stories, new materialist and post-humanist theory, art and death, and asks: *what happens when stories become art become stories?*

Keywords

Art-making as inquiry, collective biography, new materialism, post-humanism, entanglement, death, palliative care

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Let her weave her story within their stories, her life amidst their lives. And while she weaves, let her whip, spur, and set them on fire. Thus making them sing again. Very softly a-new again. (Trinh T. Minh-ha, as cited in Barad, 2014, p.83)

The embodied and entangled memory stories and artworks that I labour with here explore how it is to work as an art therapist with people who are approaching death. It is a weaving, whipping and singing softly anew, in coming to know ourselves and our memories differently, by becoming-with-others, human and otherwise.

In a collective biography (Davies & Gannon, 2006; 2012), the participating art therapists wove their material and discursive stories together, radically de-centering themselves as individual therapist-participants, without effacing the specificity of their stories and artworks. As such, the stories and art presented here are “individually authored but multiply rewritten” (Halberstam, 2014, p.138). They do not *represent* the therapists or their individualised, autobiographical version of themselves, but are a collectively entangled inscription of breathtakingly intimate and imbricated subjectivities:

The collectivity of collective biography is vital to the methodology. Working together in the space of being listened to; being open to each other and to being affected by each other’s memory stories; listening without judgement, but intent on knowing in one’s own body the story that is being told, creates a spacetime in which each embodied being is collectively emergent – the assemblage of researchers is a becoming being, unfolding, refolding the moment of knowing and being: knowing/being together. (Thomson et al., 2018, p.6)

Collective biography is memory-work (Davies & Gannon, 2012; Haug, 1987), diffracted through feminist poststructural and, more recently, new materialist theory. It is a trans-disciplinary, dynamic research strategy rather than a prescriptive method. In a collective biography, participants work together with memory-stories in response to a specific research question, speaking and (re)writing intense moments of being in ways that “move beyond the clichés and usual explanations” (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p.3). These memory-stories are then read aloud to the collective, who critique and question the teller until the final written iteration by the original memory-holder becomes, in a sense, collectively generated, and written in a way that is vividly

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