

Performing Communit(y)ies

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Abstract: This paper tells the story of a group of community workers, activists and academics who came together, in a participatory inquiry, to explore "good news stories of difference and resistance". Using an organising principle of social change from the margins we engaged in, and collected, local stories of hope, ordinary resistances and success. Using simple strategies such as story telling, purposeful listening, fun, laughter, food and creativity we sought to celebrate, document, analyse and make visible our successes and nurture each other. After five years 40 people came together to plan and host a creative community conference in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales (NSW, Australia). As a result of this a creative reflective writing group was established to reflect on this event using WINTER, BUCK and SOBIECHOWSKA's (1999) notion of a patchwork text and RICHARDSON's (2000) writing as inquiry as theoretical and methodological underpinnings. Concerned with talking with, rather than to, our audiences the writing group developed a play script (AMBLER et al., 2002) which was performed at four conferences. This article discusses the creative writing group/inquiry group process, the play script and performances as examples and manifestations of performative social science in action. In so doing I explore theoretical questions which underpin the historical moment of performative social science as performance ethnography. This seems important if, as social scientists, we are interested in "future-oriented research" which produces works that speak clearly and powerfully as well as works that are committed to changing the world not just describing it (DENZIN, 2000, p.915).

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1. Introduction

This article is about performance ethnography as re-presentation of research. It is not a performance text. It is a text about a performance. The two are different as SALDANA so crankily exclaims in his poem, *This is not a performance text* (2006). What I mean is that while I use the artifice of a script/dialogue throughout this article, it is not meant to be performed in the more usual sense. It is written to be read, probably silently. I have used the script artifice throughout however, as I seek ways to talk about research practices that have integrity between content and process, which resist binaries, that are accessible and perhaps playful and that make place and process visible. The material (or data) comes from a variety of sources, described below. [1]

The characters? Well, apart from Debbie HORSFALL and Judy PINN they are composites of real people. None of the words ascribed to any character are their actual words unless referenced as transcribed data. [2]

The actual performance (called "the play") is the result of a seven year collaborative community research project. This project was retrospectively conceptualised as a collaborative action research project of four stages (see HORSFALL, 2005). Stage one was a narrative inquiry into community work practices called "Good News Stories of Difference and Resistance". This stage spanned five years and was the only predetermined research component. Through a process of collaborative critical analysis and reflection stage one informed a number of community actions (Stages 2-4). Stage two was the organisation and implementation of the Connecting and Celebrating Communities Conference (CCC) in 2001. A collaborative creative writing group formed Stage 3. This group critically reflected upon the conference. The writing groups work culminated in the development of a play script, a representation of the CCC event. Stage 4 was the performance of this script at four different venues over a two year period. [3]

At each stage "data" were recorded in several different ways: by tape, transcribed and returned to the collaborative research group for discussion; conference presentations and scholarly articles; diary and field notes (Stage 1); as minutes of planning meetings, public brochures, newspaper articles, funding body feedback, video recordings, diary and field notes, minutes of an evaluation meeting and participant evaluation sheets (Stage 2); written directly by the collaborative writing group as poems, short stories and a play script (Stage 3); audience feedback and performance of the scripted play (Stage 4). This data was collaboratively and thematically analysed by all members of the group/s. The key themes were critically reflected upon and plans for action(s) were made. Then the next stage of the action research cycle took place. And so it went over the years. While there were three core members throughout the 7 years other group membership was fluid: seven in Stage 1; forty in Stage 2; five in Stage 3; and eight in Stage 4. These stages and their specific outcomes are described in more detail elsewhere (see HORSFALL, 2005; PINN & HORSFALL, 2000). [4]

In the following I am aiming to both show *and* tell about this research, its context, the theoretical underpinnings and the material production of the research performances. I am attempting to flow between explaining, describing, theorising and dramatising, which reflects how the research actually happened. Social science researching does not always fit neatly into a proscribed linear process. Instead stages inter-lap, especially when doing action research with/in communities. Interestingly, as researchers, we are often admonished, or censured, if we admit that the process is sometimes chaotic and relational. It has always puzzled me that in the so-called scientific quest for "the truth" accounts of "what really happened", certainly about process, are often missing (see HORSFALL, ARMSTRONG & HIGGS, 2001). So here is my account of what happened, informed by the data, the process, the relationships, theory. It is, of course, a partial account of what *really* happened. [5]

2. Act 1/Stage 1: Telling Good News Stories of Difference and Resistance

Setting: Sitting around a table on the back veranda of Neil's home in the Blue Mountains of NSW seven people with a collective concern about social justice and community development work. Two of these people were academics from the University of Western Sydney (Debbie and Judy). The other five people worked in a peak Blue Mountains community development organisation. On the table: coffee, tea, home made raisin bread, a blank sheet of paper, a tape recorder. This was their first meeting.

No research grant, no proposal, no plan, no outline of goals, aims and outcomes and no timeline.

Introductions had been made; people had filled their mugs and were eating the bread. [6]

Judy¹: Historically community has been a static idea and the practice of community work has privileged unity and sameness, suppressing differences and contradictions (YOUNG, 1989). The word "community" has been used as polyfilla (WATT, 1990).

Mark: What, patching up the cracks of contradiction, smoothing over tensions and conflicts and differences. Not really telling it as it is?

Iris: Have to be a lefty. Have to have consensus. Have to be working against ... the government; structures and systems. Have to work hard for little or no reward and certainly no laughing!

Debbie: We are beginning to talk about community as a verb, something that we *do*, rather than some *thing* for which we strive (HORSFALL, 1998).

1 Judy PINN and Debbie HORSFALL were the university researchers, their names have been kept throughout this article. All other names have been changed. Act 5, is a play which has been publicly performed four times, the names of the actual performers have been kept. Act 6 is entirely fictionalized; HORSFALL and PINN said none of the things ascribed to them. The words of the authors in Act 6 are quotes from their written works.

Judy: We want to work with an idea of community that embraces a conscious politics of partiality, where we're all recognised as having partial knowledges and the voicing of these knowledges is the doing of community. We think that doing this can be a creative force for social change.

Claire: What *are* you talking about?

Mark: Sounds a bit poststructuralist to me.

Brian: Aren't we a bit old for that?

Judy: Look, we use this metaphor. Imagine a pool or small lake. Traditionally the way of seeing social change is where you lob a big rock into the centre of the pool and the ripples trickle out to the edges. The ripples are the largest and most disruptive at the centre, weakening as they reach the edge.

Iris: The ripple out rather than trickle down effect?

Judy: Yeah. Or by shifting the metaphor social change is the dropping of lots of little pebbles at the edges of this pool. The ripples intersect and create disturbances and chaos, disrupting the centre.

Debbie: It works; we've tried it in the bath. We weren't both *in* the bath! So the centre of the pool is made up of the dominant stories in our western culture, for example, economic rationalism, individualism, cultural homogeneity, growth and so on. By the edges, we mean resistance to that centre.

Judy: Lobbing of rocks into the centre and the dropping of small pebbles from the edge are necessary for social change. There are already many people doing lots of pebble dropping. They just don't make such a big splash!

Debbie: Your community work; it's not on the news is it? Probably not many people know about it. But you are making a material difference to peoples lives aren't you?

Mark: Oh, you mean there are many ways of effecting changes at many different sites. You want local everyday acts of resistance to count too? Not instead of big structural change but as well as?

Claire: I like it. People may feel more able to act if they don't have to be the hero, the big splash, taking on the whole world.

Judy: So we thought we could tell each other stories from our practices that we may not usually speak up about. This challenges the space the dominant stories take up. [7]

Interruption²:

"Collective stories that are based in the lived experiences of people, and deviate from the cultural story, provide new narratives; hearing them helps individuals to replot their lives because they provide an alternative plot to absent or powerless texts" (RICHARDSON, 1997, p.58).

2 Interruptions are a textual device used to interrupt the conversation of the text. They are usually interruptions from scholars/theorists, making comment on the ideas in the article. They point to theoretical underpinnings.

Debbie: And we can make visible and public alternate stories for people to start embracing, doing, talking about.

Mark: A bit like Joanna MACY's (1983) work on despair and empowerment?

Judy: Yes moving from despair to hope and local actions.

Iris: Or sorta social capital work? (See PUTMAN, 1995.)

Claire: Sounds good to me.

Brian: Let's just do it. [8]

The group met monthly over a period of five years. Each meeting one person told a story of their practice exploring the theme: "good news stories of difference and resistance". These stories were recorded and returned to the group in the form of a letter.

This was not a cosy self validating exercise, but one where critical reflection on practice was foregrounded. The group developed a strategy of "purposeful listening" which was informed by a feminist post structuralist politics of difference (LATHER, 1997, 1991; FINE, 1994). As people told their stories the listeners noticed and subsequently explored what was being said in the following five areas:

- *Connections—any connections to other stories, ideas, information;*
- *"Old baggage"—any taken for granted assumptions, old patterns of behaviour, ideas, ideologies that the story teller may not be aware of;*
- *Social justice—any issues of social justice that needs naming, or highlighting;*
- *Power relations—any relations of power that have not been explicitly named;*
- *Unintended outcomes—unplanned consequences both good and bad that have not been noticed/mentioned. [9]*

Interruption:

Why tell stories of our practice?

"A story, simply put, is a retrospective account of lived experience ... The underlying premise is that 'experience is meaningful, and human behaviour is generated and informed by this meaningfulness' (Polkinghorne, 1998, p.1). Furthermore the aspects that participants choose to tell about their experiences illuminate what they see as meaningful (White & Epston, 1990). Telling stories can be a powerful research tool in seeking to understand particular phenomena through people's experiences and the sense they make of them (van Manen, 1997).

Collecting and telling stories is particularly effective where researchers and participants are concerned about social, political and personal change (Razack, 1993). Stories can reveal how social injustices and inequities are experienced and perpetuated, both individually and collectively. Stories can illuminate people's resistances to inequities and injustices (Reason, 1998)" (HORSFALL & TITCHEN, 2007, p.89).

Back to the research group:

After a year or so of story telling Debbie and Judy, as the university researchers, analysed the letters to the group. They did this by asking: are there any themes here? What are the connections/disconnections within the stories? What have we actually done/said? Three main themes emerged:

- *Working in the margins without being marginalised*
- *Re-storying the power of the ordinary and the everyday*

The need to celebrate successes, making public stories of what has/is working. These themes were fed back *to the group, for validation and critique.*

It is this third theme, celebrating successes and going public, which is explored here. [10]

3. Act 2/Stage 1: Moving Outside the Struggle Story

Setting: Neil's Kitchen table, 1 year later. [11]

Lisa: Seems that one of the things we have been talking about is an alternative to the overwhelming stories of despair and exploitation. We show how to privilege the hopeful, funny and imaginative and how to re-vision and re-claim work with/in community.

Claire: But Lisa its true isn't it, working for social and environmental justice *can* be sheer hard work?

Debbie: But stories of struggle *are* often privileged, it's hard to admit to having a good time and be taken seriously about say, setting up a community house for people who have disabilities.

Judy: You know Emma GOLDMAN, the feminist anarchist? Well over 70 years ago she said; she did not believe that a Cause which stood for a beautiful ideal ... for release and freedom from conventions and prejudice should demand the denial of life and joy (GOLDMAN 1934, in GOLDMAN & SCHULMAN, 1996).

Debbie: Oh that's been paraphrased to "if your revolution doesn't include singing and dancing, don't invite me". I love that!

Mark: It's true though. When we talk of our work the struggle discourse is the most dominant. We mostly love our work and we couldn't do it if we didn't have hope, but this story of love and hope is seldom at the forefront (ZOURNAZI, 2002).

Claire: Yes we censor or even hide the stories of the many pleasures, passions and successes involved and instead emphasise the struggle.

Iris: Too true; we talk about poor work conditions, lack of time and how we are undervalued.

Judy: Despair and struggle are a real part of the stories from the margins. This does need to be acknowledged.

Mark: It would be good to learn to work in the margins without being marginalised by others.

Claire: Or without marginalising ourselves!

Judy: One of the ways to do this is to tell our stories, celebrate our successes and make them public.

Debbie: To encourage more people to get involved in this type of work it needs to be contagious. Having fun, finding joy and pleasure can make it contagious. Working towards change can be lively and colourful. We *can* allow ourselves to enjoy it.

Judy: "It is important to make what we do public; to celebrate and value what we do and to recognise that we are involved in creating social capital. Part of being in the margins without being marginalised is learning how to talk about what we do" (Research group minutes 29.6.99). [12]

So we spoke about low interest loans schemes; working with industry groups to promote accessible tourism for people who have a disability; working with migrants; struggling to support Vietnam war veterans when you had demonstrated against the Vietnam war; working with people who come to meetings and are just plain difficult and disruptive; working with theatre to help refugees tell their stories; working with conflict in the team; trying to write reports which show the complexity of community issues rather than representing the community as having one issue, one voice. We also collaboratively wrote and presented three conference papers (PINN et al., 1999; PINN & HORSFALL, 1999; HORSFALL et al., 1999), one book chapter (PINN & HORSFALL, 2000) and one article (HORSFALL & PINN, 1999). [13]

4. Act 3/Stage 2: Having a Celebration

Setting: Neil's Lounge room. The group had just completed an exercise on hope and despair based on the work of MACY (1983). Large pieces of butcher's paper were stuck on the windows. After a short break, and more coffee and cake the group re-settled. [14]

Judy: Maybe we can initiate something in the mountains where we provide a space for the rest of the community to do what we've been doing. Lots of kitchen tables.

Claire: How to get community workers to be engaged enough? Everybody is so busy.

Iris: Just a half-day or a one day conference that is inspiring? A celebration of sorts?

Judy: "There is such a strong arts community here that linking community work with the arts community could be a really vital liaison" (Research group minutes: 14/12/99).

Mark: We know how powerful telling stories has been for us, how it has shaped our practices. It would be good to extend this.

Judy: We need to be clear though. What do we mean by celebration? Celebrations, by who, for whom and with what purpose? What counts as dominant Australian cultural celebrations? What are we throwing into shadow as we celebrate an event, a person or place? Celebration could become a problematic buzz word, a feel good word, just like "community" and "family" if taken out of the context of political, social and environmental injustice.

Iris: A recent example of a dominant cultural Australian celebration was the Federation Centenary 2001 celebrations.

Debbie: What happened?

Iris: We had celebrations of selective histories; primarily white histories.

Claire: Yeah the polyfilla approach was used. As a nation we smoothed over a history which was problematic for many. We could have celebrated the ideas from 1901 of how to be a genuinely inclusive Australia. [15]

Interruption:

"[T]his was an opportunity to rethink 1901 and create a genuinely inclusive nation ... but they got nervous and the doors came down and the Prime Minister went to Lords"
(KALANTZIS, 2002, n.p.).

Judy: So we are saying that we want to celebrate local successes and acts of resistance while not losing sight of the larger social context and the inequities and injustices which still exist?

Mark: Yeah we want to embrace multiple perspectives, not just one.

Iris: To flow in and out of local, global, local.

Mark: We need to hold central the principles of inclusion, valuing of community, arts and creative processes, environment, overlapping layers, and space for everyone.

Brian: Too much talking. Let's have a celebration! [16]

So the word went out, formally and informally.

No research grant, no proposal, no plan, no outline of goals, aims and outcomes and no timeline.

A group of approximately 40 people met to plan the celebration. People from small local business, students, community workers, local artists, environmental activists, council workers, university lecturers. The planning meetings resulted in "Connecting and Celebrating Communities" (CCC). A two day conference/gathering which was held in March 2001. It aimed to celebrate, enthuse, inspire and nurture people in the Blue Mountains who do the hard work of community (CCC, 2001).

(The event itself is dramatised in the play—Act 5/Stage 4)

At the resulting evaluation meeting of the CCC event it was suggested by a participant that the event be written up in a form other than the usual report, or

academic article. In a way that was more democratic and accessible to a wider range of people. A writing group was formed. [17]

5. Act 4/Stage 3: Writing Creatively and Collaboratively as Analysis and Reflection

Busy people, emails fly,
dates suggested, dates rejected,
we can all be there ...
oh no I'll have to decline.
emails flying, dates suggested, dates rejected
we can all be there ... in two months time.
(PINN, 2005)

The writing group met once a month over a period of 12 months.

No research grant, no proposal, no plan, no outline of goals, aims and outcomes and no timeline. [18]

5.1 Scene 1

Setting: Debbie's house in Little Hartley. A cold blustery winter's day. The fire is lit; tea, coffee, cakes, laptops, books, pens, paper, jostle for space on the kitchen table. The dogs, Stella and Rosie occasionally rise for a pat, then drop to the floor, content. Everyone sits round the table, eating, drinking and laughing.

Work begins. [19]

Anne: How can we show the complexity, the multiple voices?

Debbie: How can we be accessible when we talk about deconstructing and reconstructing meanings; making connections and disconnections? I don't just want to talk to other academics!

Zoë: How to include everything that emerged as related, and not just in a linear way?

Claire: I just want to document and understand why and how the CCC event worked. And how it emerged from our research. And I want to write it collaboratively. And I want to write something that other community and environmental workers will read, enjoy and find useful.

Jackie: Oh, is *that* all?

Debbie: Let's each write a reflective piece between each meeting. We can circulate what we have written by email. No rules. It could be a poem, prose, fact, fantasy. We could write from our own point of view or try to imagine other points of view. We could have a critic for example—it wasn't all wonderful! [20]

Interruption:

GANNON argues for her right to "speak into this imaginary space" (2005, p.625) the space of the other as she seeks "writing practices that zigzag between categories, that produce knowledge in the gaps between analysis and creativity, reason and emotion, intellectual and aesthetic, mind and body, academic and everyday, us and them" ... an "epistemology of the imagination" (2005, p.626).

Jackie: We could use the process of writing as a way of inquiring into what happened, how and why. Writing as a method of discovery and analysis (RICHARDSON, 2000).

Debbie: Good idea Jackie; Laurel also says that writing this way frees us from trying to say everything at once to everybody in one text (RICHARDSON, 2000). [21]

5.2 Scene 2

Setting: Individual group members at home, or in their work offices, working on their computers. Emails to the group start flying. [22]

.....

Hi all

How about an organising structure for our writing process and how to work with each others contributions? We could base it on the work of Richard WINTER, BUCK and SOBIECHOWSKA (1999). This work used the metaphor of a patchwork text, making something new and useful from already available material. As far as I know it has only been used as an individual process. Let's use it as part of a collaborative writing, reflection and critique process.

Love Debbie

.....

Great idea Debbie, I love a structure, it lets me be creative. An enabling structure?

Love Judy

.....

I like it! Using WINTER et al.'s work to collaboratively write, analyse, and reflect. Our metaphor could also be a mosaic! Seeing our work as valuing diversity and difference and trying to write creatively. We can encourage each other to consciously explore paradoxes, contrasts, gaps and silences both in our practices and in the event we're writing about. We could self-consciously foreground messiness, partiality, plurality, imagination. Let's strive to write *and* enjoy ourselves, to be alive embodied scholars. And let's not forget we are writing for a particular audience; academics and community and environmental development workers/activists: people like us!

Love Anne

.....

Six meetings, and much creative writing, later.

.....

Hi everyone.

Well the Popular Education Centre at UTS (University of Technology Sydney) has accepted us to present at the forum about celebration and social activism! Yikes, now we have to do it!

Love Debbie [23]

.....

5.3 Scene 3

Setting. Picnic grounds in a Blue Mountains national park. Summer. Yellow tailed cockatoos fly overhead. The cicadas thrum in the background. A heat haze is on the horizon. The summer breeze whispers through the shading Casuarina trees. Tea, coffee, cakes laptops, books, pens, paper jostle for space on the picnic table. [24]

Claire: Well I don't know what we're going to say at this forum, conference thing.

Jackie: Yeah but we do know "No talking heads"! No narrowing down to one authoritative voice. We want to show the plurality of research themes, voices and experiences. A sort of polyvocal presentation.

Anne: And it would be good to invite the audience into the text, to help re-write it on the day. To provide gaps and spaces for that to happen.

Claire: A more conversational approach? Extending the collaborations out to the audience. I like that.

Debbie: Seems like a moral imperative really (CONQUERWOOD in DONKER, 2007).

Zoë: And I want to do something that allows for an intellectual and an emotional response. Some sort of evocative text;

Debbie: yeah, Carolyn ELLIS and Art BOCHNER (1996) talk about that;

Claire: can't help yourself can you—academics!

Jess: Let's make a mosaic of our writing and see what it says. [25]

All the pieces of creative writing were spread out on the table. Big pieces of butcher's paper were torn off the roll. Pens and glue and scissors appeared out of Judy's bag. People read and cut and pasted bits of writings into themes on big pieces of butcher's paper.

A few hours later, all bits of writing were stuck onto 1 piece of butchers paper or another. The group stood back to look at their work. [26]

Anne: It's screaming out to be written as a play.

Debbie: Yes it's looking really messy.

Judy: Messy's OK but we need to connect things. A play is a great idea. A series of writing fragments, or stories, stitched together into a single text a text full of connections and contradictions, a text which embraces the complexity and messiness and usefulness of the work we have done.

Jackie: And it will actively work against the single authorial voice. We won't have to do a talking heads thing!

Debbie: The writing up of much research follows a similar stitching up process—what to include/exclude? How to tell the best story? Which order to put the pieces in? Although this is usually sanitised out. Sometimes you could be forgiven for thinking that computers did and wrote research! I like the integrity of process this idea offers.

Judy: The post modern turn in the social sciences (BELL, 2006) has, in large part, meant that researchers are now able to use a multitude of textual forms to explore and understand the lives of research participants and themselves. It will be great to try this out. [27]

Interruption:

"[A]fter so much 'telling' I wanted to 'show'. I used alternative forms of representation: drama, performance pieces, poetry, and finally ... making it my own, writing both against and within its conventions" (RICHARDSON, 1997, p.3).

The play is re-presented below. While in its original form it was written collaboratively by the writing group I have edited, and slightly re-written, here for clarity in a written textual form. "... " denotes material has been cut from the original scripts. The play was performed by the writing group members and a couple of "ring ins" as a rehearsed reading, with people juggling scripts and props. Initially it was performed at the University of Technology Sydney's forum on celebrating communities (AMBLER et al., 2002). Made bold by our reception we later performed for community workers who had been involved in the connecting and celebrating communities' event, at a regional community workers conference and for welfare students at TAFE³. The script (all of Act 5) is an edited version of our various working scripts—which we changed each time.

3 Institute of Technical and Further Education.

we imagined
something creative
in an accessible form
from fear
of doing dead writing
emerged
text-ure jamming
a democratic text
performing
our feminist body politics? [28]

6. Act 5/Stage 4: Performing the Connecting and Celebrating Communities Play

6.1 Act 1: The Idea

Semi-circular stage set up. Props at back. Table of food and drinks under overhead screen. Overhead of Blue Mountains scene on screen. Six chairs set up centre stage. Jess at overhead projector on one edge of stage and a small whiteboard at the other. Cast members sitting on reserved seats in the audience at different spots in the room with Act 2 prop (streamers, flyers and bubbles) under them. [29]

6.1.1 Scene 1

Susan is on centre stage with the storyteller/narrator hat on. Each cast member stands up to say their lines then sit down again. [30]

Susan: This piece was created in Gundungurra and Darug country⁴ and today we would like to acknowledge the ancestors, the elders and the descendents of the traditional owners of this place ...

Once upon a time workers of a Mountains Community organisation and workers from the University of Western Sydney formed an alliance to talk about "good news stories of resistance and difference" in their work. They were passionate about social change, and how social change happens through community work.

Debbie: (*moving to stage*) So, they met once a month over tea, coffee and yummy food and recorded their stories. After two years, they decided that a two day celebration of community development, in many of its forms, be held in March 2001.

Lesley: (*running to stage*) They imagined that this cultural celebration would emerge from the people who came together to think and plan it through.

4 These are the lands associated with the indigenous First Nations people of this area.

Heidi: (*running to stage*) They wanted the celebration to acknowledge and support what was happening, both formally within community services structures and informally outside the paid structures.

Judy: (*moving to stage*) Their desire? To provide mutual support to sustain the grass roots of community work and to provide a sense of hope about what is happening now, and about the future.

Mary: (*moving to stage*) They called it a "cultural celebration" so people had space to tell their stories—using art, songs, performance, workshops, talks—and have them reflected back, appreciated, understood and discussed by others.

Lizzi: (*moving to stage*) In encouraging creativity they hoped that the organising processes, as well as the event, would involve "making culture", as they and others explored the relationships between community development and creative forms of expression—both powerful forces in the Mountains.

Lizzi, Lesley and Heidi move to places back stage.

Susan: So, what happened? (*Exit*). [31]

6.1.2 Scene 2

A small group meeting. Mary, Judy and Debbie sitting around eating and drinking. [32]

Judy: Maybe we could have a "nurturing the community workers" thing to celebrate our successes—with massages for everyone, and lots of chocolate cake!

Lesley (*off*): What successes?

Mary: Well, there's Patterson Road community house project for people who have a disability and the Gundungurra Tribal Council project; getting the building and the housing meeting and the refugee rally, those sorts of things that we do all the time;

Debbie: we could involve people who aren't officially community workers, you know, volunteers, unpaid activists.

Judy: Maybe we should put the word out?

...

Lizzi puts on story keeper/narrator hat moves to centre stage.

Story keeper/Lizzi: So then what happened? Some people gathered with a vision/many visions and brainstormed and work shopped and disagreed and agreed and talked to other people and got ideas, money, spaces and other resources. [33]

6.1.3 Scene 3

Group meeting. Debbie, Mary and Judy folding are folding event flyers. Others arrive during the scene. Each time someone arrives they are welcomed by Mary, and given a flyer to fold.

Lesley arrives. [34]

Mary: Thank you for coming, I think that we should start by introducing ourselves, and I'll give a quick idea of why we're here.

(Quick spin of the football clackers).

People introduce themselves as from a neighbourhood centre, the local university, unpaid activists ...

Mary: Thanks, well we've noticed that while we spend our time looking after others, we don't get time to nurture ourselves. So we thought it might be good to have some sort of celebration.

Susan arrives (quick spin of the football clackers).

Mary: Thank-you for coming along, I think that we should introduce ourselves again, and here's an idea of where we're up to so far.

Judy: I wonder if we should be calling it "A Conference" so that people can get time off and money to attend.

Lesley: And where will we have it? There are always issues about accessibility.

Debbie: Let's have lots of great food—but let's pay someone to do it.

Mary: Deb from the Third World Cafe might want to do it—they do great veggie stuff.

Lesley: And let's include the wombats *and* the weeds, then bush care volunteers might get into it too.

Judy: And the Youth Centre mob, let's get as inclusive as we can.

Debbie: And we've got to have childcare.

Susan: Churches? They do community. And what about businesses, do we want to try to involve them?

Lesley: Yeah, how far do we want to go with this, who do we want to play with—like not right wingers—we don't want them do we?

Mary: We want people and organisations that are into what we're trying to do and we need to work out what that is—like social justice.

Judy: Let's not forget sustainability.

Mary: Speaking of sustainability, I guess we're going to need to think seriously about getting some money and other resources.

Debbie: This is getting so huge, maybe we need to break in to some smaller groups?

Heidi arrives (quick spin of the football clackers).

Mary: Thank you for coming, I think that we should introduce ourselves again, and I'll give a quick idea of why we're here.

...

Story keeper/Lizzi: But then, this is connecting and celebrating community in action. The organising process takes on its own shape and meaning. Struggling to be flexible and open while at the same time moving forward, heading ... somewhere ...

Debbie takes hat from Lizzie and reads poem from front stage.

Story keeper/Debbie:

sparks of conflict ignite
beneath "the collective"
ideologies flare up and collide
how much difference is ok?
who will have the final say?
want you to go away!
you stamp on my feet
as I try to be sweet
my blood pressure soars
inside I roar
"shut up and do as I say"! [35]

...

Lizzie takes hat from Debbie and reads poem from front stage.

Story keeper/Lizzie:

Messiness and Difference
chaos and complexity, messy?
living in a social construction of Social Darwinism,
the hierarchy, the survival of the fittest
that's messy
sexism, racism, hetosexism, speciesism
no room to be different
that's messy. [36]

...

Mary goes centre stage and takes hat. Debbie and Lizzie join the group meeting and fold flyers.

Story keeper/Mary: So ... how did we do it? We had a couple of meetings brainstorming our ideas and gradually formed a two day program of events with four themes ... (*Indicates overhead of themes: Signs of hope/community mapping; Community regeneration; Environmental regeneration and sustainability; Community stories*). We then formed working parties around each session. In all we had about 40 people involved in the organisation, it was quite a feat ... It felt like a very risky business having so many organisers involved but we finally came up with a program, a venue, dates, times and even some money. [37]

...

Everyone takes a chair or two (and any folded flyers underneath it) off to the sides of backstage area. [38]

6.2 Act 2: The event

6.2.1 Scene 1

Carnival type music playing in background.

Re-creating the two day event. The organisers arrive and begin to organise the space. Music is playing. Everyone enter stage with indulgence⁵ tent props. Debbie takes her brochures and streamers—and begins to put up the tent to side of stage.

Judy centre stage with storyteller/narrator hat.

Music stops. [39]

Mary: What a glorious windy autumn day ... look at those bunch of clowns putting up a tent in the wind. It looks great fun.

Storyteller/Judy: ... There was a flurry of activity setting up the space (*pause*). The indulgence tent was set up with cushions, beautiful scarves, chocolate, magazines, music (*pause*).

(Tent is set up).

Debbie: Well the tent's up. It's a bit grubby and pathetic set up outside the main events. Interesting that indulgence is still set outside of the main happenings ... still not part of the real thing.

Derek (*Susan wearing the "Derek hat"*): No-one will ever use the indulgence space, or want to be seen using it. What us community activists really want is for someone to notice how hard we work. Well if any one does use this it won't be the hard core activists.

Storyteller/Judy: The mosaic materials were set out: Trays of shells, buckets of broken tiles and crockery, and various nick knacks.

5 The indulgence tent was literally a tent set up in the grounds of the community centre. It contained chocolates, magazines, cushions, flowing material, drinks and flowers. It was envisaged as a space for people to relax and chat.

Lizzie sets up props and includes audience around her handing out the mosaic pieces.

Storyteller/Judy: The soapbox was put in place in the middle of the courtyard ...

Mary places wooden crate slightly in front of the first row of audience. Stands up on crate.

Storyteller/Judy: The plants were organised for the planting to be done on the second day.

Susan sets up planting props handing out small plants and flower pots to the audience around her.

Storyteller/Judy: The street theatre people are arriving. The kitchen is buzzing with activity. The main hall is ready and the bike riders protesting against the transportation of nuclear waste through the mountains are pumping up their tyres for tomorrow's bike ride.

Lesley and Heidi run across the stage with bicycle pumps pretending to pump up their tyres.

Storyteller/Judy: So what happened at the CCC?

Cast hand out programs to audience members and talk with people around them about what is on the program.

Heidi and Lesley enlist volunteer anti-nuke bike riders from audience and give out T-shirts, cycling jackets and helmets.

Storyteller/Judy (*quick spin of the football clackers*): Ok everyone can you come in and sit down—we're ready to start!! [40]

6.2.2 Scene 2

Music playing. Streamers and balloons given to audience. Cast and audience throw streamers and blow up balloons. Music stops. [41]

Mary (*moves to centre stage*): How will we get these 200 participants into the hall? The speakers have started. There are people without seats ... There's too much to do! (*Goes to soapbox spot*).

Derek/Susan (*mumbling*): Couldn't organise their way out of a paper bag.

Music again.

Music stops. Storyteller introduces events which are set up in the audience.

Storyteller/Judy: Throughout the whole event participants were encouraged to celebrate and connect in all sorts of ways. They were chilling out at the indulgence tent.

Spotlight indulgence tent.

Debbie (*standing*): Thank god the organisers were imaginative and came up with such a great space—sure haven't seen one of these at other conferences. Here

have some chocolates (*offers chocolates around to audience and crashes on the cushions eating chocolates and chatting to others around her*).

(*Quick spin of the football clackers*).

Storyteller/Judy: People made mosaic tiles as part of a mural for the community centre where the celebration was held.

Spotlight Mosaic.

Lizzie (*standing*): I think I'll make a mosaic tile. I was so inspired watching people enjoying themselves doing it earlier and the tiles they made were all so fabulous and different (*hesitates*). But I'm no good at art, never was creative. How can I do this? (*Pause*) Bugger it! I'll give it a go. Here you have a go too (*hands out stuff to audience then sits with them*).

(*Quick spin of the football clackers*).

Storyteller/Judy: There was street theatre, networking with fellow activists over food, listening or speaking on the soapbox.

Spotlight soapbox.

Mary (*stands on soapbox and shouts lines*): And I say to you, "Women of the world unite and take the soapbox from the dickheads!" (*Moves off soapbox.*)

Storyteller/Judy (*gets on soapbox*): And great food was being provided by the Third World Cafe, part of the proceeds will go towards building a well in a village in India.

Derek/Susan (*lurking around soapbox*): Must say everyone else seems to be enjoying themselves (*pause*) might go and indulge in the tent or be artistic for a minute (*pause, staggers back*) what am I saying? Where would the mountains be if everyone just floated off to connect and celebrate all the time, economy'd fall apart, no small business, no development, no tourism ... argh ... they've got me chilling out, got to get out of here, must be something in the food (*tries to exit towards cyclists*).

Storyteller/Judy (*shouts to audience*): Hey everyone here comes the bike ride!

Derek hides behind soapbox. Riders enter and everyone sings the nuclear cycle song.

All:

Cycle against the nuclear cycle
All the wheels go round and round
Cycle against the nuclear cycle
Leave uranium in the ground. [42]

(*Quick spin of the football clackers*).

Storyteller/Judy: The tree planting and ritual for land began after the bike ride.

Spotlight tree planting. Audience and Susan plant trees in pots. "Yarramundi" (TOBIN, 2001) being played and sang.

(Quick spin of the football clackers).

Storyteller/Judy: The event ended with people telling more stories about their community work using Playback Theatre⁶ ... and finished with everyone doing the rain game (*audience participate to create the sounds of an approaching and passing rain storm, guided by storyteller*). [43]

6.3 Act 3: Reflections

Judy, singing "from little things big things grow" (KELLY & THE MESSENGERS, 1991) (others join softly), brings a chair from backstage and sits. Susan comes on stage gets chair from backstage takes hat from Judy goes to centre stage. [44]

6.3.1 Scene 1

Story keeper/Susan: A couple of weeks after the event the organisers, and some of the participants, got together for (*pause*) an Evaluation Meeting! (*Takes off hat holds on to it*).

...

Judy: Are we going to do it again?

Lizzi (*coming onstage. Gets chair and sits down*): It'd be nice to make it an annual event.

...

Mary (*coming onstage. Gets chair and sits down*): How about we talk about what worked and what didn't?

Susan: Yeah, I've been hearing some good feedback from people who came along. Did we get responses to the feedback sheets?

Lesley: Yes, and look, we've got some photos too.

Photos of the actual event get passed around group.

Debbie: Let's hear what some of the feedback said.

...

Judy: Listen to this, "Many thanks to all who created the special atmosphere in which community could take place. The cost was accessible and the flexibility for attendance was great!"

Susan: And this one "It was good to connect to people familiar and new and feel regenerated, inspired, enthused and nurtured as promised. I felt dangerously relaxed."

Various pieces of feedback from participants are read out.

6 Playback Theatre is a type of socio drama. The theatre troupe listen to people's stories or issues then develop and perform a skit which shows the story or issue. This is improvised on the spot. It enables the storyteller—and others in the audience—to witness their story, or issue, being played back to them. The aim is to enable people to look at their story/issue in a different way, to gain insights and perhaps ideas for actions.

...

Derek/Susan: Sorry—I have to go now (*leaves, giving hat to Lizzi*).

Mary: Thanks for coming Derek and for all your hard work.

Lesley: Why are you thanking him? You didn't thank Lyn when she left earlier. Why do you only thank the boys for their work?

Story keeper/Lizzi (*stands up puts on storyteller hat as she moves to centre stage*):

feeling fidgety inside but giving the impression (she thinks) of calmness and openness—quietly listening not letting the internal turmoil come out
sitting nodding in agreement
a woman's place
to be seen and not heard
the good girl
she ties herself to her seat with her mind
while she writes notes
meaningless notes. [45]

(*Gives hat to Lesley and sits*).

...

Debbie: We need to document all this.

...

Judy: Let's write it up and put all the photos together, does anyone want to be in a writing group with me?

Various people say yes. [46]

...

6.3.2 Scene 2

12 months later. A writing group meeting. Cast on chairs in circle on the stage. [47]

Mary: You know I went over to the Mid Mountains community centre the other day and the garden is overgrown and weedy—I don't think many plants have survived.

Lesley: Yeah the mosaic has lots of bits broken too, not that it's really damaged but it just looks unfinished.

Mary: Hey you guys—don't you think we should finish this job off?

All (*shout*): SHUT UP!

Storyteller/Lesley (*puts on hat moves to centre stage*): Ah! The politics of an open end! There are few tangible results in this kind of work. So, knowing that it's never complete and always partial we have seized the moment and created some

space for re-storying and celebrating our work with communities (*take off hat and sits down*).

Judy: Wow, we are such a prodigious writing group; look at all this poetry, prose, fiction and non-fiction ... We could put it all together in a kind of patchwork of all the voices, or a mosaic.

Susan: Hey, I've got an idea, lot's of these writings create fabulous little scenes, we could represent them in a performance, you know write it as a play ... let's put on a show!

Cast on stage for final pose and bow. [48]

7. Act 6: Theorising? Performance Ethnography

Setting: A coffee shop in Sydney, just outside of the conference venue. A group of the performers and some audience members meet. Debbie and Judy stand outside in the warm winter sunlight whilst Debbie smokes a cigarette. The others go inside, find a table and order coffee. [49]

Judy: Well that seemed to go ok; judging by the laughter and the way people joined in.

Debbie: That was a surprise. I think it was a relief to get up and move after all that sitting.

Judy: It was kinda funny the bits they laughed at. I didn't expect some of it.

Debbie: I think that's where the community workers got a joke we didn't because we're not community workers. They were laughing in recognition. You know the struggles of trying to run inclusive meetings when people just never arrive on time.

They go inside and join the others at the table.

Claire: One of the things that was exciting was that the community and university researchers were the writers and the performers. It made it a bit more accessible to others I think.

Debbie: That's a bit different to arts-based or performance work in social sciences. Often people hire a real playwright, or actors, or artists. This is great, if you have the money. But it is also a different process, with different outcomes. What we did, well, anyone could do really. And I know that's heresy to some.

Judy: Yeah, while we tried to do a "good job" we were honest about the fact that we were neither playwrights, nor actors;

Debbie: so we aimed for a good enough drama embracing our amateur-ness. Bit scary though, not quite "proper" academically or artistically.

Kip JONES: "Looking beyond the safety of our own discipline, with its protocols, procedures and 'ring-fenced areas of expertise' to what Frances Rapport calls 'the edgelands' (Rapport, Wainwright & Elwyn, 2004) can be both daunting and liberating. The trick is, I believe, to remember that art and science are both 'fuelled by creativity' (Taylor, 2001) and that the potential for inventiveness

resides within us all. After all is said, creativity is that uncanny ability to work within rule boundaries while, at the same time, changing them" (2005, p.9).

Debbie: I love the idea of edgelands Kip.

Kip JONES: Actually, it's Frances RAPPORT's word that I am using here. She has used the term, "edgelands", in her own titles, and is the originator I believe.

Debbie: It's evocative and resonates with our metaphor of the pool and margins and centres. And ecologically edges are places of fertility, diversity, abundance.

Jess: I agree but it was much more work than a straight stand and deliver paper. Why did we bother?

Claire: Oh Jess, it was so much fun.

Judy: More than that. Writing a play script collaboratively and then performing the text we had a different purpose.

Debbie: Showing?

Johnny SALDANA: And I suspect you wanted to create a research text which rendered "from personal experience a research account that offers ...a level of insight and understanding into human social life" to be provocative (SALDANA & WOLCOTT, 2001, in BARONE, 2002, p.257).

Debbie: Well, to be provocative and to share our knowledge of a particular culture, that of community and environmental workers—paid and unpaid—in the Blue Mountains of NSW.

Joni JONES: And it seems that you managed to have the performance grow "as a collaboration between the ethnographer (s) and the community being presented. In this way the ethnographer remains accountable to her or his fieldwork community" (2002, p.8).

Judy: Didn't really name myself as an ethnographer before. That sounds more proper!

Debbie: Yes and creating collaboratively also works against the researcher treating the community as a set of data banks. You know the routine: researchers descend into the community from the ivory tower of academia to collect research treasure, and then go back to the tower to polish it and display it to others who inhabit similar towers.

Judy: You and your towers. I think I'll call you Rapunzel! I think performance moves the research text into something organic and alive. The creation of the text was as important as the research. It allowed for our intersubjectivities to be there in the open; as you say Debbie we were not being researchers locked away in an ivory tower uncontaminated by anything.

Jess: Yeah we were down and dirty, getting into the thick of things.

Joni JONES: Having multiple voices in the text also "helps to mitigate the authority of the ethnographer, and provide varied, even contradictory perspectives, which the audience must synthesise" (2002, p.9).

Judy: Making them active interpreters and creators of knowledge.

Kip JONES: "The principles of Nicolas Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetics (Bourriaud 2002) offer a theoretical grounding to the search at hand. Relational Art is located in human interactions and their social contexts. Central to its principles are inter-subjectivity, being-together, the encounter and the collective elaboration of meaning, based in modes of sociability, meetings, events, collaborations, games, festivals and places of conviviality. Bourriaud believes that Art is made of the same material as social exchanges. If social exchanges are the same as Art, how can we portray them?" (2005, p.7).

Debbie: Well, artistically, creatively, performatively, beginning with an offer?

Kip JONES: Yes, "presentations can then evolve into ways of creating meaningful local encounters and performances" (2005, p.7).

Jess: We hoped our performance would be a powerful and democratic tool for representing the themes that emerged from our research and the resulting actions.

Sheryl Cozart CONRAD: "It also seemed as if it enabled you to do justice to the complexity of your data" (CONRAD et al., 2003, p.55).

Claire: And to leave the dialogic space open for multiple interpretations of "what we found out about what we did".

Judy: And we did work "to bring together different voices, world views, value systems and beliefs so that they can have a conversation with each other. The aim of dialogical performance is to bring self and other together so that they can question, debate and challenge one another. It ... resists conclusions" (CONQUERGOOD, 1985 in CONRAD et al., 2003, p.60).

Jess: The politics of the open end again!

Claire: The structure let us show a plurality of research themes, as well as voices. Especially the critic. We could make that visible, name it, and show it.

Judy: And a performance or play gave us the ability to have differences spoken without needing to resolve them into a seamless unmessy text.

Debbie: I liked how we included conflict and self doubts. Derek, our critic in the play, was so funny and yet raised issues we struggled with.

Judy: By being provocative rather than pursuing an argument of "this is how it is" a polyvocal approach allowed for ambiguity and the potential for creative insights and emotional responses from the audience.

Carol SMITH: "The purpose of the text is to engage the audience fully, so that performer and listener meet in the liminal ... space that lies between them ... The audience travels into the world of the participant, where a profound meeting of the two takes place" (2007, p.522-523).

Debbie: How so Carol?

Carole SMITH: "It draws the audience and performer together in a shared moment of understanding and, in many cases, points the way to action" (SMITH & GALLO, 2007, p.527).

Judy: So the audience becomes a sort of co-performative witness, as you'd say Dwight. This unsettles the usual hierarchy between researcher and recipient of the research report, or the reader of the article. They are then in a way implicated.

Dwight CONQUERGOOD: Yes a performance of research can negotiate the borders between identity, difference, detachment, and commitment to speak to and with rather than speak about others (CONQUERGOOD, 1985 in DONKER, 2007, p.823)

Amia LIEBLICH: It also creates a "field of shared emotional experience" for the writers/performers and the audience (2006, p.72).

Debbie: In terms of the moral imperative this is a double edged sword. Any intimacy is also possibly confrontational. The audience/reader of a performance is not reading a text written in another space and time. They can't put it down and go and have a cuppa. They are witnessing the text as it unfolds in front of them.

Judy: And they were actively invited into co-creating parts of the text.

Dwight CONQUERGOOD: Well for people interested in social change this is important; this type of research presentation works against the disembodied, detached reader. Instead it speaks directly to and with the audiences/reader allowing for collective ownership of the research findings and then democratic actions (in DONKER, 2007).

Jess: This takes us to the idea of estrangement doesn't it? Estrangement is achievable through performance.

Judy: I know what you mean. Our lives are so familiar to us we don't see them, or ourselves. Noticing is hard in our non reflective worlds. In all of the cycles of this research we asked people to notice themselves/ourselves, either through telling a story of their practice or writing a creative piece about the CCC event and the performance sorta held up a mirror didn't it?

Debbie: Using creative, performative processes, in this sort of venue, are strange in themselves. They can help us, audience and performers, to glimpse the familiar. To notice and to enter into our worlds in different ways, to see what emerges from beneath the doing of our daily lives (VAN HALEN-FABER & DIAMOND, 2002).

Amia LIEBLICH: Yes it can enable audiences to "become aware of aspects of their behaviour or dimensions of their identity which tend to be blurred or hidden in their normal reality, in their daily vision" (2006, p.77).

Anita SINNER: The pleasure and the risk is that a performance format can "evoke or provoke understandings that traditional research formats cannot provide" (SINNER et al., 2006, p.1223).

Judy: Desirable and undesirable; comfortable and uncomfortable; pleasure and pain.

Claire: It's exciting though to try and create something interesting and to document stuff that doesn't usually get documented.

Jess: And I suppose its fun to challenge the idea that it all has to be hard work and serious and exhausting, with only one way to represent research.

Debbie: That's the multiple turn. And it also turns us back to one of the original themes from the research group—to work against the struggle discourse!

Judy: Creative, artful representations of research also help to bring forward new and different forms of knowing.

Claire: How come?

Judy: Because they can tap into visceral, emotional and visual terrain that is discouraged or silenced in orthodox academic writing. Writing collaboratively, creatively then performatively can transgress dualities such as mind /body and truth/fiction. Layers of meaning get to be represented.

Debbie: And for the audience/reader there is room to interact. In between layers are gaps and fissures to creep into. It is not so much about holding tightly to truth.

Jess: Whatever that is!

Debbie: Yes, but to work to enable multiple layered understandings of human interactions, inhabiting certain cultures, being in the world.

Judy: The current and rather tired debate seems to be about creativity and performance being out of place when applied to research. Who says? Connections and relationships based upon empirical analysis and visceral responses can occur. This evokes a more holistic relationship and full response from audience/readers.

Debbie: They don't have to put their feelings and emotions on the shelf as they read the research text.

Judy: No, and I think this can lead to people feeling moved. Being provoked. To take action. [50]

8. Conclusion

In both the writing of this article and the various research performances it contains I have attempted show how we performed social science research in action and how so doing constructed the way we did the research *and* how we represented it. Theoretical discussions of community development, performance ethnography, action research and writing as inquiry are embedded with/in the texts. The resulting text is somewhat messy—including a variety of voices and textual genres. My hope in writing this way was to enable readers to hear and see various performers (community workers, activists, academics, and theorists) in addition to inviting them/you to creep in between the layers of the text. In this way performative social science works towards democratising the research project (in process and product/s) enabling us, as researchers, to speak with and too a wider audience. [51]

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