'It's you who are. What? / A hummingbird.' and 'No longer was he young and raw though the error remained young and raw'

Mark Anthony Cayanan
Cover 39/3, Design: Debra Livingston

For this issue of Social Alternatives the cover design reflects the elation of coming out of COVID-19 restrictions. I designed a colourful abstract typeface to present this issue's title, 'Critical Reflections'. This issue does not have a tight theme but has a variety of articles and commentary woven around the concept of critical reflections. It also has a photographic essay. It was decided that the title should become the cover design to reflect this variety by creating an original typographic style. Typography has a complex relationship with emotion and for this issue it has been designed to project a joyful feeling. The abstract typeface created for this issue reflected an experiment with a bouba/kiki effect. The bouba/kiki effect is how we map sounds onto objects. Ramachandran and Hubbard’s research on synaesthesia suggest that:

… the visual shape of the object - either round or spiky - is linked to the shape that our lips make when we say that corresponding word - either open and rounded, or narrow and wide. In turn, this is linked to the way that our tongue moves in order to generate the word itself, kiki requires you to make a ‘sharp’ movement of the tongue on your palate, whereas bouba involves a more ‘rounded’ movement (Etchells 2016).

The colourful shapes and forms of each letter shows the sharp and rounded forms that Etchells (2016) discussed in the Guardian science article referenced below. He argues that these shapes and forms ‘shed light on the potential evolutionary origins of language’. When we sound the ‘o’ shapes, this is bouba and when we sound an ‘i’ shapes this is ‘kiki’. So the title ‘Critical Reflections’ for this issue, will have both bouba and kiki sounds in the shapes entwined with the visual language of colour.

References:
Ramachandran V and Hubbard E. 2001 ‘Synaesthesia: A window into perception, thought and language’. Journal of Consciousness Studies, 8: 3-34

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Social Alternatives

Social Alternatives is an independent, quarterly refereed journal which aims to promote public debate, commentary and dialogue about contemporary social, political, economic and environmental issues.

Social Alternatives analyses, critiques and reviews contemporary social issues and problems. The journal seeks to generate insight, knowledge and understanding of our contemporary circumstances in order to determine local, national and global implications. We are committed to the principles of social justice and to creating spaces of dialogue intended to stimulate social alternatives to current conditions.

Social Alternatives values the capacity of intellectual and artistic endeavour to prompt imaginative solutions and alternatives and publishes refereed articles, review essays, commentaries and book reviews as well as short stories, poems, images and cartoons.

The journal has grappled with matters of contemporary concern for four decades, publishing articles and themed issues on topics such as peace and conflict, racism, Indigenous rights, social justice, human rights, inequality and the environment. Please show your support by subscribing to the journal. For other enquiries please contact a member of the Editorial Collective.

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Submissions of articles, commentaries, reviews and fictional works are subject to double blind peer review and should be emailed to the general article editor. Authors are encouraged to consider and reference papers previously published in Social Alternatives to promote ongoing discussion. Submissions should be double-spaced with page numbers on the bottom right. Academic articles should be approximately 3,000-5,000 words, commentaries and review essays between 800 to 1,500 words, book reviews 800 words, short stories 1,000 words and poetry up to 25 lines. Submissions must include:

• copyright release form
• title page listing contributing authors, contact details, affiliation and short bio of approximately 80 words
• abstract should be a maximum of 150 words
• three - five keywords.

Please use Australian/English spelling and follow Harvard referencing. Submit tables, graphs, pictures and diagrams on separate pages. Remove in-text references identifying authors and replace with [name removed for the review process].

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THEME FOR THIS ISSUE: Critical Reflections
The global pandemic has forced many people to reorder their schedules, their priorities and their lives. Relationships with family, friends and colleagues have been altered and relationships with electronic media have intensified. Terms and words like: ‘lockdown’, ‘quarantine’, ‘physical distancing’, ‘mandatory isolation’, ‘state of emergency’ and ‘new normal’ have become common parlance. Governments, news media, policy makers, organisations and experts note that inaccurate and imprecise information may fuel conflict and panic, indeed even balanced ‘information’ can be read in problematic ways.

On my daily forays through vast collections and collations of COVID-19 information and data, I am struck by how little we know about the ways people are productively and innovatively dealing with the changes in their lives. Alternative means of community assistance and aid, alternative forms of amusement, occupation, and activity, alternative means of undertaking work and education, alternative business ventures and alternative economies. We encounter details of these on the internet in social media such as Facebook and Twitter, in blogs and blog collections, in alternative news media such as The Conversation and internet information platforms such as Medium. None, however, are based on print publications that are blind refereed by academics. This is what we seek to advance in Social Alternatives.

Social Alternatives is predominantly topic-based and print-based, and the articles we publish are peer reviewed by academics who are experts in the field. We seek to make available informed knowledge of alternative ways of understanding the social, political, economic and environmental challenges that confront us. While this means that the material we publish may take longer to publish and that sometimes our issues do not go according to plan, it also means that we are more able to secure quality and reliability. Importantly, the quality of Social Alternatives does not simply rely on refereed articles. We are also able to print challenging opinion pieces and we have been fortunate enough to gain the services of a gifted artist who designs the covers of the journal, and a team of talented short story, poetry and book review editors who obtain material that ensures that Social Alternatives balances its academic content with creative works.

This issue is not a tightly topic-based or themed issue. It is however grounded in the concept of ‘critical reflection’. Maddox undertakes a critical examination of the philosophical and ethical roots of democracy; the importance of equality, liberty, fraternity and justice and the crucial role of community. He emphasises the centrality of these ideals in developing a true theory of democratic government. Two commentaries take a critical look at conflict minimisation strategies under COVID-19 and the increasing problem of conspiracy theories (Hil) and the way character assassination and bullying has invaded journalism and politics (Rees). In a photo essay Livingston casts a critical eye on the history, development, importance and romance of black and white print-based photography and reflects upon its resurgence with a new generation of photographers.

In addition, three papers in this collection specifically apply critical reflection as a research methodology. These papers showcase examples of critically reflective research currently being undertaken at Queensland University of Technology (QUT). Students can elect to undertake course work that develops a critically reflective research project. This course work stream has been developed and implemented by Christine Morley. Viktoria Mueller and Jessica Hart are graduates of the QUT Master of Social Work (Qualifying) program, and Jo Clarke, is a lecturer in the program, who has been involved in teaching some of the units developing critical reflection.

Critical reflection is a relatively new method of inquiry in social research, but is fast gaining credence in applied professional disciplines, such as social work, because of its capacity to link theory and practice, and its ability to generate innovative solutions to enduring problems. Given that the data analysed is drawn from an incident based on either the author’s or researcher’s personal or professional lived experiences, critically reflective research can offer fresh insights and ways to address challenging practice dilemmas in ways that develop the knowledge base of professional disciplines by theorising and developing professional practice.

By systematically engaging in critical reflection on practice, each of the three authors using critical reflection...
methodology have contributed research papers that address different practice dilemmas or challenges. Critically reflective research can raise questions about a particular practice, stance, approach, or belief, which forces the researcher to confront particular ethical, political or conceptual challenges. This is displayed in the paper by Jessica Hart that explores the often overlooked and unintended ethical complexities of adopting a vegan lifestyle. The paper by Joanne Clarke draws on critical reflection to theorise a personal experience of trauma and grief to develop and improve critical practice responses to grief and loss that transcend dominant, medical and pathologising constructions of the issues. Related to this, the article by Viktoria Mueller and Christine Morley uses critical reflection to understand and reconstruct alternative narratives regarding Viktoria’s lived experience of workplace burnout. This paper highlights the ways that managerial and neoliberal discourses in organisations make employees responsible for workplace practices and cultures that cause distress by seeking to individualise workers’ experiences. Importantly, as with all the critically reflective papers featured in this edition, the paper offers alternative conceptualisations of the problem and practices of agency and resistance, rather than simply deepening critique.

Author
Julie Matthews is an Associate Professor in the School of Education at the University of Adelaide. Before this she was Director of Research in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of the Sunshine Coast. She is a sociologist of education who has published over 100 refereed journal articles, books, chapters and conference papers. She has undertaken research in the fields of minority education, reconciliation, refugee education, anti-racist education, international education, and education for sustainability.

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Paul Mitchell is the author of five books, including the novel, We. Are. Family. (MidnightSun Publishing 2016) and Standard Variation (Walleah Press 2014), which was short-listed for the Adelaide Writers’ Week John Bray Poetry Award. A collection of essays called Matters of Life and Faith (Coventry Press) is to be published in 2021.

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Morality and Politics in a Democratic State

GRAHAM MADDOX

Democracy is not merely a neutral method of government, but it also represents a philosophy of government and, arguably, a philosophy of life. Democratic government is necessarily rooted in a democratic community, and indeed the idea of community represents one of the ideals that denotes the ultimate worth of democracy. The key ideals are equality, liberty, fraternity (community) and justice. This paper attempts to demonstrate the affinities between these ideals and a true theory of democratic government.

KEY WORDS: Democracy, government, politicians, liberty, equality, justice, religion, community.

Introduction

One cannot speak of a democratic state without linking it to a democratic community. The democratic state involves a set of institutions designed to allow for the expression of the 'will', or wills, of the people, while at the same time providing the widest possible latitude for persons to conduct their own lives as they see fit. The ancient Greeks understood this, and allowed for personal experimentation and even eccentricity. They did not impose sanctions on people being themselves, unless of course they were interfering with the liberties of others, or engaging in criminal activity.

Modern democracies rely on representative institutions within parliament or congress to give expression to the wills of the citizens. To bring some kind of order to the cacophony of voices, modern institutions rely on political parties to organise competing discourses and policy proposals. Once regularly condemned as 'factions', which were said to promote sectional interests against the 'national interest', it was gradually realised that parliaments could scarcely work without them. A democrat should be suspicious of the term 'national interest', because it is often a sectional interest being proposed as mandatory for all, unless, of course, that interest is seen to be the explicit upholding of democratic ideals. A nationalistic state is rarely a democratic state, which unfortunately means that most current democracies are not truly democratic.

The two-party system, such as we have in Australia, may be characterised as setting up a 'dialectic of democracy'. Organising competing voices into two 'armed camps', as Robert Menzies had it, gives a greater chance of each side having its say in government. Both sides, being 'catch-all' parties, are charged with listening to voices in the public which would otherwise not be represented. Ideally the system allows for a more or less regular alternation of the parties in office, not because of any suggestion that opposite parties are equal in the value of their intent, but because democracy embodies the notion that no one person or group of persons can be good enough to rule in perpetuity. The dialectic proceeds by a proposal for a set of policies (a 'thesis') being put up by a successful party that claims a mandate, limited to a term of office, to govern and implement its policies. The losing side forms the opposition and has a 'mandate' to criticise the actions of the government as (inevitably) not serving all the needs of all in the society. It forms an alternate set of policies (the 'antithesis') to put the government's action in the shade, and to take to the next election. A new government will rarely discard or overturn everything that its predecessor did, and so a blend of old and new policies forms a 'synthesis', which, again ideally, represents an overall improvement on what has gone before. The 'synthesis' has now become a new 'thesis', subject to new challenges. The process approximates to Aristotle's dictum, 'ruling and being ruled in turn'.

Although not being entirely approving, Aristotle also characterised democracy as the rule of the poor. Ancient Athens provided a clear model for this description. As Thucydides has Pericles of Athens saying, 'wealth we employ more for use than for show, and place the real disgrace of poverty not in owning to the fact but in declining the struggle against it' (Thucydides 2017 2: 41 ). While conservative commentators will claim that democracy is a neutral 'method' of government, historically democracy is a system in motion. Democracies generally emerge in the wake of rebellion or revolution, as in Greece, America, France and Britain, and therefore
have an inbuilt telos, namely an impulse for improvement in the condition of the most disadvantaged (cf. Wolin 1993: 476). It is difficult in settled circumstances to maintain this impulse, but the need for it is always there. The initial impulse has been called ‘fugitive democracy’ (Wolin 2008: 227). A true democracy seeks improvements for the least advantaged in the society, progressive parties being charged with promoting the good of the poor, while conservative parties seek to consolidate on the ‘good’ values of the past, seeing that the polity is kept in good order. To the oppositional forces, conservatism invariably favours the landed and wealth elites. Nevertheless, the democratic system, as developed through history, is open (where there is a will) to genuine improvement in the lot of its citizens.

Yet the mechanisms of the system are the least interesting aspect of democracy.

The Ideals of Democracy

The ideals may be summarised simply, in an adaptation of the slogan of the French Revolution, which, perhaps not merely coincidentally, corresponds neatly with the aspirations expressed in classical Athens: liberty, equality, fraternity – let us say community upheld by justice. Together, they affirm a deep moral commitment. We may begin with community, since a democratic state cannot persist if it is not embedded within a democratic community.

Community

In a democratic community there is at least a low-level commitment to a democratic state, since ‘no amount of manipulation will make a multitude of egoists into a society capable of government’ (Lindsay 1943a: 142). Low-level must be conceded, because there are always elitist elements who would prefer an authoritarian state that poses no threat to their entrenched privileges. Moreover, in Australia there is at present such dissatisfaction with the conduct of many politicians that large numbers of people are disillusioned and willing to state that they do not trust the democracy (Keane 2018: 3). In the Covid-19 emergency in 2020 there is reasonable speculation that the initially low level of conformity with government instructions was a direct result of the loss of trust in successive governments (Keane 2020). Alternative options to democracy are not seriously canvassed, but the response is nevertheless alarming for democrats.

Yet there would be no democratic state in existence were it not for the implicit will for it among the majority of the people. The desire of people to live together peaceably has a long history. It has been reinforced in the West by the Judaean and Christian traditions. The children of Israel were bound together by a family connection to the one God of their people, while Christians were taught to love their neighbours as themselves, and setting differences aside, to ‘love your enemies’. As in so much, the Greeks thought through the implications of community in detail (Finley 1983: 43-45). Aristotle taught that the political state arose from the merging of pre-existing communities, beginning with families, or households, and villages, each of which was bound by love, or deep friendship (philia). The Athenians adopted the term koinonia, which roughly equates to our community. It implied that there was a common good in living in the city-state that could accommodate the differences among people and override the causes of separation. It implied a ‘functional unity of varied and reciprocal parts’ (McIwain 1943: 64).

A fragmented society is one whose members find it harder and harder to identify with their political society as a community. This lack of identity may reflect an atomistic outlook, in which people come to see society purely instrumentally. But it also helps to entrench atomism, because the absence of effective common action throws people back on themselves (Taylor 2003: 117).

Neutrality here implies a society that has no interest in promoting a vision of the good life while each person is expected to seek his or her own sense of self-fulfilment. It is a self-absorbed individualism that involves a ‘shutting out, or even unawareness, of the greater issues or concerns that transcend the self, be they religious, political, historical’ (Taylor 2003: 14).

The American philosopher, Martha Nussbaum, seeks a solution for the dilemmas of community in a reformed liberal education. She shows a particular faith in neo-Stoicism, suggesting an experiment in its revival. The Stoics’ ultimate inspiration, Diogenes the Cynic, is said to be the first to call himself a ‘citizen of the world’ (although an obscure report in Plutarch suggests the first may have been Socrates). Nussbaum says that Diogenes insisted on defining himself in terms of more universal aspirations and concerns (Nussbaum 2003: 52), but the accounts of his life suggest that he was more exercised by the hypocrisy among Athenian politicians, and a disillusionment with polite society, that brought him to repudiate politics altogether. The Cynics who followed him were legendary in their rejection of the worldly trappings of acceptable society. The Stoics who evolved from them were a different matter. Nussbaum quotes the Roman, Seneca, to say that each person is a member of two communities, one allocated by the accident of location at birth, the other a great and noble association binding all humankind. Nussbaum concludes that ‘...we should not allow differences of nationality or class or ethnic
membership or even gender to erect barriers between ourselves and our fellow human beings' (Nussbaum 2003: 58). Since most of the world’s people live out their lives in local communities, the exhortation is meant to apply to ordinary life. What is lost in modern society, Nussbaum argues, are Cicero’s strictures against aggressive wars and mistreatment of enemies, and the abuse of foreigners, for us especially asylum seekers, who should be treated with the greatest respect for their common humanity. Moreover, justice should take precedence over all expediency, a precept lost on many Australian politicians.

Community evidently impinges upon other constituents of the democratic ideal, namely individual liberty and autonomy, equality and justice, and is their legitimating principle, but we shall still need to treat each of these in turn. In the meantime, the democratic community requires an especial sensitivity: it needs an ‘ethical conscience’, which ‘pulls [each] in the opposite direction from the centrifugal forces of subjective bias, arbitrariness and egotism. It may be expressed as a sense of belonging, as participating in a harmonizing, supra-individual purpose’ (Ryn 1978: 20).

Liberty

The classic position is that taken by J. S. Mill, who argued that no person should be restrained from experimenting with her or his life choices unless it could be proved that their actions were actually harming others: ‘... the sole end for which [hu]mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number is self-protection ...’ (Mill 1910: 72). Freedom of expression would benefit everybody:

It is not by wearing down into uniformity all that is individual in themselves, but by cultivating it, and calling it forth, within limits imposed by the rights and interests of others, that human beings become a noble and beautiful object of contemplation; and as the works partake the character of those who do them, by the same process human life becomes rich, diversified and animating, furnishing more abundant aliment to high thought and elevating feelings ... (Mill 1910: 120-121).

The sentiment can be profitably applied to the community of persons. In any case, the question of freedom of expression became more complex when such issues as passive smoking were put under the medical microscope, and some such self-expressions as driving a speeding car were restrained for their potential, and often demonstrable, harm to others. Yet sometimes pressure was placed on persons to exercise their self-expression freely. Plato promoted Socrates’s view that the unexamined life was not worth living, and although the Greeks had no developed concept of individuality, they promoted freedom of expression as in Pericles’s Funeral Speech, where he claimed that Athenians did not condemn their fellows for behaving oddly.

As in so much, Christian thought learnt from the pathfinding inquiries of ancient Greece. Thomas Aquinas adopted the teaching of Aristotle that each person was the arbiter of her or his moral destiny: ‘everyone is bound to examine his [or her] own actions in the light of the knowledge he has from God’; (Aquinas in Ullmann 1967: 127). Christian thought promoted the idea of free choice, recalling the Josuianic injunction: choose which gods you will serve. Free will itself was a gift of God.

One of the most discussed views of liberty is Isaiah Berlin’s attempt at clarification by dividing liberty into two separate categories: the freedom of unimpeded action, and the divergent freedom of taking positive (mainly collective) action for societal improvement. The first, negative liberty, declares I am free when not ‘prevented by other persons from doing what I want’ (Berlin 1958: 56-7). Quentin Skinner taxes Berlin for pronouncing a liberty that is compatible with authoritarian government. Berlin’s idea traverses Skinner’s thesis, that personal liberty is derived from the Roman dichotomy that everyone is either slave or not-slave, and the condition of being not-slave can only be possible in a self-governing republic (Skinner 1998: 114-115). Positive liberty (self-realisation), by contrast, implies action of a determinate type, which requires ‘exercise’ of liberties rather than simply having opportunities (Taylor 1979 cited by Skinner 1998: 114).

In 1941 President Roosevelt declared his four freedoms, adding to the familiar freedom of speech and freedom of worship, his new categories, freedom from fear and freedom from want. Since the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington in 2001, freedom from fear has clashed with freedom to speak and freedom to associate, since draconian, and ill-considered, laws were introduced in the United States and elsewhere, including Australia. These laws greatly widened the methods open to security agencies and restricted the freedoms of citizens, whereby anyone in the least suspect of associating with somebody who just might be a terrorist was designated a criminal. Police were given power to hold people for extended terms without trial. Surveillance agencies were allowed to monitor people’s conversations with a view to catching speech that might be associated with terrorism. This blanket authority gave instrumentalities the chance to pry into private activities of citizens. The matter is delicate, because people generally did fear the possible outbreak of terrorist attacks, but security was ramped up at considerable costs, severely impeding the freedom of self-expression and association. Fear was attacked by redoubling fear.

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Free speech has long been under attack in Australia. In 2007, two researchers assembled a team to catalogue the measures taken by the Howard government to crush any public criticism of its activities. Government members became experts in not answering parliamentary questions, and downgraded the role of Senate committees, personally denigrating the characters of all who spoke out against them. They removed departmental secretaries to replace them with compliant officers, and targeted other public servants for removal, vilifying their critics. They ran down research funding and marginalised independent Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) (Hamilton and Maddison eds 2007). The Turnbull government set out to cripple the independence of the Australian Broadcasting Commission. Notably, when Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull attacked an article by ABC economics journalist Emma Alberici for questioning the government’s proposal to give the largest corporations major tax cuts. Alberici’s analysis, largely concluding that decreased taxes neither necessarily increased investment, created new jobs, nor raised wages, echoed the verdict of several other respected economists and journalists, but was denounced as ‘confused and poorly researched’. Since the ABC has been under constant pressure from conservative politicians who claim that anything vaguely critical of government policy must be ‘biased’, the management buckled, agreeing that the article did not conform to editorial standards (Jericho 2018).¹ In December 2017, the Turnbull government introduced a bill banning the use of foreign donations for politicking, but it also aimed at curbing the advocacy of charities when they believed government policies were to be exposed and criticised. The government appears to associate any criticism of its activities with its formal political opponents, Labor and the Greens. Since critics need not be affiliated with any party, the Coalition’s response is gratuitous in the extreme.

Freedom of worship has aroused recent difficulties in Australian society. The progressive move towards legalising same sex marriage was carried against the opposition of some conservative branches of the Christian Church and Muslim communities, who demanded their ‘right’ not to conform with the law. Religious freedom was held to clash with the social freedoms expanded by the new law. Conservative politics was then put into a spin to define exemptions for religious bodies. The general principle of freedom of worship still stands, however, following the implied constitutional doctrine of the separation of church and state, which has generally carried weight in Australia, despite the attempts of the Menzies government to outlaw the Jehovah’s Witnesses during wartime.

Freedom from want remains a pressing problem, since there are still significant areas of extreme poverty within the Australian society. Especially affected are Aboriginal and Islander peoples, some recent immigrants and asylum seekers, single parent families, families with members who have severe disabilities, people who have been put out of work and have had difficulties finding new employment, despite the conservative government’s boast of having created new jobs, and young people living in areas where there is high structural unemployment. Successive Liberal governments have kept working persons’ wages depressed as a matter of policy. The poverty of the unemployed is government made, because – up to the Covid-19 outbreak – welfare assistance had been restricted under the ideological cant that those who are unemployed are underserving or morally deficient in some way. The pernicious slogan is levelled at them: the best form of welfare is a job. Implicitly, then, we shall keep government assistance as the worst form of welfare. Government spokespersons are quick to speak of welfare ‘cheats’, with the intention of impugning all on welfare as ‘leaners’. They also repeatedly discredit welfare recipients with the allegation that there are drug users among them, and that they should be drug-tested as a condition of receiving sustenance. Society of course has a duty to protect people from the ill effects of drugs, but drug trafficking can be handled in the normal way. The restriction is blatant propaganda in the interests of the power elites who do not favour ‘transfer payments’ – the redistribution of income and wealth. Opposition to such policies was unblushingly called ‘the politics of envy’. The pandemic of 2020 forced the Coalition into an uneasy accommodation with Labor when the economic chaos threatened the jobs of the million ‘lifters’ who would face the loss of their jobs, and unemployed benefits were substantially raised. Unfortunately, ‘structural’ unemployment had not occurred to them before the crisis, and there is no indication that the Coalition will not return to its ideological denigration of the poor once the emergency has passed.

Under conservative, or rather, neo-liberal, government, inequality is rampant. It is at this point that the calls to freedom merge into the democratic ideal of equality.

Equality

Addressing equality is fraught with potential conflict. Confronted by the disparities in wealth ownership (in most advanced economies as well as Australia’s), the question of wealth redistribution and income parities threatens serious backlash from the owners of big wealth and the receivers of high incomes, the ‘oligarchs’.

First, what can be meant by equality in a community we have recognised as a union ‘of varied and reciprocal parts’? Plainly, there are dimensions where a formal equality is impossible. In society, personal differences are everywhere apparent. Not everyone can read and
In political terms equality is best dealt with in contrast to inequality. Our vision is foreclosed by the familiar measure of inequality based on wealth and income. Human worth is not measured by money. Nevertheless, the depressed incomes of the lowest earners and relatively low salaries severely constrict their life chances and reduce them often to enclosed, isolated and tedious lives. Such distress may lead to low participation in social life, and a detachment from the political system of which they are formally citizens. Income and wealth disparities are growing rapidly in Australia. An Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) report demonstrated that the average income of the wealthiest 20 per cent of the population was six times the income of the lowest 20 per cent, while in wealth ownership, a person in the top 20 per cent owned almost one hundred times the wealth of someone in the lowest 20 per cent (ACOSS 2020). In 2004 the average wealth of the seven richest people in Australia exceeded that of 1.7 million Australian households together (Hutchens 2004).

To address inequality is inescapably a partisan exercise. The Liberal and National (Country) parties were called by a former political scientist the parties of town and country capital, while the Labor party was the product of trade union agitation at the end of the nineteenth century. The historical calling of Labor was first to protect work security, wages and conditions for the working person and by extension, for all working people. By further extension, it has come to represent all people who might loosely be called ‘working class’, which includes unemployed workers, people prevented from work by disability and all otherwise disadvantaged groups. Of course, the Liberal-Nationals must try to keep an electoral balance for all otherwise disadvantaged groups. Of course, the Liberal-Nationals must try to keep an electoral balance for all otherwise disadvantaged groups. Of course, the Liberal-Nationals must try to keep an electoral balance for all otherwise disadvantaged groups. Nevertheless, the depressed incomes of the lowest earners and relatively low salaries severely constrict their life chances and reduce them often to enclosed, isolated and tedious lives. Such distress may lead to low participation in social life, and a detachment from the political system of which they are formally citizens. Income and wealth disparities are growing rapidly in Australia. An Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) report demonstrated that the average income of the wealthiest 20 per cent of the population was six times the income of the lowest 20 per cent, while in wealth ownership, a person in the top 20 per cent owned almost one hundred times the wealth of someone in the lowest 20 per cent (ACOSS 2020). In 2004 the average wealth of the seven richest people in Australia exceeded that of 1.7 million Australian households together (Hutchens 2004).

Justice

Justice has been a constant in the Western tradition since the time of the ancient Jewish tribes and their (legal) affinity with Babylon, and from the prehistory of Greece until Draco and Solon enter the historical record. Athens’s greatest philosopher, Plato, following his own mentor, Socrates, sought to establish justice as a constant in human life. His majestic Politieia (constitution; polity), translated by the Romans as ‘The Republic’, was an elaborate inquiry into the nature of justice. In the dialogue his spokesperson, Socrates, dispenses with commonly held notions of justice, creating a tabula rasa for the master to spin his own web of justice. Above all, Plato resorted to his overarching theory of disembodied forms – the truths that the mind can apprehend even though the eye cannot see. Justice was out there, an abiding truth even before humans were around to acknowledge and describe it. The actual content, that justice consisted in each person’s cleaving to his or her last in their allotted station in life, is far from satisfactory in a democracy that we have characterised as a polity in motion. Indeed, Plato did not approve of a polity governed by the ill-educated. And yet his approach has an important lesson for democracy: justice, ‘equitable’ treatment for all, should be the first consideration of any democratic community.

While the term ‘socialism’ does not incur the level of opprobrium as it does in the United States, Liberal and National politicians still trot it out to taint Labor politicians with the socialist brush. Usually it is described by its detractors as something it is not. Campaigning to return to the prime ministership of Britain in 1950, Winston Churchill tried to represent to the public that the Socialist slogan ‘fair shares for all’ actually meant ‘equal shares for all’ (Raphael 1980: 34), which is nigh unto an impossibility. In the previous century, John Stuart Mill spoke of ‘equitable shares’ for all, when he argued that wealth should be assigned to the actual working producers of goods (Macpherson 1977: 53). One could envisage in some utopia wiping the slate clean, and allocating equal shares of wealth for all, but soon enough the industrious, or the scheming, or the exploiting, people would soon upset the apple cart. Utopias aside, the prospect of achieving anything approaching equality, under the novel economic regime of neo-liberalism, seems remote indeed.

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of the soul that had to be kept to their respective lasts: appetite brought sustenance to keep us alive, honour led to creativity and the necessary defence of the self, and reason put the rational mind in control. In a democracy, the state ideally takes the place of reason, and sees that all residents are provided for.

Plato was undoubtedly arguing for morality in a community, and just treatment of each by everybody, what Aristotle was later to call *philia*, a community united by bonds of friendship. Friends of course may fall out, in which case the organs of justice in the community must take a stand. One may have heard more than one judge, in *obiter dicta* mode, volunteering that the law has nothing to do with justice. The finer points of law, when viewed narrowly, can deliver absurdly unjust results, as in the ridiculous expulsion of dual citizens from our national parliament who in every way, except for strict formality, had demonstrated their loyalty to Australia. In any case, manipulation of the law between two litigants may give joy to the person who, on all measures of common sense, appears to be in the wrong. Worst of all in the present discussion is the fact that ‘justice’ is readily available to those with huge financial resources to employ obscenely paid barristers protecting the position of the rich against the lot of the poor, who often have little chance of success. Even with all this said and done, it is nonsense to say that the law has no connection with justice or morality. It is only because of justice that we have a legal system at all. The choice to murder someone is an (im)moral choice, and law systems originate from taking vengeance out of the hands of wronged friends and relatives of a murdered person and placing it in the hands of the community at large, whose courts must sum up evidence and deliver a just verdict.

The level of morality is set at quite a low bar. Most people in society would abhor murder and most would reject stealing, burglary and assault as infringements upon their personal liberties. Therefore, there is a strong communal ‘will’ for a code of justice that offers basic protection. At higher levels of morality, people may have diverse views, and it would be difficult to claim a mandate for laws that affect individuals in communities. There were once highly immoral laws that discriminated against women, laws that discriminated against homosexual people, and we still have laws that discriminate against Aboriginal peoples and asylum seekers, who are imprisoned through no moral failing of their own. Justice at this level merges into controversial political action which may incur dangerous conflict. It is the good in society who take the risk, even though they be denigrated as mad or criminal.

Justice and Goodness

The paradox of goodness is that it involves the risk of concerted assault by its opponents, ever ready to label it criminality or insanity. Justice is four square and solid. As the Pythagoreans said, it is a ‘square number’. It is a responsibility of a whole community and every citizen, and whereas in any sound community there is much charity work done for the disadvantaged, the mills of justice should grind slowly and replace the most pressing of charitable objectives, thus leaving space for the adventurers in goodness to seek new fields of achievement. As John Stuart Mill said, nothing new ever happens without someone being the first to do it. These ‘moral pioneers’, ‘skirmishers in advance’ (Lindsay 1943b: 14-16) are extravagant in their ambition, reckless of danger to their persons or career prospects. Their blazing commitment often becomes the fire around which gather the beginnings of collective support for their causes.

There are no doubt thousands of such ‘good’ people who yearn for justice in its fullest expression. A small selective list would give the idea. Consider for example, the efforts, and in some cases, the unspeakable personal suffering, incurred by the following few: Benedict of Norcia, Martin Luther,2 William Wilberforce, Father Damian, Mohandas Gandhi, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr, Steve Biko, Nelson Mandela, Paul Robeson, Noam Chomsky. One way or another, their actions were woven into the fabric of politics. Their private morality became, eventually, public justice. However much we may have lost sight of the connection, the modern democratic state is founded on justice. The implicit separation of church and state in our Constitution, much distorted and on occasion misused as it has been, still makes room for the private and public exercise of morality, whether religiously or philosophically based. The democratic state, with its processes open to all citizens, still retains mechanisms available for the steady march towards the higher ideals of democracy. What is now needed, beyond the private ‘skirmishers’, is politicians of goodness, fired with passion for just causes, and careless of the consequences to their own careers because of their commitment. People in power have been happy to laugh at Jeremy Corbyn or Bernie Sanders, but their eyes are fixed on the flame of justice.

References

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Psych out

I went to church for a year and it took me twenty years to get over it

the craziest people I’ve known have been psychologists

that reminds me I need to write to the union

when all the debts are wearing silk

she asked him out and he was like only if you don’t take drugs

no events for the next two days

drib by drib

what a stupid thing the future is who thought of it anyway?

they would teach it each year as if everyone forgot

our parties end with cups of tea

Owen Bullock

fraction

“on a river three miles late” – Penelope Shuttle

fires double in the Orroral Valley residents of Tharwa told it’s too late to leave

in the mall to which we might have to evacuate

the PA plays Sultans of Swing a waitress clears tables a baby wobbles in the high chair

Owen Bullock

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End Notes
1. Many suspected that this exchange eventually led to Emma Alberici’s being made redundant by the ABC in 2020.
2. Anthony Arblaster (1985: 108-112) shows that the consequences of Luther’s Reformation, and the conflicts it engendered, formed the indirect line to the growth of liberty, although Luther was hardly liberal himself. His ‘priesthood of all believers’ was not designed for application to the ‘temporal’ world, but it was scarcely avoidable that it should be taken up by pioneer democrats. The separation of ‘the two kingdoms’ and the desacralization of the state opened a path for the growth of empirical science. Bernard Keane (2018: 204) sources the deep origins of neoliberalism in the individualism of the Reformation, but such a case must neglect the reality of communion and fellowship in the reformed churches.
The Irrationality of Grieving: Using critical reflection as a method to navigate and reconstruct deep grief

JOANNE CLARKE

Grief and loss are universal experiences of the human condition, and as such have long been the subject of reflection and research across many and varied disciplines. Despite the multiplicity of grieving experiences, the Western tradition has predominantly applied rational approaches to understanding and working with grief and loss. This has resulted in the pathologising of grief responses which do not fit within medicalised normal ranges. As an example, I present my own critical incident of loss and the prolonged period of grieving that resulted. I use a critical reflection research methodology to navigate the dominant rationalist discourses that were implicated in my experience to regain agency and reconstruct future truth narratives. Demonstrating this method of analysis highlights implications for use in therapeutic settings with clients but also potentially for professional development with health professionals experiencing vicarious trauma. This paper argues for the need for a narrative approach as an alternative to the medical/psychological model in our response to grief and loss.

KEY WORDS: Critical reflection, grief, loss, narrative approaches.

Introduction

Grief can be defined as our emotional response to losses that manifests across a range of physical, emotional, cognitive and behavioural states (Hall 2014). Many have theorised that our capacity to grieve is tied to our wellbeing, and ‘some measure of grief is taken as a mark of good mental health’ (Cholbi 2017: 256), while other responses are problematised. The grief and loss literature is predominantly constituted within a scientific rationalist discourse, which privileges a medical or psychologised understanding of grief and grieving (American Psychiatric Association 2013; Kubler-Ross and Kessler 2005; Prigerson et al. 2009). The dominant discourse constructs ‘normal grief’ as emotional reactions to loss ‘in ways which are within the normal range’, while a ‘disordered state’ is one in which the person is majorly distressed or impaired (Wilkinson 2000: 289). The medical rationalising of grief responses has been widely critiqued, even within psychiatry itself, arguing that harm also occurs from stigmatising grief experiences and substituting superficial medical rituals for deeply significant cultural ones (Dowrick and Frances 2013).

This paper demonstrates how critical reflection was used as a method for navigating the complex emotional responses of grieving in the quest for ‘good mental health’. After experiencing a series of traumatic non-finite losses, my grief responses defied medical/psychological theoretical expectations (Kubler-Ross and Kessler 2005; Stroebe and Schut 2010; Worden 2008), culminating in a mental health crisis. The failure of multiple attempts at medical/psychological approaches to grief work, aimed at producing ‘closure’ (Boss and Carnes 2012), served only to deplete whatever agency remained and further contributed to the crisis. In considering how to navigate a recovery pathway, I drew on my research skills and practice of critical reflection in my professional and academic work. Here I present my own critical incident as an example of how this method may be used to transform destructive thought processes and build agency to respond to adverse life events. This method could also possibly be used to build capacity for health practitioners and front-line workers in crisis settings to prevent events of burnout or vicarious trauma.

I will outline my critical incident research method, identify the theoretical framework that I draw on and discuss my understanding of critical reflection. The concept of critical reflection is used widely in social science and education literature (Brookfield 2009; Fook 2016). In this paper, critical reflection is extended beyond the simple
‘reflection on practice’ in that it has been developed from a combination of different theoretical frameworks plus a critical analysis, to arrive at critical reflection (Fook 2016). The discourses of grief and loss will be discussed as part of deconstructing my critical incident, and new alternative theories will be presented as the incident is reconstructed, to demonstrate transformative learning.

Method

Theoretical frameworks

The theoretical frameworks I draw upon in this research are rooted in the epistemology of social constructivism, which challenges dominant modernist thought that scientific methods are the only pathway to a singular truth (Strega 2015). Originally used in the study of the natural world, scientific methods have now been applied to the social realm and are positioned as disconnected from ideology or power, and suitable for tasks requiring prediction and control (Strega 2015). This is the case with grief literature as the seminal works are based on frameworks incorporating rational models of understanding grief and loss (Kubler-Ross and Kessler 2005; Stroebe and Schut 1999; Worden 2008).

The critical theories I draw upon align with social constructivism, in that they expose divisive power relations within social structures, institutions, practices and processes (Mullaly 2018). Critical theories are also influenced by poststructuralist approaches, highlighting the study of discourse, which Burr (2015: 73) defines as inherently linked to social power and social practices; that is, ‘what we can do or what can be done to us’. Accordingly, power is not seen as something that is possessed, but operating as an effect of discourse. It is by and through a set of powerful discursive practices that the disciplines and professions (medical model, social work and psychology) monitor and govern our responses to grief. Foucault (1970: 12) argued that the rules that shape discourses remain hidden from the consciousness of those participating in or practising these discourses. These concepts of ‘normality’ inform the micro-practices of everyday life, as well as influencing larger social systems. In this way, grieving individuals participate in the process willingly in that they discipline themselves in a desire to be ‘normal’ or achieve the ‘right’ way of thinking and behaving with the aid of processes such as counselling or therapy.

What do I mean by critical reflection?

Morley (2014) defines critical reflection as both an educational tool and a research methodology utilising deconstruction and reconstruction, which enables practitioners to envisage personal agency to respond to dominant discourses that are working against their best interests. Fook (2016) describes deconstruction as understanding the discursive production of dominant social power relations to expose the ways practitioners are complicit with those and other unjust structures. Reconstruction is a tool for practitioners to incorporate critical theoretical principles into their analysis to generate practice alternatives which incorporate new explanations that may be more in line with social justice (Brookfield 2009).

Deconstructing my own critical incident, I uncover assumptions about power and social positioning which were implicit in my thinking about grief and loss, in order to scrutinise them for discrepancies and to generate multiple interpretations of my incident. The second stage of critical reflection is reconstruction, which is used to reformulate thinking and meaning to create opportunities for alternative narratives to emerge as a form of transformative learning (Morley 2014).

My Critical Incident

In the summer of 2015, I abruptly ended my twenty-five-year marriage, after discovering that my husband – the best friend, the loving father, the supporter – was living a double life. His ‘other’ secret life was very different to the family life that we shared. It was a sordid and depraved lifestyle that he had been living secretly for over half the course of our marriage. He had also fraudulently drawn down the equity in our home to fund his secret lifestyle. This left me bankrupt, homeless and emotionally destroyed, supporting a broken-hearted teenager. I also learnt that this behaviour is not unlawful in marriage and that ‘wastage’ is very difficult to prove in divorce proceedings.

Over the course of the next year, I struggled to accept this new reality. My husband shared with me that his psychiatrist had diagnosed him as being on the narcissistic-sociopathic spectrum and outlined his plans for recovery. For a moment I believed that he was committed to doing work on himself but a few months later I discovered that the plans he had presented to me were just another exercise in pretence. I have had no contact with him since that time. Nor do I ever intend to do so.

The grief was unbearable. Often, it felt as if it would overwhelm me, but as a professional in the field I had some tools and skills I could utilise in the re-building of my life. I spent the year running, doing yoga and giving up sugar, attempting to nurse my emotional health, in order to be available for my daughter. My busyness also distracted me from the incessant processing work that was happening in my mind. I saw quite a few therapists during that time, who assured me that I would heal ‘with time’. Except that, I didn’t.
The following year, after my divorce was finalised, I began experiencing extreme levels of anxiety. Eventually, I was diagnosed with bi-lateral thyroid cancer, which was subsequently resolved through surgical intervention. I spent the next two years trying to adjust to life without a thyroid and re-gain my strength and some semblance of my life pre-surgery. Pain had settled stubbornly in my body. I developed peripheral neuropathy which meant my feet and legs became numb and burned constantly while walking which was almost unbearable. My balance was grossly affected and as a result I often fell and injured myself. Midnight yoga became a regular practice of pain relief attempts.

My life became an endless procession of seeking medical explanations for my pain. I began to suspect that my pain may be emotional in origin and re-engaged with a psychologist to explore this, to no avail. My anxiety worsened, and finally, nearly four years to the day of when my marriage ended, I succumbed to the pain and admitted my exhausted self into a private mental health facility. I was lucky enough to land in the care of a psychiatrist who listened carefully and made it possible for me to trust him enough to begin the journey to wellness, where I began to sleep and focus again. He told me that I had ‘deep’ grief: that was my work; that was my way forward.

The Discourses of Grief and Loss

While it is true that loss is a natural and inevitable part of life, it is also a very subjective process as no loss is ever experienced in the same way (Harris and Gorman 2011). Unfortunately, the mainstream grief and loss literature does not reflect this, and instead presents theories based on rationalising, measuring and predicting, and prescribing grieving processes. For example, Kubler-Ross’s (1969; Kubler-Ross and Kessler 2005) stage model of grief has been highly influential in our understanding of grief and grieving processes. Later seminal works, such as Worden’s (1982, 2005) tasks of mourning and the dual process model proposed by Stroebe and Schut (1999, 2010), although not as prescriptive, still relied on rational approaches in responding to the bereaved and managing the grieving process. Stage models have been routinely taught in medical schools and nursing programs and have become deeply ingrained in our cultural and professional beliefs about loss (Hall 2014).

The discourses of grief and loss in a Western society constitute several social rules for grieving that are not stated but are implicitly understood by individuals (Doka 1989). These social rules legitimise mourning responses by identifying appropriate actions and behaviours and shape how and when social supports are applied. These rules suggest grieving is a quiet and private matter that should be resolved so that individuals can resume their normal lives (Harris 2011). In Western industrialised societies built on capitalism, patriarchal hierarchical structures promote the focus on functionality in order to promote greater productivity and profit (Harris 2011). Therefore, there are consequences for non-compliance for members of a capitalist system, if their contribution to the market-base falls short of that which is expected, in order to minimise the ways in which grief might interfere with individual functionality (Sherman 2006).

Most of the grief literature focuses on the permanent loss of a loved one through death, although many of the early seminal theories have been extended to include different types of losses such as divorce, loss of bodily functioning or victims of violence (Kubler-Ross and Kessler 2005; Stroebe and Schut 2010; Worden 2008). Other concepts of grieving include: non-finite loss, describing loss of functionality where the loss and grief are continuous (Bruce and Schultz 2001), and ambiguous loss (Boss 1999), which are non-death losses that are very difficult for individuals to name, describe or validate. These two concepts of loss can result in a form of emotional exhaustion, often experienced as shame and self-loathing (Harris and Gorman 2011), which impacts individuals’ ability to trust and engage authentically with support systems.

The ‘work’ that is required in prolonged grieving processes is contested in the literature. Medical rationalist discourses of grief and loss construct grief reactions falling outside of the normal range as ‘abnormal’ and as such are described in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) as requiring medication and/or therapy. This reliance on rational models of grieving places emphasis on the individual and their deficiencies in grief work, resulting in blaming them for their failure to recover in a timely fashion. This adds additional stress and hampers individuals in both embracing their grief as well as undertaking the necessary grief work (Kalich and Brabant 2006). Alternatively, a social constructivist understanding of grief work would see complications arising when individuals struggle to find meaning in their existence in the wake of the loss of their assumptive world. This results in a retelling of their loss narrative to themselves in a way that fails to move towards a more positive alternative (Shear et al. 2011). The goal then, is assisting individuals to make meaning of their loss in order to incorporate that into a new worldview.

Deconstruction

In beginning my deconstruction, I considered how I had constructed my grief. Although no person had died, I felt as I had lost my sense of self. I was also uncertain as to
how the loss of my thyroid had impacted my ability to cope with life events and believed myself to be ‘less resilient’ or deficient in my ability to grieve. I realised that my losses were non-finite and ambiguous, in that they were ongoing and very difficult to describe (Harris and Gorman 2011). I can now recognise that I had difficulty separating the social expectations of how I was supposed to behave as I had constructed a binary of ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ grieving. However, it was difficult to know what the ‘normal’ grieving response would be in such an ambiguous situation. Mine was a self-imposed internalised oppression (Mullaly 2018) where I subjected myself to feelings of shame, humiliation and disgust in the self-disciplined drive to normality (as described by Foucault 1970) under the guise of protecting myself from further vulnerability. I now recognise that I was judging myself harshly in applying the rigid social rules which invalidated my losses and limited my opportunities ‘to engage meaningfully in a grieving process that would permit adaptation and healing’ (Harris 2011: 20). This meant that I could maintain a semblance of equilibrium, but I could not move forward, as the narrative I had constructed about my grief was working against my best interests.

The energy I expended to appear ‘normal’ exhausted my mind and body. In exploring this, I discovered neuroscientific evidence showing that there was a substantial overlap between physical and psychological pain, including commonalities in inflammatory responses and neural pathways (Sturgeon and Zautra 2016). The alignment of mind and body was something that I had explicitly believed, however, for some reason I had constructed a false binary of physical and emotional pain and had unwittingly chosen to accept the traditional medical discourse of separation. In deconstructing this, I reflected on research which found that individuals often avoid processing their emotional pain because initially it appears too overwhelming to tolerate (Riva et al. 2011). This emotional fear of the body’s physical demise is adaptive and protects the individual during a crisis (Riva et al. 2011). This resonated with me and I began to question whether I was focusing on my physical pain because implicitly I believed that even though it was excruciating, I knew I could endure it. However, I was not certain I could tolerate the emotional pain of my losses as they appeared larger than my life. Whilst this may have protected me initially, the crisis had long past and I was still holding onto this self-defeating belief. By dichotomising the sources of pain as physical versus emotional, I legitimised the ways in which I was avoiding facing the deep pain of my grief. Possibly it was a distraction that impeded healing at a deeper level. This would take some further deconstructing.

There were many ways that I participated unwittingly in the discourses of grief and loss. Harris (2011) argues that within the rules of grieving, individuals who experience profound losses are socially conditioned to silence their grief, are pressured to carry on normal routines and praised for their strength in the face of adversity. In the aftermath of my darkest days, I most certainly donned the mask of strength, and for a while, it sustained me. When I reflect upon why this may have been so, I consider my family of origin. I was raised in a rural community and am proudly descended from a long line of strong rural women. Whilst stoicism may be a coping strategy, there are consequences for this. Much of the research on rural women found that they often place their needs second to those of their partners, children and families and as a result minimise their own emotional health concerns (Wendt and Hornosty 2010) and their ability to heal (Ragusa 2017). Rural women often bear the emotional strain for the family and assume the role of comforters, which also makes them more vulnerable to financial and emotional abuse (Alston 1997). My implicit beliefs about needing to ‘be strong’ (as my mother and grandmother had been) in the face of a crisis, meant that I minimised the emotional pain and ‘sidelined’ my grief for fear of diminishing my functionality.

Recognising my contradictory assumptions about marriage was also a painful but vital task. I participated in the patriarchal construction of marriage in the way that I made many more sacrifices for the good of the family than did my husband. This meant that I, like many other women (Ragusa 2017), worked part-time, did most of the childcare and contributed disproportionately to the domestic labour. My work and career were subordinated to those of my husbands. And yet I constructed my relationship within the institution of marriage as being an emotional support system for the growth and development of each person in the relationship. My critical feminist framework understood his behaviour as misogyny enabled by a patriarchal society, however that did not protect me from experiencing shame and humiliation, nor the implicit belief that I must be flawed in some way – especially to have been so naive to the realities of our life together. Despite the financial reality of a single mother, I felt I had no choice but to terminate the relationship as the emotional devastation of remaining was, for me, far worse than the financial devastation of leaving.

Reconstruction

In the grieving process, I had participated in dominant discourses which did not serve me and had constructed myself as a victim, powerless to make self-determining choices about my life. My fear had led me to believe that I was somehow deserving of the traumatic events in my life. In exploring my fear I discovered that my belief in a benevolent world meant that I had constructed an ‘illusion of invulnerability’ (Janoff-Bulman 1992: 51) which had been shattered. I had constructed a truth narrative
about being deficiently equipped to move forward instead of accepting that what I was experiencing were normal reactions to completely abnormal situations. I needed to re-connect with my sense of agency and re-build my identity as a survivor.

For this to be possible, I needed to reconstruct my assumptions about the world that were no longer viable and create new truth narratives. I needed to change the belief that I was somehow flawed and deficient. Eventually I found Brown’s (2015) research on women survivors of relationships with men who had disordered thinking. Brown (2015) found that these women were far from vulnerable or flawed. They were independent, highly empathetic women with great emotional, spiritual and physical investments in their relationships, and not just the intimate ones. These women had low harm avoidance as they did not expect to get hurt and most likely grew up in nurturing environments. They trusted openly because they believed that everyone is as good and as decent as they are. This was affirming for me as I believe such a woman, who can stand in her power and stand in her truth, is truly a survivor rather than a victim.

Another concept that helped me reconstruct my victim narrative was research on post-traumatic growth, which results from the struggle that individuals engage with to generate a new reality in the aftermath of traumatic events (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004). To embrace post-traumatic growth, I have worked hard to dismantle the now meaningless binaries that I constructed. There is no normal way of grieving and applying rational approaches in dealing with loss is a wasted, and sometimes harmful, exercise. There will be no ‘closure’ to my grief and loss, rather I have found a renewed commitment to building a bigger life than my grief. My grief will stay the same size as my life expands around it. My physical pain is gradually receding as I accept the inherent ‘pain’ connection between mind and body and allow myself to feel the full extent of emotion that emerges with stillness. With a sense of mutuality, I honour my body’s physical need for rest as part of functionality.

The ways I re-construct my understanding of the work involved in grieving draws on Dolan’s (1998) ideas of moving beyond being a survivor by knowing yourself, nurturing yourself and working on relationships that enable you to flourish. Through critical reflection, I do this by continuously reflecting upon how I participate in the knowledge I use and by changing unhelpful assumptions (Fook 2016). This has enabled me to reconstruct my self-limiting belief that I am incapable of tolerating my grief, by recognising that: I can and do, every day. To nurture myself, I engage in yoga and meditation, which combat stress reactions in the body (Zimmerman 2011) and facilitate transformational learning by interrupting repetitive negative thinking and prevents negative spiralling into conditions such as anxiety and depression (Dorjee 2014). Modern technology in the form of neuroscience is just discovering what Buddhist mind training has known for centuries – that developing greater self-awareness can help distance individuals from their thought processes, which then facilitates a greater acceptance of thought and emotion (Tang 2017).

Implications of the Study

This study presents an example of the therapeutic application of critical reflection as a tool to facilitate healing after a prolonged period of grieving non-finite losses. My learning demonstrates how engaging in social constructivist approaches in working with grief can enable a powerful re-telling of a loss narrative and incorporate holistic responses such as yoga and meditation which link the mind and body as part of a recovery pathway. Gorman (2011) argues that deep listening, normalising the emotion people are feeling, without engaging in dominant mental health discourses which diagnose, predict or reshape their responses, is one of the most effective means of facilitating post-traumatic growth.

There are also implications of utilising critical reflection as a means of supporting health practitioners and frontline workers experiencing vicarious trauma from working in organisations in the context of neoliberalism. Building a ‘culture of critical reflection’ (Fook 2016: 125) would enable a critical acceptance of practice difficulties and facilitate a resistance to being drawn into dominant narratives of individualisation that are presented through managerialism (Morley and Ablett 2016). More research is required into how critical reflection, which provides a re-imaging of future practice through building practitioner agency, could have lasting affects for positive mental health outcomes.

Conclusion

This paper has presented literature and evidence demonstrating the complexity of emotional responses that are experienced in the grieving process. Despite this, medical rationalist approaches remain the dominant responses in grief and loss work. An example of navigating deep grief through the application of a critically reflective research method was presented here with wider implications of use for health professionals’ self-care. The path to post-traumatic growth is as individual as the grief experience itself and cannot be replicated or staged. However, this paper demonstrated how critical reflection was used as a tool to assist in developing a recovery pathway, which enabled a reconstruction of a hopeful future truth narrative.


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Reality check

Halfway between magma and starlight, this place is far from simple, everything the colour of joy and envy. Hera Lindsay Bird would call me an emotionally articulate, meadow-frequenting, piece of shit dumb-ass. I watch like a stray cat in the night, tapetum lucidum flashing. My night-vision is keen but I don’t realise how much data reflects back, not even making it past the retina. I don’t see that the kids have moved out, houses squatting damp and shuttered. There’s a brisk trade in ‘for sale’ signs. Apprentices are local front-page news. Dams are dry and sheep drink from bathtubs scummed with the dead. Mowers are in vogue but prosthetics for maimed wildlife are yet to catch on. Cows chew grain over grass. Species creep. Climate crisis. And who knows what’s happening with the fires? It all looks bucolic, these roads up the mountain like glossy eco-porn. If I wanted to be flippant, the cliché about change being the only constant springs to mind, but flippant people shit me. As do clichés. And how much change can the planet take, anyway? Not more than 1.5°C Celcius seems to be the consensus. I don’t trust easy answers, so this seems a trustworthy place. Look, I don’t know my red gum from my pink, but some things are clear. The forest gives way to the fence. Vapour trails crosshatch the blue. The world is torn. The magpies are caroling before I even open my eyes.

Rachael Mead

Credo

There are a million ways to know something. This is one of them. I’m walking this valley but seeing it with words. The world makes the lines and the lines make the world. I’m in the empathy business — my goal to knock you into another skin, another scale, another set of worries and come to love the estrangement. Don’t we all reach for wisdom? Sometimes I like impossible questions, feeling for a keyhole in a door that opens onto something so much bigger than myself. I want you to feel the trauma of the present, these words my hands shoving humanity off its invisible throne. The house is crumbling. The contractors are hopeless. Let it fall. Everything comes apart. Everything fumbles towards another form. Blood and thunder. Starlight and grass. Viruses and satiety. All dissolved into something more, something great. Something good.

Rachael Mead
BURIED VERSE

beneath our radiant second verse there’s more grist for those who try to bridge the great political divide yet the ham-fisted pop-philosophy tailored to the ‘silent majority’ slips into the cracks & fissures of this abyss roughly the size of the desk on Q&A seeping into the drinking water like fluoride to keep our teeth white sharp & pearly white

I grip firmly
to this $7 bottle of wine that I bought instead of buying groceries yelling at the television on a Monday night wondering how many Egyptians died building the pyramids from the top down

where ScoMo sits most uncomfortably atop that paragon arrogantly declaiming us the most successful multicultural nation in the world as if it were an olympic sport (tho we all know we’d have a better chance of winning if it were the comm games)

looking confused & daggy as a politician would getting actual sand in his boots—it’s like Napoleon’s soldiers shelling off the nose of thephinx breathing a collective sigh of relief when on the back of a dirty postcard a digger writes “post-colonial” & doesn’t get called up on it

the sick logic of this being that while skin abounds in our sunburnt country being so sensitive & white means getting stuck on whether to stock up or not: choosing vitamin D over aloe vera

increased self-preservation & retreating indoors to complain about migration means we stay in suburbs sparse & plain like a buried verse in an anthem only ever mumbled by overpaid athletes words lost in their delivery

though it’s clear if Andrew Bolt keeps talking & people keep letting him I don’t think we’ll ever be able to reverse the effects of such awful coral bleaching

Dominc Symes
Blaming Individuals for Burnout: Developing critical practice responses to workplace stress

VIKTORIA MUeller AND ChristIne MorLeY

There is a high prevalence of workplace stress and ‘burnout’ among workers across the human services sector. The causes of workplace stress are multifaceted, and often structural in nature. Despite this, however, the experience of burnout is often constructed as a private or individual problem, indicating the dominance (and limitations) of psychological perspectives, and the need for critical and socially-informed analyses to understand and formulate responses to workplace stress. This article contributes to an emerging body of critical literature in the area by reporting on the findings of a study that used critical reflection as a methodology to deconstruct and reconstruct a personal experience of workplace distress. The research demonstrates that critical reflection is a useful tool for human service practitioners to reflect on their professional experiences in ways that propose more holistic understandings of burnout.

KEY WORDS: Workplace stress, burnout, critical reflection, human service organisations.

Introduction

There is a high prevalence of workplace stress among practitioners within the human services sector (AASW 2013). This phenomenon is dominantly referred to as burnout and has been identified as a leading cause of workplace ‘injury’ or ‘disease’ for human service practitioners (Blewett et al. 2006: 12; see also Kinman and Grant 2011). This of course was prior to the COVID-19 global pandemic, which has significantly exacerbated the stress levels of human services practitioners; many of whom work in organisations that have needed to radically and rapidly reconfigure service delivery (Grobman 2020; Walter-McCabe 2020). In addition, COVID-19 has prompted significant increases in social problems including domestic violence (Gerin and Knight 2020), child protection concerns (UN News 2020), substance abuse (Fare 2020) and mental health issues (AASW 2020), generating and increasing complexity and stress in the health and welfare sectors.

Notwithstanding the impact of COVID-19, the causes of workplace stress in human services organisations (both in government and non-government organisations and across all sectors including disability, health, child protection, family violence and aged care) are multifaceted, with systemic organisational factors intersecting broader structural issues in complex ways to adversely affect practitioners. Aggressive neoliberal policies over the last three decades have meant that human service organisational contexts are characterised by increasing competition, surveillance and regulatory performance management, targets and accountability. Further, there are greater pressures for efficiency, compliance, risk management and profit generation along with diminishing resources and job security with a corresponding loss of autonomy and morale (Hendrix et al. 2020). The impact of globalisation and marketisation has resulted in practitioners’ expertise being undermined by requirements to manage risk and engage in social control type practices. Meanwhile the marginalisation of social justice goals has been replaced by the hope-sapping view that there is no alternative to neoliberal hegemony (Wallace et al. 2011). Top-down oppressive management styles and structures, bullying, a lack of skills and knowledge in managers, unskilled and unqualified workers, as well as inadequate supervision are also identified as part of the landscape of human services organisations (Whitaker et al. 2006), which some have referred to as ‘toxic’ (Easton 2017).

Despite these broader contextual issues, the experience of burnout is often regarded as a private or individual problem, indicating the dominance (and limitations) of psychological perspectives, and the absence of critical or socially-informed analyses in understanding and formulating responses to workplace stress. This dominant view is infused with neoliberal ideology that emphasises individual workers’ responsibility to build their resilience by engaging in self-care (Hendrix et al.
2020). However, focusing on the supposed failings of individual practitioners to manage self-care and build resilience does not address the structural issues that create stressful conditions (Galpin et al. 2018).

This article contributes to an emerging body of literature that adopts a critical perspective on the impacts of workplace stress. It explores how critical reflection offers a broader, more context aware understanding of the experiences of workplace stress in human services organisations in Australia. It reports on the findings of a study that used critical reflection as a methodology for Viktoria (one of the authors) to deconstruct and reconstruct her experience of workplace distress. The research demonstrates that critical reflection can be a useful tool for human service practitioners to reconstruct their experiences of organisational stress. In this study, this new lens created by critical reflection enabled Author 1 to develop a more holistic approach to burnout interventions that contribute a broader social analysis to the research literature in the area.

Burnout

The dominant discourse evident in the research literature that addresses workplace stress constructs the experience as ‘burnout’, indicating the dominance of individualised, psychological perspectives regarding this issue (Leiter et al. 2014). Burnout emerged as a concept in the United States in the 1970s (Freudenberg 1974; Maslach et al. 1996) and is defined as ‘a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion that results from long-term involvement in work situations that are emotionally demanding’ (Schaufeli and Greenglass 2001: 501). Perpetuated as an individualised problem, the World Health Organisation (WHO 2019) has recently included burnout in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11), defining it as ‘a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed’.

Human services workers report high levels of workplace stress or burnout, that impact significantly on all aspects of their lives (Kinman and Grant 2011). Research indicates that human service practitioners experience multiple work-related stressors, and that burnout has been ‘rapidly emerging as the single greatest cause of work-related disease and injury within the community services sector’ for more than a decade (Blewett et al. 2006: 12).

Both in Australia (Blewett et al. 2006; Coates and Howe 2015; Goddard et al. 2000; Harrison 2013; Lloyd and King 2004; Milner et al. 2019; Samios 2018), and overseas, there is now a substantial body of research on long-term effects of burnout on human service professionals (Borritz et al. 2006; Craiovan 2015; Johnson et al. 2005; Morse et al. 2012; Schaufeli et al. 2009; Tham and Meagher 2009; Wirth et al. 2018). Impacts identified include negative physical consequences such as headaches, sleep disturbances and pain (Kim et al. 2011; Lizano 2015). Psychological consequences include secondary traumatic stress and mental health concerns (Baugerud et al. 2018; Bride 2007; Harker et al. 2016). In addition, the occupational consequences of burnout have been identified as including absenteeism, reduced job satisfaction and work ethics (Coates and Howe 2015; Harker et al. 2016; Wirth et al. 2018). Such impacts expand well beyond the work environment. It is presumed that the frequency and intensity of interactions with vulnerable clients (Blau et al. 2013) creates an emotional overload that compounds organisational demands, thus contributing to high burnout rates in the human services sector. This overload can manifest as conflict between practitioners’ and organisational values, high turnover rates, understaffing, unsupportive management, and so on (Coates and Howe 2015).

In adopting an individualised lens to theorise this phenomenon, the literature on burnout obscures the ways organisations have been shaped by neoliberal policies that consistently prioritise economic priorities over social justice and human wellbeing, or managerial practices, that privilege technical, cost cutting interventions that often create ethical and value conflicts for many human service professionals (Fenton 2014; Galpin et al. 2018; Hendrix et al. 2020). Continuing the dominant, individualised narrative, most research papers concerning burnout are premised on the idea that people need to become more resilient and better at managing their own wellbeing (Samuel and Thompson 2018). This focus on resilience emphasises emotional and social competencies that are presumed to safeguard against the negative consequences of workplace stress, and are therefore considered as essential qualities of human services practitioners (Collins 2008; Howard 2008; Kinman and Grant 2011). As Neocleous (2013: 5 cited in Hendrix et al. 2020: 2-3) puts it, ‘Good subjects will survive and thrive in any situation’. Hence, psychological interventions and strategies that seek to promote individually-focused self-care type activities are valorised to address the prevalence of toxic organisational contexts in the human services (Shier and Graham 2015). Such interventions, however, fail to address the underlying structural issues in organisations that are implicated in causing burnout (Reynolds 2011) and therefore simply blame the victim (Hendrix 2020).

This research proposes to make an original contribution to this emerging body of critical scholarship by generating practice-based evidence from critical reflection of Viktoria’s experience to devise alternative organisational responses to workplace stress. The remainder of this
Critical Reflection as a Research Methodology

Critical reflection aims to uncover the impact of implicit values and assumptions of practice with a view to promote transformative learning. According to Brookfield (2017), learning through experience is the most powerful means of transformative learning. As a research methodology, critical reflection allows for exploration of a broader socially-informed perspective on the topic of burnout. Critical reflection produces practice-based evidence, which is drawn directly from analysing practitioners’ experiences (Fook 2016). Critical reflection is a non-positivist, qualitative and reflexive approach situated within critical and constructivist research paradigms (Morley 2008). It shares some overlap with autoethnographic approaches research, but is a recognised methodology in its own right (see for example Fook, 2011; Morley, 2014).

As a process, critical reflection requires the person reflecting to provide a concrete, detailed description of a critical incident from professional experience (Fook 2016). This critical incident description is then analysed using critical and poststructural theories that link people’s lived experiences with broader social and structural factors (Morley et al. 2019). Critical poststructural theories view knowledge as continually changing and contextually-based; thus rejecting absolute ways of knowing (Fook 2016). The poststructural influence distances the approach from modernist understandings that privilege quantitative objective measurement to instead observe phenomena from a range of dynamic perspectives (Fook 2016; Fook and Gardner 2007). This is an important theoretical underpinning for research that seeks to explore particular concepts and experiences beyond individualised understandings, to acknowledge the structural dimensions inherent in private (i.e. personally-lived) experiences of burnout (Reynolds 2011).

For this research, Viktoria engaged in documenting her experience of organisational stress and workplace burnout (as is described below). Analysis of this data was assisted by drawing on Fook’s (2016) model of critical reflection. This involves: (1) deconstruction – questioning dominant discourses and hidden assumptions; (2) resistance – denying the participation in dominant discourses that disempower; (3) challenge – naming discourses to open opportunities for new perspectives; and (4) critical reconstruction – converting findings into new ways of understanding practice and power to create social change and practice theory (Fook 2016: 120). The deconstruction process generates diverse ways of thinking about a critical incident and informs a reconstruction process that produces new ways to approach practice (Morley et al. 2019). This assists the understanding of how existing social structures contribute to the experience of burnout and therefore highlights the possibility for alternative practices.

It should be noted that research is based on a subjective experience and the findings represent one aspect of practice-based evidence. Findings from this study do not seek to explain cause and effect (Loftus et al. 2011) but develop different understandings of experience that may uncover new practice possibilities (Morley 2014). The researcher collects and generates data at the same time (Morley 2013) without any external contribution, although analysis of the data may be undertaken by multiple people (as was the case in this project). Critical reflective research does not seek to make universalised generalisations while reflexivity of the research is prioritised over reliability and validity (Morley 2008). From a positivist perspective this might be seen as a limitation, whereas reflexivity is considered a strength of critically reflective research because of the unique perspectives generated.

Account of Viktoria’s critical incident

This incident took place several years ago (in a previous workplace) while working as a junior human services worker in a non-government community organisation. Due to emerging funding changes in the human services sector at the time, I was put in a senior position with the encouragement that this would be a good learning opportunity to aid my career progression. At this point, I was enjoying my job, felt confident in the role and found my interactions with clients rewarding and energising. When I moved into the new role, I was learning the responsibilities on the run while supervising other more senior staff members, with no additional support provided by the organisation. I started to work long hours to keep up with the workload, felt forced to make decisions that felt beyond my expertise, and these did not always align with my values.

I felt forced to protect the organisation by covering up mistakes made by other staff, who were also lacking in support and supervision from higher management. I witnessed multiple problems including bullying of staff and lack of transparency about organisational processes concerned with managing high levels of risk associated with the physical and mental wellbeing of clients of the organisation as well as that of staff. I raised my concerns about these issues with higher management, but no actions were taken.
Consequently, I had to make decisions that were incongruent with my values, which impacted on my physical and emotional wellbeing as I was constantly thinking of work, unable to switch off and sleep. I felt low in energy, anxious, like a failure and ill-equipped to deal with being in a more senior role. I started to question my career choice as I lacked the resilience to deal with the professional responsibilities given to me.

After several months, I surrendered and asked to return to my previous position in a part-time capacity. I felt guilty about not being capable enough to ‘fix’ the problems in the organisation, deal with work-related stress and cope with the responsibilities of my new role. I felt incompetent and like a failure for not being ‘resilient’ enough to effectively perform my role; I doubted my capacity and wondered if I had made the wrong decision to become a human services practitioner, despite having a long-held passion to make a difference in people’s lives.

I recognised that deeper reflection is essential to generate diverse ways of thinking about this experience and I turned to critical reflection to research my practice with the hope of finding new ways to understand my experience and approach my work in the future (Morley et al. 2019).

The critical incident described here is my personal recollection of incidences that occurred, and therefore my perspective and narrative. I acknowledge that other people in the situation may have a different perspective or experience.

Deconstruction

Deconstruction is the process of uncovering the ways that dominant discourses, beliefs, values and assumptions become enmeshed in our own interpretations of the world (Fook 2016). In the process of deconstructing my critical incident, I became aware of how my implicit taken-for-granted assumptions reflected dominant discourses that had guided my thinking, reasoning and became my ‘truth’ (Healy 2014). I conceptualised my ability to cope (or not cope) as the problem; pathologising myself as inadequate (and therefore locating the problem within myself), whilst simultaneously seeing myself as a powerless victim of the system. Consistent with neoliberal orthodoxy that scapegoats the individual, I used negative and disempowering language such as ‘guilty’, ‘weak’, ‘incompetent’, ‘unprofessional’ to describe myself. My belief in my professional capacity was undermined by my unconscious participation in a discourse that suggested I comply with demands of my workplace, and I am weak if unable to ‘fix everything for everyone’. This discourse also created an othering process. By assuming I was different to clients and colleagues, and maintaining a façade of being strong, professional and resilient, I effectively isolated myself from possible allies and supports. I identified a binary theme throughout my narrative in relation to being professional versus unprofessional. Reflecting on this notion made me consider the ways dominant (managerial) discourses create particular expectations of professionalism that hold individuals responsible for organisational failings.

I felt powerless in the situation as I was unable to fulfil the organisation’s expectations, but on reflection, these expectations were mostly my own, given I had internalised managerial assumptions about professionalism. Participation in this discourse contributed to my high expectations of myself and feeling defeated when these expectations were unreachable. This made me feel as if I had no choice as I wanted to keep my job, hence reinscribing my sense of powerlessness. In my narrative, organisational processes based on neoliberal agendas were also privileged over professional integrity and wellbeing, which bolstered the discourse of personal responsibility for resilience (Foster 2020; Garrett 2016).

I accepted the dominant modernist and dichotomous discourse between myself as powerless, and higher management as powerful as a given. Further, I conceptualised power as a commodity that can be possessed, which also exemplifies a modernist understanding of the concept of power (McKinlay et al. 2012). I was driven by achieving professional acknowledgement and career progression, based on the neoliberal belief that I can achieve success through personal hard work. This neoliberal perspective erases structural barriers that many experience in achieving success, regardless of how hard they work, and obscures organisational issues that contribute to workplace stress and burnout (Hendrix et al. 2020). Therefore, I did not question decisions made by the organisation that impacted my, and my colleague’s, wellbeing adversely. I bought into the dominant psychologised discourse that developing symptoms of burnout was an individual failing and therefore inadvertently contributed to the representation of workers as commodities that can be replaced in a time of casualisation of the workforce (NDS 2018). This created a sense of precariousness and insecurity in people’s employment disguised under the term of flexibility (Garrett 2010). Harvey (2005: 169) terms this neoliberal phenomenon as ‘the disposable worker’. As commented elsewhere, ‘the culture we work in, we’re used until we’re burned out, then discarded and new ones are brought in’ (AASW 2013: 16), leading to high turnover rates in human services.

Within this construction, my sense of agency felt removed, reflecting acceptance of discourses that favour managerial, neoliberal and psychologised worldviews that assign
power to the organisation. It is essential to become aware of my participation within these discourses to explore what other constructions are possible and how subsequent practices might be changed (Fook 2016; Rossiter 2005). As emphasised by Bay and Macfarlane (2011), what we choose to include or leave out of our narrative about our critical incident usually serves the dominant discourses, rather than our own interests. Language shapes discourse and creates meaning (Fook 2016). Words such as ‘opportunity’, ‘career development’ and ‘resilient’ were used by managers to achieve neoliberal aims that support managerialist practices. Brookfield (2017) cites the process of uncritically taking these on as ‘automaton conformity’ that involves individuals striving to be the same as everyone else and therefore conforming to dominant discourses. This disruption of automation conformity is a key goal of the transformative learning process facilitated by critical reflection (Brookfield 2017).

Reconstruction

Having identified a range of implicit assumptions during the deconstruction process that were not serving me, freed me to consider alternative interpretations of the situation. Reconstruction is the process of re-authoring one’s narrative to create a revised understanding (Fook 2016).

The clash between my values and dominant discourses (Bay and Macfarlane 2011) was the turning point for me, when work-related stress became burnout. Morley et al. (2019) contend that critical approaches require our personal values to align with our professional values and ethics, while rejecting conventional notions that the personal can be separated from the professional. This knowledge allowed me to reflect on my professional identity as a new graduate, who became entangled in uncritical practice driven by personal success and oblivious to the negative consequences this had on me, as well as others (Fraser and Taylor 2016).

I felt unable to seek support as I wanted to maintain my façade of coping, but I can see how my perception of organisational, systemic, social and supervisory support has significantly contributed to my symptoms of burnout such as physical and emotional exhaustion (Houkes et al. 2003; Nelson 2015). Reconstructing my initial narrative gave me a different perspective. A critical lens highlights that neoliberalism makes individuals responsible for their own wellbeing without looking at the broader structures such as the organisation’s responsibility to provide a safe and fair workplace with a reasonable workload (Morley et al. 2019). The effects of managerialism and neoliberalism in a broader sense made me believe that success in my role was linked to being personally responsible for solving the organisation’s problems (Davies and Petersen 2005).

This resulted in a sense of individual responsibilisation. Taking on the organisation’s responsibilities as if they were my own serves the core intent of neoliberalism and managerialism (Garrett 2010). Macias (2015: 254) posits that produces ‘subjects that, while suffering the detrimental effects of neoliberal deregulation, nevertheless internalize neoliberal discourses and use them to understand themselves and others as rational, calculative, enterprising, and individually responsibility subjects.’ Complying with this is understandable as neoliberal regulatory systems and practices generate feelings of fear and powerlessness. Yet conformity maintains the injustices of the status quo and the current work culture of the organisation.

Compounding this was a discourse about resilience. This operates as a covert requirement to respond to adversity and cope with stressors and is gaining popularity in social work and related professions (Garrett 2016). This resulted in me blaming myself instead of reflecting on the complex interaction between systems and political, organisational and structural frameworks (Galpin et al. 2019). Bottrell’s (2009: 335) question ‘how much adversity should resilient individuals endure before social arrangements rather than individuals are targeted for intervention?’ made me reconsider my initial interpretation. Garrett (2016) argues that this ‘resilience talk’ constrains and deters resistance to neoliberalism.

After deconstructing the incident, I felt empowered to question organisational processes and the psychologised construction of burnout. I took responsibility for the way my own constructions influenced my perspective (Morley 2004), and adopted a critical postmodernist approach to increase my capacity to work with uncertainty. This enabled me to acknowledge the complexity of context, identity and power relations and reconstruct possibilities for personal agency and autonomy (Allan et al. 2009; Fook 2016). Rather than seeing myself as a failure and as suffering burnout, critical postmodernism allowed me to reconstruct my identity as multiple, relative and fluid, changing depending on context (Fook 2016). Instead of seeing myself as a victim who didn’t receive the support I needed, I recognised my capacity to advocate for training, seek external supervision and talk with colleagues to create a sense of collective solidarity (Reynolds 2011).

Foucault’s approach to power (Healy 2000), which rejects modernist views that construct power as finite, structural and oppositional, enables me to acknowledge I could have exercised power by not conforming with the neoliberal organisational agenda. I was unable to do this at the time, however, due to holding onto the assumptions I had internalised about the need to be resilient, I felt that accessing support would be perceived
as weak. Reconstructing these assumptions enables the conceptual space to create a new and revised interpretation of the meaning of my experience, which guides my understanding of taking action for the future. Reconstruction of my narrative through a poststructural lens explains the process of labelling myself as being ‘burnt out’ and paves the ways for me to reject this understanding and develop alternatives (Fook 2016).

Discussion and conclusion
The findings of this paper highlight that Viktoria had internalised the dominant discourses surrounding workplace stress, pathologising her experience by labelling it as burnout. This dominant ideological viewpoint lands responsibility squarely with the person who may be experiencing the effects of working in a toxic organisation. Garrett (2010) suggests this discourse promotes individual responsibility through blaming the individual experiencing burnout, thus obscuring the role of the organisational context in leading to the response that is constructed as burnout.

The experience of burnout arose for Viktoria when she experienced a conflict between personal and organisational values, and a sense that she was unable to address these with her employer (Greenslade et al. 2015; Hemingway and Maclaran 2004), resulting in moral dissonance (Lynch and Forde 2016; Weinberg 2009). Fenton (2014) refers to the same situation as causing ‘ethical stress’, which occurs for social workers when they are not able to reconcile their values with their practice. Reynolds (2011: 27) similarly describes this experience as resulting in ‘spiritual pain’. The findings from this study support these observations that the more risk averse and managerial the workplace environment is, the greater the ethical stress experienced (Fenton 2014), and the greater the likelihood that a practitioner will be seen as ‘burnt out’.

The findings of this paper further contradict the widespread erroneous perception that the frequency and intensity of interactions with vulnerable clients are responsible for higher rates of burnout in human services practitioners (Blau et al. 2013). The individualised concept of burnout and the accusation that workers are ‘not resilient enough’ conceals the organisational issues causing distress. This supports other studies that identify the conditions and culture of workplaces as problematic, rather than the work itself (Easton 2017; Hendrix et al. 2020).

Reynolds (2011: 27) proposes to counteract burnout ‘with collective sustainability that is shouldered-up by justice-doing.’ This perspective allows a shift in narrative from the dominant discourse of burnout as a disempowering discourse that serves the interests of managerialism, to one of personal agency and covert forms of workplace activism, and potentially in concert with others (Greenslade et al. 2015). This opens up possibilities for action and change allowing practitioners to work according to their values. Adopting a contextualised and critical understanding of burnout in lieu of the dominant discourse is one way of participating in covert activism as it resists the individualised, neoliberal constructions that blame the victim, and instead creates opportunities to take action.

Supervision is also put forward as an important strategy for reducing ontological anxiety if a supervisor allows decisions that are in the best interests of service users and therefore aligned with the values of social work, rather than economic concerns or risk management associated with neoliberal organisations (Fenton 2014). Critically reflective supervision contributes to understanding and contesting toxic organisational contexts that cause practitioners to experience burnout, as it allows practitioners to form a broader social perspective that acknowledges higher level structural challenges and dominant discourses. In addition, critical reflection provides creative practice strategies to move beyond feelings of powerlessness, by creating new ways of navigating challenging organisational contexts (Morley 2014).

The findings from this study suggest professional practice is improved by using critical reflection to identify unconscious/implicit assumptions and aligning one’s practice with espoused values of social work. Breaking free from the victimised construction of self allows practitioners to move away from a state of paralysis and to regain capacity for action. As Morley (2013: 1) explains, the processes of critical reflection may be used as ‘strategies and tactics of resistance within structural constraints’. According to Brookfield (2005: 7) critical reflection helps us understand ‘not just how the world is, but also how it might be changed for the better’.

Evidently, more research that takes account of a wider range of factors is needed to promote holistic responses to workplace stress. A critical approach, which is informed by an analysis of structural and systemic factors, can counter the reproduction of pathology-based understandings of social issues that emerge in organisations, and potentially point to alternative organisational strategies to respond to increasing rates of workplace stress in human service organisations (Kristensen et al. 2005; Shirom 2005).

Ultimately, this research contributes to an emerging body of literature that offers a critical perspective on the experience of workplace stress; the phenomenon dominantly constructed as ‘burnout’. Critical reflection was used as a research methodology to understand the impact of neoliberal managerialism in human services organisations concerning the wellbeing of human services organisations concerning the wellbeing of human services organisations.
practitioners. The findings from Viktoria’s reflection suggest critical reflection is an effective strategy to prevent burnout, foster resilience and increase worker wellbeing. Beyond adopting better self-care strategies, the findings suggest that developing a critical analysis of, and resistance to, culpable structural factors may well be more effective in combatting burnout. Moreover, increasing practitioners’ personal agency to engage in collective solidarity, activism, and supervision that supports ethical practice and organisational accountability are also identified as fortifying factors. The findings and analysis presented from the reflection hold broader implications beyond human services organisations to people working in all types of organisations and industries. This supports Samuel and Thompson’s (2018) promising findings that suggest using critical reflection in a group setting with general practitioners, for example, was effective in reducing symptoms of burnout.

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JennifeR coMpton

the poet

if i rang
when he was at his desk
and he was in a mood
to wag his chin

he would pick up
on the second ring
— hellowooooo
he’d warble

such larks
such disarming
shenanigans
(now i begin
to leak from my eyes)
(odd that
that hiccuping
wrenching thing)

— thankee kindly
he would say
me i would say
— such fun

and then he said
— goodbyeee
with an upward
hum

JENNIFER COMPTON

The Stranglebears

The two of them are the leftovers from the hunt some kind people thought up to give the kids a reason to walk round the block in their family bubble during the time it all suddenly stopped like that.

We didn't have a teddy bear but we did have a six foot high wooden giraffe with a sweet smile on its face so we propped it so it could peep over our tall front fence. And there's the thing. Where we live we have fortress fences

so no one can look in and we leave home in our tanks with tinted windows via automatic gates. They open and then they close. No way to spot a ted lurking behind a curtain in a bay window or disporting on a front porch in a rainbow hat.

So needs must and two neighbours attached their offerings by their necks with plastic ties, nice and tight, goggle-eyed, stumpy arms and legs splayed. And they are still there although the game is over. And that is all I have to say about that at this time.

JENNIFER COMPTON

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A Critically Reflective Approach to Veganism: Implications for Indigenous Rights and Green social work

JESSICA HART

Veganism is a way of living that is growing in popularity in the West. It is a social movement that seeks to avoid and raise awareness about the exploitation of, and cruelty towards, animals for human purposes and consumption practices. This paper provides a critical reflection on my experience of being vegan, that has raised some ethical questions for me about some of the unintended implications of veganism. This critically reflective process has empowered me to research my implicit assumptions surrounding veganism, and their connection to dominant discourses that serve to shape unequal power distributions within society. Specifically, this paper examines how veganism as a movement has become increasingly concerned with promoting environmental justice due to its intersection with animal rights, which may have unintended related colonising implications in which Indigenous people’s rights are further oppressed. It highlights how veganism, particularly within the West, is interlocked with privilege and cultural capital. The intersections between food sovereignty and Indigenous rights are also discussed. An example of the ways this research can help shift the discussion around de-colonising the vegan movement is given in relation to the implications for social work practice; particularly the field of Green social work.

KEY WORDS: Veganism, critical reflection, Indigenous rights, Green social work.

Introduction

Veganism is defined as ‘a way of living that seeks to exclude – as far as is possible and practical – all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose’ (The Vegan Society 1988). It is a lifestyle that is being adopted by an increasing number of people within Western countries (Radnitz et al. 2015: 31). This is emphasised by global organisations such as the United Nations (2006a) who advocate adopting a plant-based diet to mitigate climate change. In doing so, dominant discourses have emerged that place responsibility on individuals to combat environmental injustices through their dietary choices, as well as the possibly misguided view that this responsibility is the same for everyone. At the intersection of this lies Indigenous sovereignty, including Indigenous peoples’ rights to participate in their culture (United Nations 2006b). Both the value bases of movements associated with veganism and Indigenous sovereignty are concerned with social justice and social change. These are at the heart of social work, yet there are some fundamentally opposing principles that raise important ethical issues, as Indigenous cultural practices often involve the hunting and consumption of animals.

This analysis is furthered by examining dominant discourses such as colonialism and capitalism that exploit the environment and Indigenous rights. In doing so, it shows that veganism has become a colonised space in which Indigenous peoples’ rights are further oppressed in the movement’s push for obtaining animal and environmental rights. This article explores a critical incident involving an Indigenous animal photographer and his vegan social media following, that uses critical reflection as a methodology to explore the tension between vegan principles and respecting Indigenous cultural practices. As someone who is committed to supporting Indigenous rights, and the principles and values of veganism, this project seeks to develop a more ethically rigorous approach to veganism through the lens of Green social work. Dominelli (2012) pioneered the field of Green social work, in which she argues that true environmental solutions must prioritise Indigenous cultures, values and experiences of the natural world as well as address intersected issues such as classism, racism, and capitalism. Indeed, if social work is concerned with social justice, then these issues cannot be ignored as major and equal contributors to
social problems. While veganism emerged primarily as an animal rights movement, recently the discourse has begun to champion environmental motives and as such, an overlap of veganism and Green social work is apparent. Despite drawing on different perspectives and approaches, both are concerned with environmental issues such as addressing climate change, promoting sustainability and encouraging greater relationships with the natural world. It is hoped that this project will also contribute to the expanding field of Green social work to further consider Indigenous sovereignty and cultural safety as the profession moves towards addressing environmental justice.

Substantial research exists which advocates for the adoption of a vegan lifestyle (Alvaro 2017; Gamborg and Gjerris 2012: 206; Le and Sabaté 2014: 2139; Pimental and Pimental 2003; ; Ricard 2014; Sodano 2012; Winston 2009: 1627). There is further academic discourse that how veganism has become a predominantly white and colonised space, however, there is a distinct absence of literature that explores the intersection between veganism and Indigenous sovereignty, especially within the field of social work. This comes as an oversight, as there is a push within the field to move away from anthropocentric worldviews and instead incorporate values that are respectful of all sentient beings and the natural world (Dominelli 2012: Ryan 2012: 158; Wolf 2000). Furthermore, in examining the intersection between social work, food consumption and the environment, Gordon (2017) argues for the profession to address food at the structural level to mitigate the effects of climate change through adopting a plant-based diet. While Gordon (2017: 152) does mention that a ‘one size fits all’ approach should not be used, there is no discussion on how the social work profession can adhere to Indigenous sovereignty and incorporate cultural safety values in their promotion of a vegan diet. Of the social work literature reviewed, the majority consisted of white, privileged voices. Although this observation was recognised by Erickson (2018), no articles could be located that provide insight into how to adopt a vegan ethos and promote Indigenous voices.

**Veganism as a Colonised Space**

Beyond the field of social work, some attention is paid to the importance of Indigenous sovereignty when addressing veganism, with the argument that veganism is another extension of white colonialism being a prominent theme among the literature. Harper (2011), for example, argues that veganism is a lifestyle associated with one of privilege and ‘status’, with its populations comprising predominantly white, middle-class females. They argue that while many vegans are quick to compare speciesism to racism or sexism, few are willing to discuss how veganism itself can be considered racist, with viewpoints of moral superiority prominent within the movement (Harper 2011; Mares and Pena 2011). Mares and Pena (2011: 198) argue that few vegans have knowledge of Indigenous ecology and sustainability practices, assuming their lifestyle to be the most ethical and appropriate way to address their ecological footprint.

Further emphasising this viewpoint, McCallin (2018), paints a disparate picture of ‘militant vegans’, who exist simply to shame and hold guilty non-vegans, particularly those with religious or cultural connections to meat. McCallin (2018) argues that the blame towards Indigenous peoples’ treatment of animals as cause for environmental desecration is ‘wrong and misplaced’, as Indigenous peoples’ ways of living had existed for thousands of years without animal extinction or depletion of the Earth’s resources before colonisation. Indigenous people are and have always been true conservationists, McCallin (2018) argues, and Native American tribes in particular ‘understand the inherent dangers of overtaxing the earth and her creatures’.

McCallin (2018) provides clear examples of the relationship between colonisation and Indigenous food sovereignty, such as Greenpeace Canada’s campaign to end seal hunting, where the Inuit people’s rights to hunt were stripped from them. While apologies have since been made (Greenpeace Canada 2014), vegan activists within Western countries continue to argue against Indigenous peoples’ rights to participate in their culture, which is in direct contrast to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2006b).

Expanding on this example, Nieves (2019) argues that veganism has become a form of the ‘white animal saviour complex’, which continues to oppress Indigenous peoples’ rights to participate in their culture. Moreover, they state that globalisation and capitalism are at fault for the subsequent environmental impact, and that Indigenous people should not be forced to conform to ‘white ideas of morality and cultural expression’ (Nieves 2019), which has continued to oppress Indigenous people through colonisation.

Similarly, Roberts (2011) argues that the West, in its push for veganism, fails to recognise that traditional Indigenous populations may not have the means to engage in veganism due to unsustainable climates and the consequent unavailability of fresh, nutritious plant-based foods. Furthermore, he argues that it is unfair to expect Indigenous communities, who have contributed little in the way of environmental destruction, to partake in veganism on environmental grounds, as it is the fault of the privileged West and therefore their responsibility (Roberts 2011).
The objective of this article is to present a research process that might move our thinking beyond this divide between the aims of the vegan movement and Indigenous rights to achieving sovereignty, particularly highlighting the implications for Green social work.

Hence, the research question explored is: ‘How might critical reflection assist the social movement of veganism, as it is applied within Green social work, to ensure cultural safety and Indigenous sovereignty are upheld?’

Critical Reflection

In understanding that the personal and the professional cannot be removed from each other, critical reflection, through its analysis of a critical incident, was chosen as the most appropriate methodology for this project. While critical reflection is a relatively new tool in the field of research, its capacity to draw from personal experience allows results to be shared in a way that is consumable by academic and non-academic people alike, broadening its scope for achieving social change (Fook 2011).

Drawing from a critical post-modern theoretical framework, critical reflection allows for the multiplicity of perspectives to be heard, creating an avenue for shared understanding and transformative learning (Fook 2016). While there are diverse understandings of critical reflection, this project will employ Fook’s (2016) model which outlines a concise process for achieving transformative thinking. By engaging in a process of deconstructing and reconstructing an incident considered critical to its author, practitioners can begin to uncover dominant discourses and taken-for-granted assumptions, views or ‘common-sense’ beliefs that influence their world view (Morley 2008: 270). Exposing these discourses allows them to be questioned, in turn removing the power they hold, which may limit beliefs and practices (Morley 2008: 274).

By deconstructing modernist views of power and identity embedded in everyday incidents, researchers are provided with the opportunity to move towards more post-modern constructions that allow for the flexibility and fluidity of experience and can overcome binary constructions (Morley 2008: 274). Power is no longer seen as something that is a physical entity or commodity but rather something that is exercised and expressed in discourses (Morley 2008: 274). People can actively participate in such discourses, thereby connecting them with a capacity to exercise power (Foucault 1980). Related to this, post-modern perspectives of one’s selfhood interpret identity as a subjective experience that can change over time for specific purposes (Fook 2016). As such, it empowers practitioners and researchers to challenge the ways they view a situation and how they participate within discourses, thus providing them with the power to reject, embrace or ignore them (Morley 2008: 274). Moreover, in challenging dichotomous thinking, critical reflection allows researchers to consider a situation from many perspectives, encapsulating post-modern schools of thought that affirm there are multiple truths within any construction (Fook 2016).

This project draws from critical and post-modern perspectives such as critical whiteness theory – which analyses and challenges whiteness and associated privileges (Nicholl 2010) – and cultural capital – the accumulated knowledge, experiences, norms and behaviours which can contribute to social standing (Bourdieu 1986: 86; Goldthorpe 2007) – to form its conceptual and theoretical basis when critically reflecting on the intersection between veganism and Indigenous sovereignty. Food security and decolonisation were also used as key concepts to inform this piece. Furthermore, in ensuring ethical considerations were maintained throughout this project, the author of the post which triggered this critical incident is referred to in non-identifiable ways to protect anonymity confidentiality (National Health and Medical Research Council 2007).

My First Account of the Critical Incident

As an avid member of the vegan community and someone who has a keen interest in the natural world, I follow a number of animal photographers on social media. I encountered a photograph that triggered reflection of my vegan values and lifestyle. The author, a well-known animal and nature photographer, was holding a large fish that had been caught on a recent fishing trip. The author’s enthusiastic vegan following were quick to anger, and, as a Hawaiian local, the author responded to the myriad of aggressive comments on his post by making a statement about the sacred, cultural motivations for catching the fish which he believed was strongly his right to do. This incident proved critical for me as I am a passionate member of the vegan community, but also, as a social worker motivated to achieve social justice in all forms, I am also passionate about Indigenous rights. This incident therefore created an ethical dilemma as I identified an inconsistency in ethics between the values of the vegan movement and Indigenous peoples’ rights to participate in their culture whose practices often include the hunting, and consumption, of animals.

Analysis

A key first step in the process of critical reflection is deconstruction, which allows practitioners to uncover different perspectives, contradictions and problematic ways of viewing the world that can often remain hidden or unchallenged through dominant discourses (Fook...
and construct the vegan movement, it can be argued that in recent decades veganism has emerged as the ‘silver bullet’ (Roberts 2011) for addressing three key areas of social wellbeing: improving people's physical health (Le and Sabaté 2014: 2139; Winston 2009: 1627), eliminating animal cruelty in all forms (Alvaro 2017; Ricard 2014) and as a dietary choice capable of mitigating the effects of climate change (Gamborg and Gjerris 2012: 206; Pimental and Pimental 2003; Sodano 2012). This discourse is widespread within much of Western society, as is highlighted by the rise of celebrity vegan bloggers, products and documentaries such as ‘The Game Changers’ and ‘Cowspiracy’.

In deconstructing the view that veganism was the ‘silver bullet’ for improving these areas of social wellbeing and planetary health, I identified that these assumptions were in fact grounded in hidden privilege. Of particular concern was the assumption that veganism is the most effective way to improve planetary health (Gamborg and Gjerris, 2012). The universal expectation that everyone should ‘go vegan’ to combat climate change, as demonstrated by the United Nation’s (2010) push for a global plant-based diet is misguided however, as it fails to acknowledge issues of food security within traditional Indigenous populations (Roberts 2011). An example of this can be seen in the traditional Inuit communities of Greenland and Northern Canada, who due to their location within an arctic climate where farming and agricultural practices are not sustainable are reliant on traditional hunting practices to survive (Greenpeace 2014).

While current dominant discourses continue to advocate the benefits of a vegan diet, through reconstruction it is apparent that veganism has become a colonised space in which Indigenous people’s rights to participate in their culture are continuously denied. Within Western society, the vegan movement has failed to recognise the intersectionality of colonisation and food security which is evident within Indigenous communities such as the Inuit who, despite Greenpeace’s apology, continue to encounter challenges as a result of animal rights activism (Arnaquq-Baril 2016).

In recognising the underlying systems of colonialism evident within the vegan movement, I have become aware of my own privilege as a white, middle class person who, through my position as a member of this group, has access to the resources which allow me to lead a vegan lifestyle. As such, food security has never directly been an issue for me. The invisibility of this privilege that is so often missed by white people is a direct result of colonial systems that position whiteness as superior to others (Owen 2007). Critical whiteness theory positions race as a social construct which ‘shapes actions, social practices and dispositions’ (Owen 2007: 206). This provides white...
people with structural advantage relative to non-white people across economic, political, social and cultural spheres (Owen 2007). These practices in turn normalise and naturalise these advantages, ensuring the privilege that comes with being white is invisible to those who benefit from it (Green et al. 2007: 396). Moreover, Green et al. (2007: 401) argue that the construct of whiteness encourages subsequent constructions of Indigenous people that fit with its particular interests at the time, reinforcing existing systems of power. This can be seen in the vegan movement which, in believing that everyone should adopt vegan practices, irrespective of cultural background or beliefs, fails to account for the intersection of privilege and food security.

Further examination of this privilege can be seen in the discourse surrounding veganism as the most compassionate lifestyle (Ricard 2014). Through symbolic value and membership of the vegan community, members acquire another form of cultural capital, reflective in their social standing as ‘compassionate’ people (Goldthorpe 2007). In reconstructing this assumption, it can be seen that cultural capital, through modernist constructions of oppositional dichotomies, can foster feelings of moral superiority and therefore cultivate feelings of alienation or fault (Fook 2016). In becoming aware of this discourse, I am able to recognise that there are multiple ways of leading a compassionate lifestyle that seek to achieve similar aims of respecting the natural world and thus resist my participation within oppressive discourses (Fook 2016).

Moreover, in deconstructing the discourse surrounding veganism and its relationship to the environment, it became clear to me that colonial and capitalist systems of exploitation have deeply influenced, and continue to influence, Western discourse and subsequently society’s exploitation of the natural world. In reconstructing the ‘silver bullet’ discourse surrounding veganism, specifically the advocacy of adopting a vegan diet to combat climate change, I identified that capitalism is in fact the major system responsible for climate change. With the expansion of the industrial agricultural sector there has been a rise in the over-consumption of animals contributing to an increase in emissions from the sector (United Nations 2006a). Similarly, the mass desecration of Indigenous land rights around the world has allowed colonial systems to continue to shape the way in which Western society exploits the natural world. In the intersection between colonisation and capitalism, this further oppresses Indigenous peoples’ rights to participate in their culture which is particularly problematic for the environment when these practices and beliefs cultivate conservation of the natural world (McCallin 2018).

Furthermore, despite wider structural systems being responsible, dominant discourses continue to promote individual responsibility for climate change through dietary choices. If we are to move towards more eco-centric views that respect Indigenous rights and practices that honour the environment, broader structural change is required. While there is a role for individual change – such as consuming less meat, particularly in the West where capitalist demands are most prevalent – this analysis suggests it is misguided and oppressive to expect everyone in the world to ‘go vegan’ and that this view obscures the direct links between global capitalism and unsustainable consumption that is a key driver of climate change.

**Where to Now?**

Reinforcing the view that the personal and the professional are intrinsically linked, this critical reflection on veganism has catalysed a change in my personal views and beliefs which holds implications for my future practice as a social worker. Having engaged in the process of critical reflection, my views regarding veganism and its relationship to the environment have transformed, allowing for the inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives. In understanding that identity is something fluid and changeable (Morley 2008), I have begun the process of reconstructing my identity as a vegan. I no longer feel like my identity is fixed as an ‘all or nothing’ vegan but more as someone who can hold space for both vegan beliefs and Indigenous rights.

In recognising that dominant discourses are multiple and changing, I can contest what is presented to me by choosing to challenge or resist that which is presented as implicit or understood (Fook 2016). This includes challenging and resisting dominant discourses such as capitalism and colonialism that, at the intersection of food consumption, serve to further disempower Indigenous rights within social movements such as veganism. As a social work professional that advocates within spaces of environmental justice, I feel I am now also more capable of shaping existing power structures through my participation and resistance to colonial and capitalist systems of exploitation.

In challenging oppositional dichotomies that I had created regarding my identity as a ‘Green’ social worker and someone passionate about Indigenous rights, this has allowed for a transformation in how I view food consumption and its impact on the environment. Having identified ethical issues and tensions between veganism and Indigenous cultural practices in respect of animal rights, I have come to the resolution that the dichotomy of animal rights versus animal cruelty is not as simple. By viewing this through an oppositional dichotomous lens I am ignoring the intersection of Indigenous rights whose
populations encompass deep, sacred relationships with life and land. My personal decision to engage in veganism for the fight for animal rights and environmental justice does not afford me the right to impose my decision on others, particularly Indigenous populations who hunt and eat animals for cultural practices or who face food security issues. Moreover, in learning that many Indigenous communities hold the animals they hunt in great respect and honour the animals' sacrifice (McCallin 2018), such as the photographer who triggered my critical incident, and in further understanding that loaded language such as the word 'cruel' holds many different truths, I am now more optimistic about finding ways to hold space for these competing realities, values and experiences within my practice. As post-modernism recognises that identity is understood within context and can therefore be both contradictory, multiple and capable of change (Fook 2016) I am certain that my views regarding this will continue to transform over time as will any markers I choose to identify with. I also acknowledge that while this reflection may open doors for other cultural justifications, social issues are not always black and white, proving critical reflection to be an important tool for addressing these complexities.

While there can never be one single truth about any situation and this reflection is merely another 'interpretation of reality rather than reality itself” (Morley and O'Connor 2016: 227), this process has (perhaps somewhat controversially) highlighted the intersectionality of veganism with oppressive systems that continue to adversely impact Indigenous populations around the world. To not explore these issues, however, for the potential conflicts or challenges they raise, particularly for those like myself who identify as vegan, would be anti-intellectual and would gloss over ethical issues that I also feel committed to as a critical social work practitioner and thinking citizen. As social work is concerned with obtaining social justice, this analysis has implications for future practice.

Discussion

As anxiety rises around climate change due in part to increased media exposure of the climate crisis through actions led by grassroots movements such as Extinction Rebellion, so too will the awareness regarding the relationship between food consumption and its impact on the environment. While institutions such as the United Nations (2010) and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change advocate for a plant-based diet to reduce emissions (IPCC 2019), the number of people becoming vegan is also set to increase. Taking into account dominant discourses, those who may not have considered veganism on the grounds of physical health or animal rights may find themselves drawn to the movement through a sense of increased responsibility to combat climate change. As a vegan, I do not see this as a negative outcome in itself; however, analysis of the critical incident has raised some ethical complexities that need to be thought through before vegan principles are universally applied and imposed.

While governments continue to dismiss the urgency of the climate crisis at hand, the field of green social work is likely to expand alongside the vegan movement as the profession finds itself working to address social injustices that will arise and worsen as a result of climate change (Levy and Patz 2015; Kasperson and Kasperson 2001). In understanding that the vegan movement and food consumption in itself is a colonised and potentially colonising space, it is essential that social work allows and advocates the foregrounding of Indigenous voices. By highlighting this gap in research and practice, it is hoped that alternative ways of thinking about these ethical issues will be triggered, allowing for the development of solutions for an issue that is becoming increasingly acute every day.

If we are to build more compassionate communities based on social work values that are inclusive of all members of society, we must also move away from modernist notions of thinking that create dichotomous views of right and wrong, fostering feelings of alienation and fault (Fook 2016). As a movement that is increasingly becoming more concerned with the preservation of the natural world alongside animal rights and, in keeping with post-modern tradition, veganism must allow for the multiplicity of perspectives and diversity of voices to achieve its aims.

Furthermore, the social work profession must also not be complacent in challenging epistemological racism. That is, the foregrounding of white voices and perspectives within academia constitutes a form of what Joan Tronto calls ‘privileged irresponsibility’ – when dominant groups consciously remain ignorant about their complicity in the furthering of social inequality (Pease 2020: 167). The omission of Indigenous voices and perspectives regarding veganism and Indigenous sovereignty was evident within the literature, particularly within Green social work academia. The vast majority of discussion regarding veganism as a colonised space could only be located within political posts and blogs as opposed to higher academia sources. This further exposes colonial systems of exploitation that exclude Indigenous people from higher education (Fredericks 2009).

As the social work profession works to increase its research in this area, it must ensure Indigenous voices and perspectives are not excluded from the discussion. A critical step in achieving inclusion of ‘other voices’ is through acknowledgement of one’s own privilege (Nicholl 2010). As such, the author of this project acknowledges...
that this reflection comes from a white, privileged lens and will continue to engage in de-colonising and anti-racist learnings to combat this.

The social work profession, as both an extension of, and a mirror to, society as a whole, must apply a critical lens to all areas, including well intended movements such as veganism. In applying a critical lens, the profession can become aware of dominant discourses that shape these movements and further oppress Indigenous rights. The profession and wider society as a whole can then move towards de-colonising the vegan movement in respect of environmental concerns and allow for the inclusion of Indigenous ways of knowing that honour the natural world and its inhabitants. By highlighting the gaps in knowledge that currently exist in this area, it is hoped that this critical reflection has invited people to think differently about veganism and Indigenous rights and therefore create avenues for social change.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the intersection of veganism with exploitative systems that continue to oppress Indigenous peoples’ rights to sovereignty inclusive of their cultural practices. Using critical reflection as a research methodology, I have identified oppressive systems such as capitalism and colonialism that continue to dominate current discourses surrounding the role of veganism in achieving environmental justice. As a member of both the vegan community and environmental activism groups within Meanjin¹ and as someone who is fortunate to have an education in social work, I have become aware of my privilege and subsequent cultural capital. While my journey has been a personal one as demonstrated by this critical reflection, the adverse effects of climate change and the continued expansion of the vegan movement within Western society are issues that affect everyone.

The social work profession, particularly the Green social work field with its concern for achieving environmental justice, needs to be at the forefront of discussion in how we move forward to ensure that social movements such as veganism do not further oppress Indigenous rights. By accounting for the ‘grey’ within a movement so often plagued by black and white dichotomous thinking, critical post-structural veganism seeks to include multiple perspectives and in doing so, decolonise and challenge oppressive systems that exploit Indigenous rights.

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Sincere thanks to Professor Christine Morley for her encouragement and assistance in pursuing the publication of this article as well as her invaluable teaching in the area of critical reflection which I will endeavour to use throughout my professional career. I would also like to thank my friends within the vegan community who have engaged in healthy debate with me regarding the topic of this research.

Author
Jessica Hart is a Queensland University of Technology social work and criminology graduate who currently resides in Queensland. She is passionate about addressing social justice issues that will adversely impact the next generation, such as – but not limited to – climate change. She has a keen interest in the field of Green social work, with its concern for environmental justice and intersectional issues and applies these values not only in academia, but also through her activism within Meanjin.
17 Great Dog Shits of Sydney

I was flying over Sydney in a giant dog. Things looked bad. The First Fleet had dropped anchor and Barron Field had unloaded *First Fruits*, voiding himself of tax via *terra nullius*. There’d been a Rum Rebellion—the grog bog a symbol of progress—and the Queen was back from marking her territory on 57 towns in 58 days. The UTS Tower Building appeared as a vertical log some square god had pushed out while the sporting chicken of Forbes’ ‘Bicentennial Poem’ shat itself in Martin Place on decapitation. The 100+ kilograms of the world’s largest burger were competing with Leichhardt’s quarter of a kilometre of pizza. Mr Whippy was doing the rounds. Shock-jock diarrhoea dribbled from the radio and the NRL got embroiled in a ‘poo in the shoe’ snafu. *Stones Against the Sky* was plopped atop Kings Cross a 12.4-metre *Puppy* left a soiled bouquet at the MCA, then onion-laced Abbott became special envoy of Indigenous affairs. After Scotty’s dirty stop-out at Engadine Macca’s, Barangaroo just rubbed it in. Every night, some crusty white cop in Hyde Park pinches off a loaf for the statue of Cook. Now all the dogs with folded paws stare at a glowering sky.

*Toby Fitch*
Here We Go Again: The conspiracy theory freight train

RICHARD HIL

It didn’t take long, did it? Yes; it’s off and running – the COVID-19 freight train of conspiracy theories. I don’t know about you, but I find many of these assumption-busting, adrenalin-charged forays down endless rabbit holes rather irritating, occasionally intriguing, but more often, very dangerous. For all their manifest failings, some conspiracy theories at least offer us a sense of fleeting interest; they take us away from those smug, settled positions which many, like me, hang on to for dear life. Whilst we’re not all Pravda types, we’re also not all that easily knocked off our perches of certainty; however critical we claim to be.

Conspiracy theories tend to find their epistemic treasures in the quarries of speculation – hunches, intuition and circumstantial guesswork. They’re colourful, fascinating and invariably bizarre, sometimes bordering on the certifiable.

The latest crop of COVID-19 con theories are as predictable as they are outlandish. They include a range of florid assertions: namely, that the pandemic is:

1. A ghastly plot concocted by the CIA or US military through its biological warfare program to wipe out the entire Chinese population, or certain sections thereof – most likely the Central Politburo of the Communist Party.
2. A terrible accident in which a drunken CIA operative fell off a high stool in a Wuhan bar, causing him to shatter a vial of COVID-19 in his jacket pocket that was intended for release in Iran.
3. An elaborate cover for what is a global financial meltdown, thereby avoiding attributing blame to the usual suspects.
4. A virus exported around the world so that the People’s Republic of China can become economic masters of the universe.
5. A virus released by the Chinese Government in order to deliberately kill off the country’s elderly population, thereby significantly reducing pension costs in that country.

Now, let’s for one moment entertain these theories. If true, some of them are not only suggesting grotesque acts of callousness/madness idiocy but also – and here’s the rub – a deliberate or unintended act of mass suicide in order to achieve some, not entirely obvious, higher purpose.

But who, according to the purveyors of such nonsense, are the evil planners behind such dastardly deeds? Well, we’re never really told, but they seem to be imagined – perhaps in the vein of Dr Strangelove – as middle-aged patriarchs with bulging eyes and disconnected neurons. Each appears to be obsessed with world domination and collectively, they seem able to pull various financial and political strings, as skilfully as any puppet master.

The folk who report on such clandestine figures are an interesting lot. They’re usually found in the most reclusive corners of the dark web or more than occasionally in full view on YouTube. The self-choreographed reportage is delivered by humourless men (women are notably absent in this scenescape), some with elaborate comb-overs and others with bandanas constraining long, straggly hair. Ensnosed in dungeon-like studios, these chroniclers of the deep deliver ‘truly shocking’ assertions in the most dulcet of tones, suggesting a sense of gravitas anchored in uncontested truth. Dots are joined together and inferences drawn in story lines that often beggar belief which, of course, is even more reason to believe them. Their sources are rich and varied, including articles and ‘academic’ papers authored by self-appointed experts, or obsessive nit-pickers who claim to have stumbled across egregious factual errors. The discovery of the latter often leads to howls of joy, having apparently pulled the one domino that sends the entire establishment crashing down. It’s fun because these amateur sleuths have ventured into fields they know little about, but with a joyful determination to expose dark secrets, corruption and malevolence. It’s cerebral paintball via a keyboard.

One thing’s for sure though: these late-night private detectives are no shrinking violets. They promote conspiracy theories with ferocious intent and will
eviscerate opponents naive enough to offer an alternative point of view. They often round on public figures, trashing reputations through a toxic mix of innuendo, guilt-by-association and hearsay. At their very worst, conspiracy theorists round on entire populations, seeing them as responsible for all societal ills or as corruptors of morals and civilisation itself. This of course, can lead to some very violent outcomes, especially when appropriated by psychologically disturbed loners.

If you detect a hint of self-absorption bordering on the narcissistic among such individuals, you’d be right. They produce long, impermeable screeds otherwise referred to as manifestoes – vapid commentary infused with victimhood and hatred. They’re intent on making you feel like an idiot; having exposed truths to which, apparently, only they or a few others have access. A key tactic in these discursive assaults is to befuddle and confuse by raising ceaseless unanswered and unanswerable questions. Once you think you’ve dispatched one claim, another arises. That’s the point: to sow doubt, to confuse, to undermine, and to reinterpret and reformulate received wisdoms.

But, these folk do at times hit the mark, right? Yes, of course, but it’s a bit like the monkey and the typewriter: they’re bound to hit the right key at some point. There are times when tangible evidence supersedes guesswork, and that’s when conspiracy theories can have some value. After all, we can agree, I think, that the official account of 9/11 is suspect? But if we’re to assert, following this, that Mossad or the CIA or reptilians from outer space orchestrated this tragedy, then some concrete evidence would help. The thing is, we do need this thing called ‘evidence’, even if it’s in an abstract form. We also need to pass the evidentiary test of reasonableness. Is it reasonable to assert that a reincarnation of Frank Zappa planned 9/11? Recently, an acquaintance of mine Screamed into my Face asking why I found it ‘so very hard’ to believe her latest theory (which was that the bushfires were started by some nefarious agents in order to clear land for mining). When I asked for some skeletal evidence, gasps of exasperation followed. On another occasion, another person informed me that all the assertions about President Putin being a ruthless autocrat who occasionally knocks off errant journalists or imprisons political opponents were in fact US propaganda. When I drew this person’s attention to the ‘fact’ that the two Russian agents responsible for the poisoning of a former Russian spy in the small English town of Salisbury were caught on CCTV, I was called an apologist for the CIA. The logic here is simple: defend your original argument at all costs, reinterpret the ‘evidence’ to suit the prevailing story, and ridicule doubters. What I’ve learned from my many encounters with con theorists is that it’s impossible to pin them down. There’s no evidence that can dissuade them. So, as Cassam (2019) points out in his excellent analysis of conspiracy thinking, a more effective tactic may be to expose the company they keep. So, let’s take climate change deniers. You can spend the rest of your short life trying to address their liquid assertions. Instead, you may want to point out that the vast majority of the world’s climate scientists, who have spent many years researching climate changes, tend to support the anthropogenic thesis, and that only a few think otherwise, ably supported by the likes of Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Tony Abbott and Lord Monckton. Don’t expect this to get you very far – you’ll be accused of cynicism and ignorance. But then again, reptilians from the planet Zog would say that, wouldn’t they?

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Inception
I am, of course, the thimble top thing that’s still spinning, but I go deeper, three layers further, so tell me you can’t taste snow on my lips, feel my soaking clothes or smell the air hostess’s breath. I’ve spent centuries waiting in this empty hotel for you to come and simply say hello. And now you’re here you want to smell some common sense and logic. Okay, I could have imagined larger weapons more often to ward off dreamt-up enemies, and the circular nature of dream and reality made two dimensional models of both. But try looking at a Parisian outdoor café the same way again or the slow opening of an elevator door.

Paul Mitchell
Character Assassination as Journalism and Politics

STUART REES

Since this commentary was written a series of dramatic events have occurred. Mr Moselmane’s parliamentary office and home were raided in an AFP–ASIO joint investigation into breaches of the Foreign Influence law. His parliamentary staffer, John Zhang, had his offices and home raided. The homes and offices of four Chinese journalists were also raided and two Australian journalists were precipitously returned from China amid fears of retaliation. Two respected Chinese scholars of Australian Studies, Professor Chen and Li Jianjun, have had their Australian visas cancelled. Zhang has challenged the warrants that authorised the raid on him and the foreign interference laws themselves, arguing that they undermine the freedom of political communication. No allegation was made against Mr Mouselmane who has since returned to parliament as an independent. (Ed)

KEY WORD: Journalists, bullying.

The notion of common humanity presupposes qualities such as respect, dignity, tolerance, thoughtfulness, generosity and support for non-violence. In attacks against the Assistant President of the New South Wales (NSW) Upper House, Muslim Labor MP Shaoquett Moselmane, those qualities were absent. He became the victim of character assassination for questioning anti-Chinese sentiment and for praising the Chinese leadership’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Wuhan.

One side of this controversy included radio shock jocks Ray Hadley and Alan Jones, Sky News’ Peta Credlin, former politicians Stephen Conroy and Graham Richardson, two Sydney Morning Herald journalists, a representative of the Daily Mail, Federal Minister Peter Dutton, Walt Secord of the NSW Labor Party and the One Nation representative Mark Latham.

Shaoquett Moselmane is a generous, selfless parliamentarian who for decades has contributed to invaluable charitable and community work. I regard him as a significant human rights advocate. Former Foreign Minister Bob Carr describes his Labor colleague as conscientious, hard-working, and ‘a very good person’.

Given Shaoquett’s character and achievements, what do his detractors have against him? He supports the human rights of Palestinians. He had contrasted the leadership of Xi Jinping in the Wuhan outbreak with the absence of Prime Minister Morrison in the early weeks of the bush fire emergency. One academic China watcher said that Moselmane’s praise of Chinese leadership was ‘misguided’, but that does not mean he’s a spokesperson for Chinese communism or should be hounded from office.

The Repetition Technique

In the diatribes against Moselmane, repetition is the first of three techniques. Journalists and ex-politicians threw mud on the assumption that some of it might stick. A Nick McKenzie article in the Sydney Morning Herald became a catalyst for abuse against the MP and seems to have fed the scapegoating of Chinese Australians. MacKenzie’s colleague, Lisa Ventin, repeated his claims, and the Daily Mail chimed in.

Searching for sensation, some journalists think they must attack something and someone. Between March 31 and April 10 2020 there were thirty-two articles or broadcasts attacking Moselmane, 12 from the Daily Telegraph, 10 from the Sydney Morning Herald, 7 from Sky News and Radio 2GB, 2 from the Jewish News/Jwire and 1 from the Daily Mail.

In an April 2 Peta Credlin interview on Sky News, One Nation MP, Mark Latham, referred to Moselmane’s ‘disgusting praise of China’s corona virus response’, and in another Credlin exchange, former Labor Senator Stephen Conroy said, ‘Mr. Moselmane is an absolute disgrace to the Labor Party’. The vehemence of Conroy’s attack sounds like projection, attributing to others what he feels about himself: ‘an absolute disgrace to the Labor Party’. Conroy gave Credlin the cue to insist that a politician who made bizarre pro-China comments should be sacked.
To add to the ‘let’s get him campaign’, on April 2 Peter Dutton spoke to 2GB’s Ray Hadley, ‘You can’t have an allegiance to another country and pretend to have an allegiance to this country at the same time’. A barely disguised hint of Moselmane being a traitor was repeated by Hadley.

Added to this repeat technique is the notion that if bullies express the same charges, they must be right. On April 2, Hadley referred to Moselmane ‘copping a giant spray from former Federal Labor Minister Steven Conroy on Sky News and again on my program’.

**False Claims**

A second characteristic of attacks against Moselmane is the confidence in making false claims, as though having a microphone means that ethics are irrelevant, and that no one will be held accountable.

In an interview with Latham on April Fool’s Day, Peta Credlin declared that since entering parliament in 2009, ‘Well this bloke had, you know, nine or so sponsored trips to China, to do you know, God knows what … If we really have foreign agent laws, why isn’t Moselmane being looked at?’ This implied the MP was a well-supported Chinese sympathiser. A more careful assessment would have shown that he pays his own expenses and had created a charity ‘Kids on Wheels’ in China. With friends, he had delivered wheelchairs to meet the needs of children in one of Shanghai’s largest orphanages.

To continue the claim that Moselmane is sympathetic to China and disloyal to Australia, on April 6 McKenzie produced another piece of maliciousness. Moselmane had written that in the context of media xenophobia and hostility against China having become the norm, ‘the old white Australia fear of the yellow peril is re-surfacing’. From that observation, McKenzie produced the headline, ‘Obsolete scum of white Australia behind anti-Chinese sentiment says NSW Labor MP.’ An initial, ‘the obsolete scum of white Australia fear of the yellow peril’ became ‘the obsolete scum of white Australia.’

**Bullying as Politics**

A third trend concerns a determination to influence politics as though access to a microphone, or the entitlement to write a regular newspaper column, means that abuse can bring down a politician or influence a political leader. Even modest praise of China or of Palestinians makes certain commentators feel that they should target anyone who voices those views, and there must be no caveats to their criticism. To express doubt would be an admission of weakness. Dogma does not entertain doubt. They want scalps. They think they can influence politics. They do influence politics. They even influence the sacking of Prime Ministers.

Attackers against Moselmane behaved as though they represented a political party, at least in terms of getting rid of someone. In his 2GB interviews of April 2 and 3, Ray Hadley began with a modest description of Moselmane, ‘A rather regrettable fellow’ then warmed to his task. The MP is called, ‘This jerk’, ‘a train wreck’, ‘a Chinese PR spokesperson’, ‘a lunatic’, ‘a low filthy bludger’, ‘this low life’, ‘this bastard’, ‘this cancerous growth’, ‘unworthy traitor’, ‘a dolt’.

That bullying then transferred to NSW Labor leader Jodi McKay. Hadley wanted to confront her about the Labor Upper House MP, but ‘We can’t find her. We can’t find her anywhere. We’ve been looking for her all morning’. He threatens, ‘Unless you come out from your bunker … unless you come out and condemn this man, you will be associated for all time with this imbecility’. On April 3, when McKay does appear, his listeners are told, ‘Jodi McKay has been flushed out.’

McKay attempts to be constructive, ‘My sole focus is to work constructively across the parliament to deal with the health and economic consequences of the pandemic. That’s what the people of NSW expect’. Hadley responds, ‘No, they expect leadership from you and they want that bloke sacked’ … ‘Can you shut him up’. McKay gives Hadley part of what he wants, ‘Ray his actions have been appalling’. Hadley concludes, ‘You can talk to me next week … Once you get rid of him you can talk to me all you like. But get rid of him first.’

**Putting the Boot In**

On April 7, Moselmane resigns from his Assistant Parliamentary Friends of Israel says he welcomes the resignation of this long-term anti-Israel activist over his ‘extremely stupid pro-Wuhan COVID-19 comments.’ Then he produces a familiar, unproven accusation, that Moselmane has compared Israel to Nazi Germany.

NSW Labor MP Walt Secord, Deputy Chair of the NSW Legislative Council position. The bullies have achieved a partial victory and are joined by others who seize the opportunity to remind the public that Moselmane is also critical of the policies of successive Israeli governments and supports the human rights of Palestinians. A lethal brew is concocted. Pro-Israel sentiments are joined with antagonism towards the Chinese. Who could possibly disagree?

Not to be left out of a head kicking, Vic Alhadeff, former chief executive of the Jewish Board of Deputies joins in. ‘Mr. Moselmane has taken deeply problematic views on Israel and our community over the years, drawing
analogy between Israel and Nazi Germany’. Then comes Alhadeff’s sickening ingratiation, ‘His (Moselmane’s) jaundiced views on such issues have reflected poorly on the many fine members of NSW Labor for too long and we don’t believe many will shed a tear at this development’.

The details of this story are important. So too is a practice where derision, bullying, and repetition of information hinge on an apparent fascination with cruelty, compounded by an inability to re-define an issue, to question dogma, let alone consider the merits of an opponent’s views.

This episode of bullying and moral certainty may persist in a post-corona world, hence a need to foster respect for the ideals of a common humanity. Without such respect, society will be uncivil, and the most aggressive may think that their dogma represents views a wider world should share.

There’s an irony in the bullies’ behaviour. Their ‘shut him up’, ‘sack him’, ‘get rid of him’, displays the same intolerance of dissent common in Communist China.

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**What I loved about COVID-19**

In the year of the virus, time slid out of its little containers and peacefully I mopped it up

Ants became more noticeable and I loved them more

Also flies with their cute little paws teaching me how to wash my thousand eyes

I saw how full my house was how good it was to breathe

Things meant things and it was easy to give them away

At last everything was as it was and new, so new

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**Gods of liquid, gods of dust**

*after Jill Jones, ‘Homeless Home’*

When my mind comes home to itself the world is there too settled into its own breath the way it means something quietly.

Take leaves for example how they twist when falling becoming a dance I like the light brown dust of them underfoot.

But leaves can also roar orange and angry consuming and consuming they’re telling us something we’re too noisy to hear.

Underground ancestors know what we don’t their bodies becoming dust, becoming Earth moving closer to the bright liquid fire below.

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**Alison Flett**
I dance through the undergrowth as my freedom falls to her knees in front of me, behind me, crashing through the eucalypt. The man shakes his fist and shouts, and I hear the words falling from his trackless and thirsty lips.

*Brumby does not belong.*

My mother’s blood was gathered up and taken from where she belonged. Fed into these sweeping plains, this burnt bushland, where the branches on the gums sang in her ears and the tussock grass whispered at her feet and the sun cracked the earth and I was born, tangled in everlasting daisies with the taste of honeysuckle and red dust from the claypan on my lips.

I run beneath the open skies and the caws of the cockatoos as they tell me where the wind will carry them, where the waratah grows, where the fires have burned away the grasslands and the veins of lifeblood that spread across the soil have brought it back, anew.

Here I know the rain falls enough to fill the weirs but the grass stays brown, and the birds still sing while it descends because this land is fiery and loving while she is harsh, deadly, but alive. So alive.

I am alive. I am this bush, always leaving parts of myself behind. I have walked where man and his two feet cannot, I know the secrets of the stars on the spotted gum, and what the sugar glider whispers to the tawny frogmouth while the moon settles softly on their branches. I leave my prints in the soil amongst that of the lace monitor and the kangaroo and the brolga and I speak with them, gossip with the running creeks, hearing the calls of the kookaburras in the morning light, and know then what the day will bring.

I walk through the low-lying fog across the marshes and where my coat will blend with the trunks of the ironbark and I am there, then not. But I am always there, even when they cannot see me. I have seen that the true heart of the bush never changes, that this land shall remain unbridled, and though I am told I do not belong I know this land because my soul remains the same even when my body does not. Unbridled.

I do not belong, but simply am.

I am not thoroughbred or draught or stockhorse, but I have been bred to survive here, I am what was left behind. My veins have poured their roots deep into this earth until there is no beginning or end, just me and this ground. I am pieces of many though nothing whole and noble; yet the land and the bush have welcomed me with open and blistering arms of bushfires and drought and soothing rains and deep, dark water from the earth that tastes like iron and fills me with promise.

No, it is the man who does not welcome me.

His hands dry and uninviting, who chases me down from the hills and the scrublands to say that I am untamed, and wild – but shouldn’t be.

It is he, who says I do not belong.

Yet is the man not the same?

Did man’s mother not give him life here in the dust and the dirt and the golden soil, did she not sing him songs of promise, of a land where nature’s gift could be held so gently in his hands?

Does this country, and what the man must shout from the hills, across the plains, not pride itself on not belonging, instead being pieces of many, yet nothing whole and noble? Rebels at heart, unbridled, young, and free.

Why must I be spurned for not belonging, for letting the eastern winds call to me, singing me a home that is as much in the cracks of my skin as it is beneath my feet?

The man cries out that I am a poor reflection of my kin, like the one who is bred for his will, his obedience, who’s back he now clings to by luck of leather and buckle, urged to pursue me. He does not want to hold me gently, as he does not hold anything gently in his coarse and reckless hands. If the man only listened to those who did not speak as loudly as he, he would know that his purebred mount does not chase because he is told, but instead runs with me now, part of me – freely. The wild heart of the bush filling his lungs and roaring through his veins though our blood marks us as different we are the same. Until the bite of a spur and the reefing of a rein reminds him, that he is not, free.

Then the chase is over, though I know all the twists and turns of the trunks and the undergrowth, I slow. Before me is another, his mare held tightly underneath him, foam at her lips and scars on her flanks. This man here in front of me, ready to crack his whip, he does not bow to a bit, to a rein. That I am wrong, do not belong, for having a soul so like his own, why doesn’t he see?

Submit, or die. This land does not, this man does not, so why should I?

I am Brumby.

But if he cared to comprehend, he is Brumby too.

They converge on me, the man in front and the man behind, and it is past and it is future and the present is a place where I will always be chased, made to not belong, made to not be Brumby.

So I let the wind sweep me up in a dust storm and I run...
and run and run, run to belong.

I show the men what being Brumby means, when no bit or bridle can hold me back, when my feet can fly and my head is high and my heart is free.

I pound the earth, and she cracks open beneath me.

I am

Brumby.

Author
Alannah Mewes is a Creative Writing PhD student at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia, where she grew up on a small local farm patting horses, cows and dogs by day and reading voraciously by night. Her passion for animal rights in all aspects of life flows through her writing both academically and creatively, with stories that seek to gain a better understanding of human-animal relationships, and this planet that hooves and hands share together.

BOOK REVIEW


A Mouthful of Petals is the story of Wendy and Allan Scarfe’s experiences of volunteering as teachers from 1960 to 1963 in a remote village in the north Indian state of Bihar. They were among the first young Australians who volunteered to spend two or three years of their lives sharing the knowledge, skills and experience they had gained in their professions, through working for minimal wages in local conditions in what were then called “third world countries”. Most often these countries were Australia’s neighbours across the Indian Ocean, in the South East Asia region and the Oceania area of the Pacific Ocean.

In the case of the Scarfes, they had studied to become teachers at the University of Melbourne and taught for several years in Victorian secondary schools until they decided to accept the invitation of Jayaprakash Narayan to become teachers for his ashram school in the backward and impoverished village of Sokhodeora. One of the leaders of the independence movement along with Ghandi, Narayan had turned aside from political leadership to concentrate on social reform. Wendy and Allan had formed a remarkable friendship with Jayaprakash while doing educational work with the Ghandian Village Development Movement two years earlier.

Most volunteers live in local conditions, but Wendy and Allan found themselves living in what they recognised as “the most modern house in the ashram and for at least thirty miles around” – a recently built brick house with concrete floors and verandahs front and back. At one end of the back verandah was a small kitchen; at the other end, a Western style bathroom and toilet provided specially for them. Light, however, came from lanterns, cooking was done on primus stoves, kerosene powered the refrigerator they had brought from Australia, running water for the house had to be pumped from a well at the back to a high storage tank and it was essential to sleep under mosquito nets.

They found the village people could be divided into three groups. Their first contact was with the people living around the ashram – Jayaprakash’s brother who was in charge of the ashram, the other teachers and two Japanese agricultural workers who were demonstrating new techniques in rice growing. These they related to more or less as equals. Then there was a small group of tradespeople and craftsmen who earned small but steady incomes which enabled the families to live in small houses and access enough food for their children’s growth and wellbeing. They were largely satisfied with what they had achieved and were suspicious of the white strangers and the new ways they were introducing. The Scarfes had minimal contact with these people. The third group, the Harijans or outcasts, constituted the poorest families in the village and represented the great majority of its people. Mired in their poverty, they were quite unable to see beyond the realities of the tiny crowded mud hovels they lived in and the two meals a day of rice and dahl on which they could do no more than survive. Wendy and Allan felt drawn to help the Harijan children by offering them both opportunities for basic literacy and numeracy learning and finding ways to improve their diet and health. The book’s name comes from the authors’ observation of Harijan children stuffing hibiscus flowers plucked from a hedge into their mouths to satisfy their hunger and enjoy the sweet nectar to be found at the base of the flower.

Initially Wendy and Allan were overwhelmed by all the things they saw that needed to be done to improve both the teaching in the school and the health of the Harijan children. So little learning seemed to be taking place at the ashram school that they re-organised the classes at different levels of achievement and outlined a set curriculum that needed to be taught at each level. The challenge was to help the teachers implement this new curriculum and to encourage students to come to school regularly and benefit from this learning. They recognised that irregular attendance, poor attention and slow learning were directly related to the children’s insufficient food that was completely lacking in protein – no meat, no milk, no eggs. When they discovered that the ashram had 1400 pounds of American powdered milk waiting to be used, Wendy and Allan organised its regular distribution to the
village children each morning, by boiling up cauldrons of water, stirring in the milk powder and filling each child’s bowl with the hot creamy liquid. Later they were able to access a protein-rich multipurpose food which they distributed in the same way. The children benefited visibly in body weight, energy and alertness from these supplements to their diet.

One of the great challenges facing volunteers is coming to understand that the cultural assumptions which they have grown up with can be very different from those of the people they are living and working with. For example, Wendy’s egalitarian Australian assumptions were shocked at the idea of having a servant working in the house. The Bihar villagers, on the other hand, considered that those who were educated and had money should employ servants, not just for their own convenience, but as a means of providing a small but steady income to a poor family. Allan, for his part, assumed that the village meeting would use the same system of making decisions as in Australia, by voting for and against a proposal. The Indian way, however, was to talk through the issues until a consensus was reached. How to care for children was another area of great cultural difference. The village mothers were amazed at the way Wendy cared for the two Indian babies that she and Allan adopted during their stay in Bihar.

What proved to be probably their most important achievement came through the initiative of Harijan adults who wanted to have the opportunity to learn literacy in the evenings. It all started with Mahavir, the servant they had been reluctant to accept. As he worked for them, he observed how important reading and writing were in their lives and begged to be taught how to read and write Hindi. He was absolutely delighted when he was able to read his first story for himself and asked to take home books and magazines which he read by lamplight at night. His success led other Harijans to ask Mahavir to arrange for adult literacy classes to be held at night and he asked Allan how they could achieve this. When no suitable building could be found, Allan and Mahavir were able to purchase some land and cheap building materials. Allan drew up some simple plans and Mahavir organised Harijan volunteers to work in shifts to construct the building which was successfully completed. Meantime Mahavir and one other literate adult were sent to special short courses for literacy teachers. In this way, the Night Class building became a permanent feature of the village landscape and the adult literacy classes continued long after the Scarfes had returned to Australia.

Subsequently, Wendy re-visited Bihar and wrote a report on the famine of 1967. Her experiences at that time constitute the Epilogue of the book. Her account reveals the rapid growth in the intervening years of volunteer movements, so that the presence of American Peace Corps workers and Canadian volunteers enabled the digging of deep village wells during the Bihar famine. In the years following, these continued to provide permanent sources of water for the villagers to use for irrigating vegetable crops from the seeds they had been given. Then in 1970 Wendy and Allan returned together to India to research and later publish a biography of Jayaparaksh Narayan, their great friend.

Originally published in London by William Heinemann in 1967, revised and re-printed by Seaview Press in 2011, A Mouthful of Petals was completely reset and published by Wakefield Press in 2020, as Wendy’s tribute to Allan who died in 2016. Writing in 1977, Stephen Murray-Smith, then editor of Melbourne Studies in Education, described the book as “a distillation of the experience and wisdom of ... Australian[s] who ha[ve] a real understanding and knowledge of mudbrick, cowpat, village India. It is to Australia’s international credit that the Scarfes are now widely known abroad, especially in Asia, for their sensitive and important works on Indian themes ... their achievement has been remarkable.” Overland, 1977.

Author
Dr Margaret Secombe, Adelaide

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**poem for a sister**

*for Ali Cobby Eckermann*

Ali my sister with the warrior heart
I am sorry. For all that was stolen.

umbilicus cut too many times; too many severances, down the lines

you show me how to be a poet: the stops in between; bird song words

gifted like water in deserts; keening from the heart, and not too afraid to cry; kneeling lonely between stanzas

Beautiful smoothing lines that show us how to belong; how to keep going on.

*Molly Murn*

Although written pre-COVID and pre-Tory landslide, this searing analysis of the English psyche is undiminished in this increasingly disunited kingdom. Fintan admits up front, ’It is harder what to make of England because it is harder to guess what England makes of itself’. The relevance is acute with final Brexit negotiations and a no-deal looming in December 2020. The Brexit aftermath with the requirement to renegotiate hundreds of trade and other treaties does not bear thinking about. In the context of a COVID pandemic that has hit the UK especially hard, the state has become severely stretched. It can be questioned whether such a weakened state has the ability to fight the various battles looming and extant.

With Scotland and Northern Ireland voting to stay in the EU, the 2016 Brexit referendum, arguably the longest suicide note in recent history, passed by the slimmest of margins (51.89% vs 48.11%). This ensured lasting deep divisions that show no sign of diminishing. The Brexit farrago seemingly stemmed from some distant dream of England as a latter-day Ruritanian superpower with illusion and reality never being more polarised. ’When your neighbour is going mad it is only reasonable to want to understand the source of their distress’, O’Toole suggests.

He believes that, ’... a deep sense of grievance and a high sense of superiority’ are the primary driving forces of the Brexit debacle. This cognitive dissonance at a national level emerges as anti-imperial nationalism and imperial nationalism co-existing, with self-pity the unifying emotion. Emerging from ‘standing alone’ in their ‘finest hour’, post-war England, unlike the vanquished, lived up to its international mediocrity as a decreasingly effective nation.

The author notes that as the UK power descended, it disdainfully shunned and ridiculed the Treaty of Rome nations with a nineteenth century arrogance that disdainfully shunned and ridiculed the Treaty of Rome. This ensured lasting deep divisions that show no sign of diminishing. The Brexit farrago seemingly stemmed from some distant dream of England as a latter-day Ruritanian superpower with illusion and reality never being more polarised. ’When your neighbour is going mad it is only reasonable to want to understand the source of their distress’, O’Toole suggests.

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The Second World War seems to be forever on the horizon with constant analogies to ‘Keep Calm and Carry On’ and the ’Dunkirk spirit’ being regurgitated ad nauseam to reignite flagging spirits. It was lamented that England’s greatest days and victory led to a humiliating post-war defeat while being subsumed into a German-dominated Europe. This rhetoric was then further subsumed into England only being at its best when fighting invasion and sending Johnny foreigner, or more recently, Johnny virus, packing – both illusions of the first degree.

Although schadenfreude would have been an easy recourse, Fintan has no need, despite any justifiable Irish tendencies to the contrary. I detected a note of sadness – a recounting of a tragic comedy, or more, a comedic tragedy. Johnson fits this role perfectly with his buffoonish bonhomie and his ministerial seed scattered as widely as his bons mots. With elite England aware that ’nanny knows best’ and a good spanking before being sent early to bed is not only the cure for any diversion from the path of Tory glory, but also a part of its masochistic growing pains, the scene for England’s decline is set. After all, born-again Victorian, MP William Rees-Mogg took along (was led by?) his nanny while campaigning for his seat. The nanny state moniker in one way or another is endured by all whether as castigator, legislator or welfare recipient.

While all states glorify their victories and repackage their defeats into heroism, from the Hundred Years War to Brexit masochism, the English have managed to snatch endless defeats out of various victorious jaws. A strong European voting and trade bloc to counteract China, the US and Russia seems to be beyond the comprehension of the Brexiteers.

The predicted economic and trade mayhem with lorry parks in Kent fields and the required portaloos could not come at a worse time considering the out-of-control pandemic and its pressure on the UK economy. With the added pressure over the Irish border now that Jo Biden has been elected, along with Johnson’s record of supporting Trump as well as his racist rudeness regarding
Barack Obama, the UK is facing a plethora of challenges that it is poorly equipped to fight.

Whither goeth England and its satellites is the question after their Brexit and viral conniptions? The sad fact is that a pact, however Faustian, with the demonic Europeans was perhaps England’s last chance for rebuilding its shattered economy and national spirit. One cannot help but have a soft spot for a country if, much like the errant nephew who mooned the vicar’s wife only to be forgiven if he would say sorry, it would mend its ways and attend matins.

*Sic transit gloria mundi* indeed.

**Author**

Michael Buky has taught Politics and International Relations at the University of the Sunshine Coast. He has published articles on small ships and terrorism, the curtailment of civil liberties in the US Patriot Act and climate change and has been the joint editor of three issues of *Social Alternatives*. He currently lives in rural Tasmania alongside various endangered species, numerous dairy cows and lots of mud.

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**It’s you who are. What?**

* A hummingbird.

To be old, to have
the body’s laughter dislodged
in place of welcomed
glances, how is it
to be put up
with
thoughtless distaste or
undeserved respect, how is it
to inspire
nothing
is an adventure no
one’s ever outfitted for and to
remind them of
their terror, the world
as it’s deforming
yourself? Stop
the true disaster
is the first disaster.

*MARK ANTHONY CAYANAN*

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**Persephone II**

when the bees agitate, their sound high and sweet in newly blooms
when the wind comes rousing, slamming doors and opening them
when the light begins to lengthen, showing your face almost fully lit
and when the crickets stay up late because the night is changing pitch

I see something new from the window and it is not the naked morning
or the birds claiming so much song, or even the trees greening awake
but it is that I could be carried along in the rush and gambol of spring
as if all the quiet griefs of winter were settling in the undergrowth—dark
matter for new saplings, and a soft place to lay the bones

*MOLLY MURN*
ENGLAND IN 2019

Fuck the fucking Left’s not right
we’re the internet internalised:
our self-assured, ironic kitsch
our bleeding hearts with eyes that twitch
at news that’s fake, but kept afloat
by news polls & a second vote.
So like a victim, crippled & lame
the March continues just the same
calling out howlers & whistling dogs—
for to die in the streets & be out of a job
might seem well intentioned when at a remove
(skim-reading Red Flag, sipping on Veuve).
Though Corbyn’s at Glasto quoting from Shelley
he’s anti-Semitic—it’s been proven on telly.
When Boris gets crowned & the borders get closed
we’ll have what we wanted our “I told you so.”

DOMINIC SYMES

No longer was he young and raw though the error remained young and raw

Dearest little unfinishable selves, look
at your lone body and how it can’t outgrow
its reticence, cowled souls bold enough to play coy but with a Rilkean swagger owned only
by those expert at being separate, outside
in the smog of all your indisposed cities, daybreak
is its known sounds, cranes undo what
apostlebirds call, autumn trees not yet denuded
not angry, stillborn versions, every one of you
misleading and wildly desirable, the bone wall
disappears each hour’s promise into the commonplace
with you this default self shares no history
except the keening he makes and can you repair
his faith, not built to wait, for whom he waits, he waits

MARK ANTHONY CAYANAN

Portrait of What Came Next (Or)
after Gerald Stern

What I failed to understand about a woman’s body
turned out to be everything I needed to know
about bank accounts.

All the names I forgot from primary school
were later needed for signing on plane wings,
those skywriting bullies.

What I didn’t know about onions was everything
I needed to feel about tiny gravestones in the rain
and nothing I needed to remember
about lipreading.

Coins that fell from my pockets in fistfights
were all the cymbal crashes I needed for typing
annual reports

And what I thought was a baby’s bonnet
was revealed to be my biography
written two-fisted by a baboon
crying for milkshakes and a PhD.

PAUL MITCHELL
Marking Mark’s Discovery

In the bar toilet thinking
I should ask my friend Mark
who I’ve been drinking with
what music he’s been listening to lately
because tonight I’m conscious
how often I hog conversation
haven’t been much of a friend to him
he’s been a much better one to me

So back at our booth with our beers set down
I ask how do you listen to music these days? he says
mainly on the iPod but I have Spotify on my laptop
and back in the toilet I’d already decided
to ask Mark if he’d heard of Mark Eitzel
because I’d been listening to his album
without a pause because on my playlist
I can’t flick past him and my friend, like Eitzel,
has a British connection, well, Eitzel lived there
and Mark was born there, but I think Mark
will like Eitzel, he’s literate and Cohenesque
so I ask Mark if he’s heard of Mark
Eitzel and he says, “Mark Eitzel?”and I say,
“Yeah, I love him.” And Mark says, “American Music Club
Mark Eitzel?” and I say, “Yeah, but I’ve only heard him solo”
and Mark says, “You know my best mate in England,
Paulo?” and I say, “Yeah, you’ve told me about him,”
but I don’t tell Mark that whenever he tells me
about Paulo I get just a little bit jealous
as much because Mark is fifty-something and has
managed to maintain a best friend as much as
I’m not him. But it doesn’t last long because I’m trying
to be the best friend I can, in the moment, like that one
in the toilet when I thought of telling Mark about
Mark Eitzel and Mark tells me Paulo’s favourite
musician is Mark Eitzel, and Mark adds he shouldn’t be
surprised given my similarities with Paulo – my making poetry,
making music – but he says nothing of my name. I ask
Mark, “Do you like Mark Eitzel?” and Mark says, “You know,
I’ve never listened to him,” and I say, “How can he be
your best mate’s favourite and you’ve never listened
to him?” and Mark says it’s because he’s always had
this thing with Paulo where they respect each other’s
music but can’t cross music party lines: Mark
was a Bryan Ferry man, while Paulo was David Bowie’s boy.
I’m not sure when I tell Mark that Eitzel’s album’s called
Hey, Mr Ferryman, but I sing the first two lines:
“The Ferryman who takes me to my rest/
he don’t give a damn who’s cursed or blessed”.
Mark likes that I tell him Eitzel became a Christian
then gave it up and because we’ve both given up
a lot of what people think being a Christian means
we wonder what Eitzel gave up too and Mark
tells me Paulo gave it up so maybe that’s why
he likes Eitzel and Mark says me and Paulo
liking Eitzel is a sign from somewhere he doesn’t say where
that he should listen to him, shouldn’t he, and I wish
I’d said Paulo would like that, or, Hey, Mr Ferryman
get on that boat, but I think I just said, “Yeah”.

Paul Mitchell
This pandemic year has been a turning point for me in letting go – letting go of a complete photographic darkroom with an enlarger and developing paraphernalia – and film cameras – that had been stored since moving to the Sunshine Coast in 2002.

This challenging year has given me time to rethink my future and question whether I would ever use the darkroom again. After 20 years the equipment had deteriorated so I decided to let go of my passion for the traditional darkroom in favour of a digital creative process which offered me a cleaner and less toxic photographic technology. The thrill of developing film and watching the photograph slowly evolve is, however, magical. I have however discovered that many younger people are now practising this traditional hand-craft. Using social media, enthusiasts are revitalising the once thriving film and photo industry that had been in decline since the advent of the digital-age. They are practising the time-honoured methods in both personal and commercial darkroom facilities to develop skills using traditional film to develop and print photographs. This paper provides a brief account of the origins of photography and reflects on my joy and experience using this medium.

KEY WORDS: Black and White photography, darkroom, camera, digital.

The first black and white photograph was a heliograph image, made by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce in the early 1800s entitled: ‘View from the Window at Le Gras’ (Maison Nicéphore Niépce n.d.). Although Niépce was French, the original image is housed in the University of Texas-Austin’s permanent collection (Stewart 2019). Louis Daguerre later developed the first polished silver-plated copper treated with chemicals, named the daguerreotype. His photograph of a street in Paris in 1839 took 10 minutes to expose. The daguerreotype was very expensive and superseded by various other processes. Although printed in black and white ‘... the daguerreotype astounded audiences because of [its] extraordinary clarity and detail’ (Chandler and Livingston 2012, 2019). Daguerre described his new technique as: ‘a chemical and physical process which allowed nature to reproduce herself’. This suggested that photographs were capable of replicating reality (Cark 1997: 13). The exactitude and accuracy of early photographs in recording ‘visible facts and material evidence’ led people to believe that photographs could produce ‘exact transcripts’ of the real world, fixed in time and space (Bloomer 1990: 161, Clark 1997: 13 in Chandler and Livingston 2012, 2019).

Because photography could seemingly accurately replicate life it became a reputable professional career, mainly practised in studio environments. At that time, it was only affordable to wealthy amateurs. Most people had never seen a physical image – of their environment, of themselves, of family, of friends, or of politicians. It must have been an emotional experience and a ‘magic’ moment despite the fact that the picture was in black and white. The reality of the past coming to life in an image would have been challenging and confusing. As Sturken (1997: 19) notes:

images have the capacity to create, interfere with, and trouble the memories we hold as individuals and as a nation [and] they can lend shape to histories and personal stories, often providing the material evidence on which claims of truth are based.

This was an age ‘when taking photographs required a cumbersome and expensive contraption – the toy of the clever, the wealthy, and the obsessed’ (Sontag 2010). Scientists and enthusiasts developed photography with all the equipment required to print an image. However, within a few short years photography was commercialised and thus became available to the masses. When photographic technology was presented and viewed at fairs and conferences the new process was taken up by companies such as Kodak for further development. Today we take
photographs with mobile phones that use meniscus lenses set at infinity with digital zoom and images that are stored in the ‘cloud’. The mobile phone is now what the Kodak Box Brownie was to the people of earlier times. The easy access and portability of the phone’s good pixel quality camera now has the capacity to document life every second of the day. This has been the evolution of photography which Negroponte (1995) suggests was perfected by photographers for the expressive purposes, fine-tuning their techniques to meet the needs of their art.

Today’s digital photographic process is full of colour, but nostalgic black and white film styles are built into software actions. Images can be digitally enhanced and printed with electronic printers. Fortunately, methods for traditional photo-processes have not completely disappeared and renewed interest has revitalised analogue cameras and darkroom print developing. Interestingly, while the mechanical production of film has become digitised, negative film has not changed and photography outlets continue to house customer film and print stations for processing negatives. Unfortunately, some specialised films will never be reproduced as Ilford and Fujifilm have gained the current market for developing standard film. Many antique and retro film styles are created by software on mobiles and on computers but the digital image cannot truly replicate the kind of image processed through a darkroom.

Analogue cameras and darkrooms have been replaced by digital single-lens reflex (DSLR) cameras and computers. While many educational institutions still teach the traditional methods of photography, the technical, chemical and visual comprehension for understanding black and white film is rapidly disappearing. Facebook posts over the long weeks of COVID-19 isolation show that many people have adopted creative activities. Their isolation has brought a renewed interest in analogue photography and they are unearthing photographic treasures in the digital age. Enthusiasts are educating themselves online about analogue photography using YouTube and web courses. The young man who purchased my photographic equipment was in the process of building a darkroom in his garage. Pandemic home-time enabled him to finish and learn the craft of black and white photography. Finding old enlargers in working condition to print black and white photos would have been an exciting experience for him. His engineering skills brought to life an enlarger, two 35m film camera kits with lenses which he intends to give away to photography students keen to learn traditional film. His preferred personal camera is an old second-hand Russian Kiev 60 using Kodak TMax 400. He kept me updated on his progress (see images 1-3).
There is a power in black and white images for their ability to evoke emotion through manipulating monochromatic toning. Even though our visual experience with the photograph consists of a single colour, controlling the highlights, mid-tones and shadows in specific ways can deepen or lighten the emotive value of the image. The narrative of the image in monochrome needs to be convincing and photographers employ various film, developer and paper experience to produce an emotive image. The image is also enhanced by the photographer’s comprehension of the visual skills required to increase the narrative value of a scene. This includes the knowledge to compose, to use texture, tone, and contrast, and to make the right film choice for the scene. The analogue darkroom process is a procedural practice:

Many photographers [have] commenced their photographic lives in the darkroom, becoming expert at producing their own black and white prints, for example, by carefully crafting each image to look, and feel, as desired, using a combination of learned skills and intuition. That is, the production of an artwork combines specific, learned, essential, procedural actions combined with non-specific experiment, and gut feeling responses—all of this is highly personal. Any image will appear differently, according to who prints it, how, and what they bring to the printing of it. No image, therefore, is neutral, just as no technology or machine is neutral (Rogers 2007).

Photographs from a bygone era are archives of the past; memories and experiences that educate us about our social and cultural life. Not only do photographs tell us about our world, they also imbue a timeline of events that we can view over and over again.

Photography generates social and cultural narratives of life experience; it exposes us to a continual sequence of events allowing us to elicit meaning and to formulate connections to make sense of the world we live in (Livingston 2017).

Early photographers played an important role in documenting many years of social life. Even a single image can be read as a narrative. ‘A picture, so popular culture tells us, paints a thousand words’ in which single images can ‘contain a story or a body of information’ (Shirato and Webb 2004: 81). Black and white images can be a persuasive argument for a narrative because to make sense of a monochromatic world the viewer is forced to concentrate on the content without being distracted by colour.

Black and white, and colour film have become a popular creative artform for many people, capturing social lives and pursuing artistic styles similarly to the early twentieth century photographers. Many twentieth century enthusiasts pursued photography as a form of art, rebuffing the view at the time that photography was only a tool for representing an objective reality. Prior to the Kodak era, Sontag (2010) indicates that:
Since there were then no professional photographers, there could not be amateurs either, and taking photographs had no clear social use; it was a gratuitous, that is, an artistic activity, though with few pretensions to being an art. It was only with its industrialisation that photography came into its own as art. As industrialisation provided social uses for the operations of the photographer, so the reaction against these uses reinforced the self-consciousness of photography-as-art.

Photography as an artform has long been present, even though galleries for many years did not accept it as art. As easier methods were developed through technological advances, photography moved into the hands of early nineteenth century artists such as Ansel Adams who is famous for photographing the American Wilderness. Photography lost its formality and past assumptions. Photographers of this time opened their own galleries and created photographic clubs for discussion and social interaction. The modernists changed the concept for understanding photography by challenging established views:

... if its purpose was to reproduce details precisely, and from nature, how could photographs be acceptable if negatives were 'manipulated', or if photographs were retouched? Because of these questions, amateur photographers formed casual groups and official societies to challenge such conceptions of the medium. They – along with elite art world figures like Alfred Stieglitz – promoted the late nineteenth-century style of ‘art photography’ (Kreinik n.d.).

Today, enthusiasts are experimenting with various effects such as expired film, infrared, cross process and double exposure.

Image 4 is a double exposure. Double exposures are created by combining two images, either by running the film through the camera twice or by using two negatives in the darkroom. This can also be done using software on a computer although it does not have the same effect as a random creation or a focused concept on film. It is not possible to manipulate darkroom processing in the same way as you can with the fluidity of digital image software. Although it is easier to recreate a surrealistic style on a computer, the image will never have the original experimental flavour of a photographic paper print from real film.

Twentieth century Surrealist artist Jerry Uelsmann is well known for his photo-montage techniques using multiple film and enlargers. The Surrealist movement was a twentieth century avant-garde artistic and literary movement that presented an irrational juxtaposition of uncommon imagery such as in dreams that connect to the subconscious self. Salvador Dali is one of the most famous painters of surrealism. Brian’s (2020) double exposure image captures the avant-garde movement’s experimental style where two negatives or a double-exposed single negative captured a surreal view. His accidental image expresses a mystical quality, with a romantic appeal, and is a well-composed image.

Photographing in film since the early 1980s I have folders of black and white negatives and colour slides and negatives that are slowly deteriorating and need to be archived before they are no longer viable. There are a couple of ways to capture these images in a digital format. Either by scanning or by photographing the negative with a special device that fits onto a lens. High-end digital cameras have millions of pixels so the quality and size of the image has the capacity to produce a superb print. My twenty years of film photography reveal a variety of mixed narratives of art, documentary and social entertainment. Choosing which ones to develop for safe keeping requires a critical evaluation of exposure and concept.

Image 4: Caleb Brian 2020, Film: Ilford HP5, Camera: Minolta X700: the multi-exposure, was taken in Amsterdam and Australia and was entirely accidental.
My art school education encouraged experimentation with a variety of photography styles from art to commercial and photo-documentary. Photo-documentary is a genre of photography that aims for a straightforward and accurate representation through capturing people, places, and events. The Old Museum at 460 Gregory Terrace, Bowen Hills, Brisbane, before its transformation into an events venue, was an ideal space to take photographs for a photo-documentary project. In the 1980s the museum items had been transferred to the new South Bank centre and the ‘old museum’ had reverted to its previous occupation for orchestral practice.

Some of the rooms upstairs had been desecrated by pigeons and in one large space left behind in the move there was an old uniquely decorated metal chair (See images 5 and 6). It appeared to be an antique, certainly not functional. Perhaps to limit the outside view while rehearsing, a closer look at the Federation style windows (image 7) in the room shows someone put small heart shaped stickers on each corner of the glass. The three triptych windows are a replica of those shown in religious architecture and paintings. When it was built in 1891 the museum was an exhibition and events space. The windows have now been cleaned and glass replaced in its latest employ as an events venue. Documenting the building in between eras and operation is significant to the building’s history. The following selection is from a narrative of about 20 images.

Image 5: Livingston D., 1980s Metal Chair in Upstairs room of the museum, and below left, image 6: crop view, the museum 1980s.

Below right image 7: Livingston D. 1980s, Federation style window with lace heart stickers.
When I was photographing inside the museum the orchestra was practising downstairs, providing an opportunity to use the available light streaming through the windows to capture shape and form. The orchestral instruments with their rounded shapes contrast against the vertical and horizontal lines to create a dynamic silhouette style image (see image 8). To balance the aesthetic, I was purposeful to poetically play with the light and shadow. Shot with 35mm film these are full frame images, meaning that before taking the shot photographers frame the composition of the image in the viewfinder to create an aesthetically pleasing image. Understanding the methods of composition is one of the first aspects of photography taught in colleges and universities; composition and capturing the moment are critical. However, it is not until the film is processed in the darkroom that we know if the photograph will be successful.

Photography students followed the steps of a bygone era to comprehend composition, film, camera settings, light, ISO, chemicals including the zone system for developing film, and print control. An important part of studying classic black and white photography is learning to see in monochrome, and this is achieved by practising the principles of past master photographers. Photographers from the early nineteenth century worked in black and white due to limits of technology. Nonetheless, early black and white photo-documentary was an important style that built a strong foundation for its visual language in photography today.

The explosive development of photography as a medium of untold expressive power and as a primary vehicle of modern consciousness occurred during the two decades immediately following the Great War. In the aftermath of this first totally mechanized conflict, avant-garde artists, commercial illustrators, and journalists turned to photography as if seeking to discover through its mechanisms and materials something of the soul of contemporary industrial society (The Met. 2004).

Twentieth century photographer Margaret Bourke-White was one of the early female photojournalists. She was a photographer for LIFE magazine and was the first woman war correspondent. Bourke-White photographed Gandhi just hours before his assassination (Artnet n.d.). Another photographer, Robert Adams, was concerned about the environment, and for forty years he documented in black and white the damage caused by population expansion in the American West. He photographed:

... the changing landscape of the American West, finding there a fragile beauty that endures despite our troubled relationship with nature, and with ourselves. His photographs are distinguished not only by their economy and lucidity, but also by their mixture of grief and hope (Yale University 2010).

His early work consisted of various images of everyday life, similarly to how students start with analogue where their focus is not yet on deeper conceptual levels. Adam’s later work concentrated on bigger issues including documenting children who lived downwind from a nuclear weapons production plant. He understood that you shoot for black and white with the aim of embedding the emotional power of the moment.
While walking through Fortitude Valley markets, a band and theatrical street dancers offered me an opportunity to capture the theatrical moment, as they posed when entertaining the crowd. Image 9 blurs the boundaries between document and art because without an accompanying explanation, the viewer can only imagine the narrative, perhaps a theatrical melodramatic moment predicting an unfolding tragedy.

Image 10 captured at the impromptu concert is a portrait of the band sound engineer. The photo uses depth of field to compel the viewer to look at the subject in focus behind the music compressor. The black and white mid-focus composition draws attention to the man’s face. Framing the subject this way accords the viewer with information, suggesting a narrative that conveys a music atmosphere.
After nearly two centuries, black and white photography has taken a particular hold in the art world and continues to do so. The twentieth century Australian photographer Olive Cotton was a master of composition and her pictures demonstrate her expertise on the aesthetics of the ‘art’ of photography. Cotton and her contemporary Max Dupain collaborated in a merging of contrasting styles: Dupain’s work was structured and abstract, while Cotton’s had an intuitive love of light and atmospheric effects (Ennis 2019). Both Cotton and Dupain were influenced by the Surrealist movement and later the Modernist movement. Photographers at that time experimented with contrast, perspective and developing the methods we know today. Importantly, they pursued the social, political and aesthetic potential of the medium:

Dupain and Cotton experimented with the photographic medium to showcase the inventive characteristics of Modernism, aware of developments in photography in Europe and the United States. They were influenced by the visual language of Surrealism and the Bauhaus as well as the sophisticated lighting and compositions of Hollywood glamour photography (NGA n.d.).

A challenge for the new enthusiast is to choose or develop a photographic style to help accentuate their own voice among the many. Just as the Modernists found a unique style, enthusiasts need to push the boundaries of film to find their place in a digital world. The Modernists experimented with film and printing which led to the interpretation of photography to be re-examined. Image 11 is a reference to modernism where I intentionally blur the image to create the illusion of movement. Forming an abstract composition, the kitchen knives appear as a silhouette against a soft dappled background. The soft focus initiates a visual interpretation of the movement of the sun dancing through a window.

The digital era has achieved the production of high-quality photo-processes that easily, although not completely replicate traditional black and white styles from any era. Photographing and digitally processing film is a lot easier now, and there are fewer steps than traditional darkroom methods. Even though a digital print does not have the same authority as a darkroom print, it can be printed on a variety of available papers, unlike the limited paper choice of darkroom printing.

Another photographic process making a comeback is the Polaroid camera and film, digitally resurrected and keeping all the original style camera designs. The name ‘Polaroid’ refers to the company who made instant film and unique camera styles. Polaroid cameras were well received because people did not have to wait for negatives to be processed and could view a photograph within minutes. Retro-cameras in the marketplace support a digital replica retro-style auto-mini instant-film, including the vintage style cameras that make prints within a minute.

It is also possible to print an image from a mobile phone to a printer that processes traditional Polaroid film while maintaining the authentic character of the film. Second-hand original working Polaroid models can still be used because the film for the various cameras is still available.

Image 12 ‘Circus Performer’ taken in 2018 demonstrates a digital retro large pull-apart style Polaroid with a border, a method used by professionals in the past with large format cameras to test a shoot for lighting and composition using instant film. Digital photographers no longer need a Polaroid test shot as they can see the image instantly on the DSLR camera LCD screen or download onto a computer.

The digital Polaroid is more precise than the original. The viewfinders on the original cameras were not very accurate, making it difficult to frame the image, and this was not adjusted in the reproduction cameras. Images 13-15 are framed on the LCD screen of my mobile phone with the ability to access software to precisely replicate the popular Polaroid instant print. The square format focuses on monochromatic contrasts of shape and form to create strong composition.
Despite my nostalgia for this wonderful medium and even though I had kept the equipment with the notion of using it in the future, I have now fully embraced digital processing on a computer. My aging darkroom equipment and film cameras needed resurrecting, so parting with them during the pandemic was an opportunity to grant them a new life. It is a blessing that a keen artist with engineering skills has brought my equipment back to life despite the dust and rust it had collected. The equipment and cameras are now functioning as they once were. It is interesting that the resurgence of film and its many traditional methods have carried through to the digital world. We have not lost the concept of photography rather, we have learnt the skill and the visual language required to produce the various ‘authentic’ film characteristics, such as the black and white process, on a computer. It is an advantage for me as a digital photographer to have travelled through the analogue process because an accurately crafted black and white image yields considerable power by forcing our minds to see details it might otherwise overlook in a colour image. This experience gave me valuable skills to envision how the surviving folders of negatives should transpose into traditional black and white images in the digital environment. My time in pandemic isolation has given me the clarity and space necessary for new artistic ventures.

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Author
Debra Livingston has a Doctorate of Creative Arts (Photography) and lectured in photography at the University of the Sunshine Coast. She is a published artist and her practice utilises both traditional and contemporary handcraft mediums with an emphasis on photography to express narrative and biographical concepts. Her work is presented in solo and collaborative exhibitions locally in Queensland, nationally in Melbourne and Sydney, and internationally in New York (NYC), Florida, Chicago, Paris and India. Her work resides in private and public collections. Published in Poets and Artists, Livingston has achieved honorary mentions in the PX3 Paris Photography Awards, finalist and semi-finalist in the annual Australian HeadOn Foundation Photographic Portrait Awards, Sydney, Australia and finalist in the International Brisbane Art Prize.

The following pages 60-62 present images of nature studies that show the various framing techniques used in analogue photography. We would hand make the frames for exposure in the darkroom. However, these images are digitally processed using software that can mimic many analogue framing techniques from rough or clean film edges to emulsion. Here the speed of the digital process outputs the look of film to emulate the retrograde post-processing alchemy in a matter of seconds rather than hand-crafting the laborious labour intensive techniques of the past.
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