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Unravelling: The Impact of a Collective Multi-Media Performance of Life Narratives in a Regional Community

Abstract

My paper tells the story of a creative writing project in regional WA, one in which women's secret lives are shared and woven into a narrative. This collaboration attracts funding and culminates in a multi-media performance at the community arts festival, with transformative effects for the participants and, reportedly, for many in the audience. Interviews with participants and facilitator will be drawn on to explore how such a venture can change lives and touch a whole community, with the potential to become a model for other regional communities to create new myths to live by.

I interpret the unravelling and re-weaving process of the production in Deleuzian terms, as a rhizomatic proliferation of desire, folding, unfolding and refolding selves in different, fluid shapes, enabling ordinary people to transcend the conventions and limitations of their lives and become different, more self-creating than other-created. This links with the work of life writing in contemporary society: to re-author lives through self-storying and creative performance.

Keywords

Brave New Works, community theatre, life writing, rhizomatic, becoming, Deleuze and Guattari.

Easter, when the dead may rise again, was the occasion chosen in 2009 by a group of women in the south-west community of Denmark in Western Australia to stage a group resurrection in a marvellous theatrical performance, part of the *Brave New Works* festival put on by the Denmark Arts Council each year at this time.¹ In the words of the program notes, *Unravelling: Denmark Stories* is 'a patchwork of personal stories ... expressed in words, music and video imagery — all woven together into our shared vision of ... the journey from childhood into womanhood, and of unravelling from pain and isolation into transformation and acceptance.' In a multi-media performance, bringing together the work of writers, theatre professionals, musicians and video artists, the actors who talk,

play, cry, laugh, sing and dance their way through this journey into the secret lives of women are also the creators of the material.

The process evolved out of a life writing group facilitated by my daughter, Nicola-Jane le Breton, who has lived in Denmark with her family for the past seven years. I have had many conversations with her about the process, and have interviewed three other women involved in the group. This paper is based on my own observations of the process and the performance, and on these interviews and discussions. In it, I will describe the process and some of the effects it has had on the women involved, and will link this to a wider conversation I hope to engage in, in this post-doc period of my life; a conversation about how life writing in various media re-authors lives. My discussion of the *Unravelling* project is framed and interpreted through Deleuzian concepts of becoming and the flow of desire in a rhizomatic process of creation and re-creation.

First, I will briefly outline how the project evolved. Then I will give some glimpses of the content of the performance, showing how a rhizomatic assemblage has been created out of multiplicitous themes and stories. I will show how this project has changed the lives of those involved, and suggest some of the wider implications for community arts projects. To navigate this journey, I need a conceptual map that charts my Deleuzian view of the process.

Philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari (1930-1992) collaborated in a lifelong project to discard hierarchical structures of thought and modes of representation, to create from many diverse disciplines a radical philosophy and ethical system they called transcendental empiricism (Deleuze 2001) or chaosophy, chaosmosis (Guattari 1995). They offered, as an alternative to the world of the subject and the object — the semiotics of subjectification and the grammar of hierarchical order — a worldview in which there are two planes, the transcendental and the empirical. One does not precede the other; the other is not dependent on the one. Rather, the transcendental field is actualised in things, lived experiences, subjects and objects, and the two fields are

coexistent, interactive and immanent to each other. There is no source beyond the immanent that can be considered its hidden unifying and ordering principle. In this Spinozan universe composed of one substance, distributed on the intersecting yet distinct planes of the virtual or invisible and the material or visible, desire is the primary, impersonal connective force that flows through all life. A multiplicity of incorporeal events, on the immanent plane, and organised forms and subjectivities, on the empirical plane, proliferate and connect in a dance of difference and repetition — always folding, unfolding, refolding, becoming. The metaphor I prefer to figure the ever-changing process of the construction of selfhood in response to internal and external forces is Deleuze's one of origami (Deleuze 1993, 6). Although, in the art of origami, the piece of paper is shaped by an external agent, we can shape ourselves, we can become agents in the process of change by becoming aware of how we are folded, and by thinking creatively, so that we can unfold and refold ourselves. Of course, the creases of previous folds will remain, but they need not determine new shapes; their psychic marks are like lines on the ageing face, sites of change and becoming. In the precise practice of origami, one single fold can be critical, can change the whole shape and meaning of the object; so it is with ourselves.

Another figure used by Deleuze and Guattari to describe the flow of desire through created forms is that of the rhizome. Unlike the tree, with its roots, branches and linear, centralised hierarchical order, the rhizome proliferates in a maze of lines in all directions, some concreting into bulbs and tubers, some extending and connecting with other assemblages: '[a]ny point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and *must* be' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 7). Deleuze and Guattari call their second co-authored book — *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia* — a rhizome, or an assemblage, as distinct from the classical type of book that has a root and branch structure (1987, 5). This means it is an assemblage of multiplicitous lines of thought, with one side facing the strata of organised forms, and one side facing the plane of immanence or desire, for which another name (their favourite) is the Body without Organs, 'which is continually dismantling the organism, causing asignifying particles or pure intensities to pass or

circulate ...' (1987, 4). We cannot expect ordered, linear patterns of thought, a beginning, a middle and an end. Instead, we have a series of plateaus which begin always in the middle, from which growth flows and spills over the edges (1987, 21). This rhizomatic form shapes the performance of lives in the production *Unravelling*, as well. In this, as in other forms of contemporary life writing, linear, teleological narratives are being discarded to allow fragmented, hidden, enigmatic, unexpected, fluid story lines to grow and proliferate. *Unravelling: Denmark Lives* is an assemblage, a rhizomatous production of desire where the energy flows from the middle and spills over the edges.

Before I explain this a little more by talking about the production, I will briefly outline the background of *Unravelling*.

Funding was secured for the project, which began with the writing workshops. Fifteen women were members of the group, five professional musicians worked on the musical score to accompany the pieces, two visual artists created the staging and videoscape, and five people assisted with general artistic production and choreography. Overall direction was by Silvia Lehmann, and coordination by Jane Matthews.

In the writing group, the principles followed were: confidentiality, freedom, equality, individuality, safety, writing spontaneously, honestly, deeply and naturally ('don't worry about correctness'), allowing and valuing contradictions, ambiguity and complexity. During the collaborative script-writing workshop, fragments were selected anonymously in small groups then sorted into a meaningful progression of linked fragments. In the first reading of the draft script produced by the end of this weekend workshop, writers sometimes read out their own work and sometimes read someone else's. A couple of the women commented that this combination of writing and listening created a melting pot, a sort of lucky dip, a pile of fragments layered on one another that grew into a picture. They reflected that they lost the sense of who said what, of individual authorship, and developed a sense of sharing a common ground, women speaking for women, to women. Similarly, Deleuze and Guattari describe their experience of collaborative authorship as a

process of reaching: ‘not the point where one no longer says I, but the point where it is no longer of any importance *whether* one says I’ (1987, 3).



Figure 1: photo courtesy Nic Duncan, April 2009.

Here are some of the 15 women who worked together to create, produce and perform the intimate story fragments that became *Unravelling: Denmark Stories*. This photo was taken in the beautiful little octagonal building created in the grounds of the Sanctuary, a cultural and educational venue managed by Green Skills and the Centre for Sustainable Living in Denmark.

After many weeks of workshopping and rehearsing, the performance took place.

Connecting threads



Figure 2: photo courtesy Nic Duncan, April 2009.

In the performance, the women constantly move and regroup as the focus shifts from one scene to another. Threads of story are picked up, dropped, reprised, interwoven in a rhizomatic organic process. As group members perform threads of story, a narrator may move forward, then move back so another can take up the storyteller's role. Women speak for each other, to each other, and to the audience.

Among a group of women who came together with a passion for self-expression and a curiosity to discover more about themselves and each other, a magical process happened, whereby they became like a shoal of fish, swimming together in formation, moving together, as fish do, in response to the tide, a source of food, the threat of a predator ... The difference here is that although they have developed a group identity, they have retained their individualities.

Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd.... To reach, not the point where one no longer says I, but the point where it is no longer of any importance whether one says I. We are no longer ourselves. *Each will know his own.* We have been aided, inspired, multiplied. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 3; emphasis added)

Here, Deleuze and Guattari express the paradoxical state of losing a sense of the isolated subjective self, becoming multiple, yet each retaining a knowledge of what he or she brings to the assemblage, without possessing that contribution. Individuality in multiplicity is also expressed in the ripple effects that the production has had on the lives of these women in their community, as I will explore a little later.

The stories that emerged from the singularities of these women's lives is a complex web woven of threads of narrative, tracing women's journeys from childhood, through teenage years, adventure, sexuality, into maturity, love, motherhood, and all the ups and downs of life in a country town, where the river meets the sea. A metaphorical theme of water (the river, the rain, the inlet, the ocean — the river of life that meets the ocean) runs through all the fragments and is reflected in the videoscape and echoed and highlighted in the music.

Here is a poem that was dropped from the final script. To fit the production into an hour-long time slot, much material had to be excluded. I include it here because it expresses the rhizomatic process of creation, of desire that flows within certain accustomed channels, yet is beginning to take lines of flight, fugitive lines of becoming that open up new ways of being, of unfolding and refolding the self.

I was worried about writing without lines.

Now there are no road rules,

I can write however I like.

But I find myself still writing straight,

Like it's day and I'm still night.

But now I can go up and down,

I'm a bird, I'm a fish.

I can circle, spiral with a twist,

or meander on the page

Just like a mouse would up my sleeve.

I'm free to take a quantum leap,

Find a new way of being.

And here's a snippet that expresses the freedom of discovery on the margins, in the spaces between organised forms, or as Deleuze and Guattari would put it, on the smooth, unstriated plane of the Body without Organs: 'The edges are always where things happen. The most dynamic places are here always, between water and land, between rock and tree and you and me.'

Here's a poem that expresses the diversity and differences of the collective of 'kindred souls' that is Denmark:

The kindred souls collective
Square people out of the square
Wordless embrace, a smile or a wave

Supermarket societies of tantalising tit-bits
Chi gung, permaculture, alien abduction
A melting pot of potty, bookie, toothy hippies

Men in drag at Pantomimes
Secret hidden hermits leading double lives
Nocturnal musos mastering their muses

Frolicking whales and mermaids,
healing feminine lay lines,
Magic and dance in sacred trance
Festivals, freefall, and face paint

Thriving throbbing community
Unique and ordinary, thongs and stilettos
Midwives read Tarot
And artists drive tractors.

Some of the stories told are intimate — a young girl’s first lovemaking; some are painful — a rape; some are ordinary, everyday — waiting for rain, cutting wood; some are adventurous — sleeping under the stars, fishing from a boat on the inlet; and others are domestic — preparing dinner, a squabble with a five-year-old son:



Figure three: photo courtesy Nic Duncan, April 2009.

Mother holding five-year-old son: ‘When you grow up, you can move out of home. And you don't have to see me again unless you want to. But no matter what, I'll always love you.’

Against these themes of a hybrid and inclusive community, accompanied by the experimental musical score, video images were played, creating complicated layered and textured constructs. We saw: hands moving along a tree trunk overlaid with an image of paperbarks by the river; the group of women performers emerging from the huge rock at Elephant Rocks; a seagull flying over the rock and rough sea; children playing chasey in the bush; a young girl with magical swirls and whirls over her close-up face; a woman looking out of her kitchen window superimposed with old fifties images of glamorous women doing housework; two teenagers with their backs to us, overlaid with a subtle

image of them kissing; close-up of a woman's hands spinning and teasing wool; a young woman dancing with a piece of blue cloth on top of a rock overlooking the sea; the same woman hugging her baby child and playing in the waves; women gossiping in the café and the supermarket, overlaid with women exiting through the sunlit door.

A star piece in the performance, for me, was a poem that expressed the unravelling that happens when two people meet and are unfolded, exposed and undone by their longing for union.

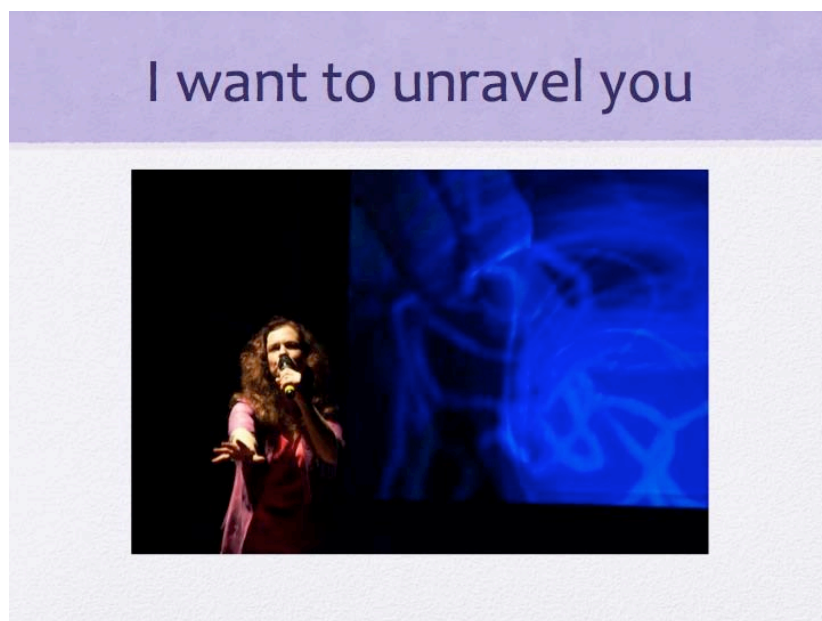


Figure four: photo courtesy Nic Duncan, April 2009.

Here Nicola-Jane le Breton holds the audience spellbound as she declaims:

i want to unravel you
like a ball of sky blue wool
i want to tease away the tangles,
and the pain, so cruel
i want to slip my fingers
into every knot of thought
and pull you free, unfettered...

and I want to be unravelled, with you,
from the self that holds me tight
to walk, with you, my friend,
into the all-dissolving light.

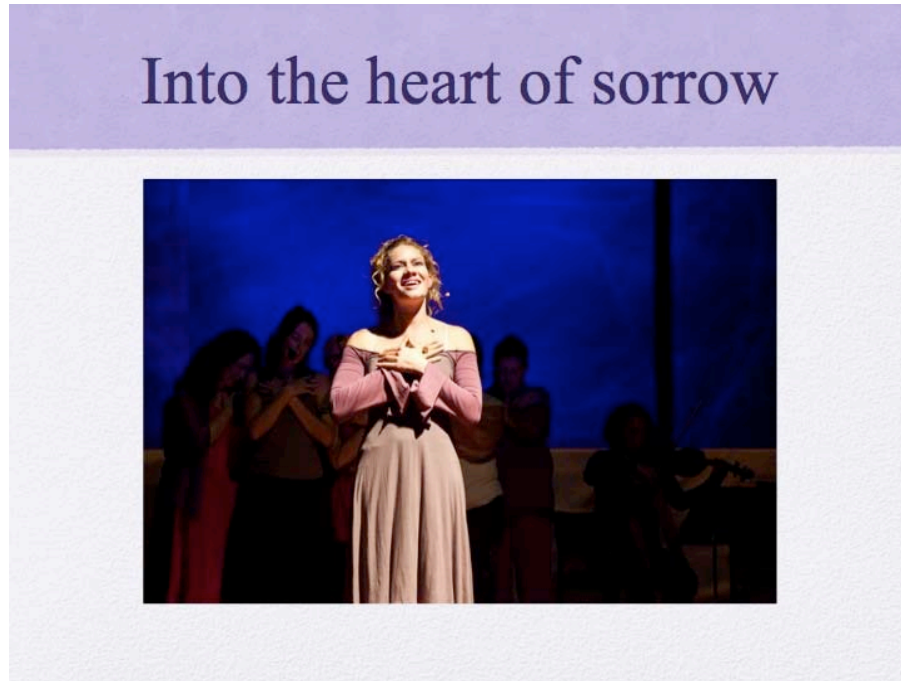


Figure five: photo courtesy Nic Duncan, April 2009.

Here Mary Greenaway sings the companion poem (on the theme of unravelling):

Into the heart of sorrow
you have taken me
with your wide wings of longing
and your sharp beak
of truth

Into the heart of sorrow
we have flown
and we have known
love's aching reality

That none can give another

what she cannot give herself

And none can be for another
what he cannot be for himself

Into the heart of sorrow
we have travelled
and been unravelled
together.

The performance lasted about an hour and held the packed audience in the community hall spellbound. When it ended, the crowd rose to its feet *en masse* and cheered, clapped, whistled and screamed applause. When the uproar subsided, many members of the audience (of whom at least fifty percent were visitors to Denmark) came forward to congratulate and connect with the performers and directors. Some comments overheard in conversations afterwards: 'I felt as if all of the women were speaking directly to me'; 'I wanted it to slow down so I could take it all in'; 'raw, true, beautifully authentic'; 'I think what I most enjoyed was that feeling that we are really all one'.

The philosophy behind the project is that by unravelling the knots of our isolating stories and secrets, we free ourselves and open up the opportunity to weave a new pattern for our lives. And that isolation will give way to a new sense of sharing and community, creating circles of understanding and honesty, like ripples from a stone cast into the water. The theatricality of the experience, and the device of preserving anonymity by having most of the pieces performed by someone other than the author, removed any fear of exposure and judgment, and gave the group strength and solidarity in the shared stories.

What are the ingredients of this recipe for transformation that have made it such a success, for individuals, for the group, for the community? The mix began in the writing group. Here, the women came together in a safe place, where judgment was suspended, and others' writing was listened to with respect and positive feedback. One of the women

said the only criticism was by omission; the facilitator and the group reflected back what was good, what worked. Even shocking material (the description of the rape) was received without judgement; initial impulses from some members of the group not to include it, for fear of normalising it, were released, in favour of honesty and openness. The name, *Unravelling*, set the theme and the ethos of intimacy and trust. People heard others' feelings and mirrored them, reflecting back ambiguity, complexity, confusion and pain, as well as joy and fun. One woman described how she had developed, from her experience of being abused as a child, a capacity to look (as an adult) at her abused child self with detachment; in the group, others mirrored both her adult self and her child self, judging neither. She said that when she was writing painful stuff, she felt distanced, but reading it aloud, she felt different. Looking at those beautiful faces, outraged at her experiences, having facets of her experience reflected back at her, was incredibly emotional, and she was able to feel again through their sharing of her experience. She said 'I don't normally cry in front of people, I'm more used to crying for others, but there — I cried for myself.'

Here I must point out that Deleuze and Guattari give little direct attention to emotion, yet I find it is there, between the lines, on the edges of their discourse. They valorise affect, a Spinozan term that their translator, Brian Massumi, glosses as 'a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, xvi). The intensity of emotion, on the other hand, is qualified by its generation within the order of subjectivity, meaning and narration, whereas affect is prior to emotion and thought. Here I find the need for a feminine emphasis on the physical, sensual, emotional and particular experience, the order of the personal and biographical (Shouse 2005). An awareness of the prepersonal and abstract can change the way we live on the plane of subjectivity and sociality, but I believe it is empathy that bridges the gap between self and other.

The women in *Unravelling*, and the men who support their performance, have gone together into the heart of joy and sorrow and know the necessity of including and

valorising emotion in our lived performance of ourselves. There is no sense of impersonality, detachment, distance, cynicism or judgement in this production.

Empathy is the key to life writing. Empathy creates a circle shared by reader and writer, or speaker and listener, a safe place on the edge of pain and confusion, forgetting and remembering, chaos and uncertainty, a safe place within which we can reprise our lives, sing refrains, share our songs, make meaning of our stories and form bonds with each other.

Life writing changes lives. There is no doubt about this. I have experienced it myself, in my own practice, and observed it happening for others, and here I see it happening to a group of women, with ripples spreading out into their families and their community. Each of the women I interviewed said that their domestic and social lives had changed.ⁱⁱ ‘I’ve shared things with my family I’ve kept secret for years’, said one, ‘it’s been a huge weight lifted.’ ‘I’m in my 40s now,’ she continued, ‘and this has come along at just the right time; I can tell new stories now.’ Another woman spoke of the beautiful friendships she has formed through the work, among women with not much in common except that they live in Denmark and they have shared the experience of *Unravelling*. She also said it has helped her with family relationships; she is more compassionate and understanding of her daughter’s point of view, and more open and confident, relating more deeply with other women. A third woman said that she feels part of the group, though she has never been able to relate to a group before. As for other circles, where before she felt she was contributing to the community as an outsider — at school, in her work, in her volunteering — now she does so as an insider. Where before, nasty gossip circulating about her made her feel isolated, now she holds her head up high, wears bright colours instead of black, disregards any negativity. For the first time in her life, she does not feel isolated, pointed at. ‘It all happened so quickly and deeply’, she said; ‘these women welcomed me with trust, they accepted me, we were all there unravelling, I was just one of them ... From the very first moment I was welcomed as a sister, and it has grown into a deep love.’

A new model for community arts has arisen in this brave, innovative project. Already, in response to many requests and suggestions, the group are planning repeat performances (including one for International Women's Day in 2010) and looking at the possibility of taking the performance itself and the model for producing it to other communities in the south-west. This was a big effort by a small group in a regional community to expand their lives in new and creative ways. From big things, bigger things grow.

For me, in my practice of life writing and as a reviewer and researcher, it is a remarkable example of how lives can be transformed by the process of telling stories of the self, and how a community process of workshopping stories and performing them can remove the normal disjunction between narrator and audience that is a condition of the gap between writing and publishing and reading, where the connection between writer and reader is made mainly through impersonal media such as books and other printed material and film or radio. I am not suggesting that all life writers should leave their solitary studies, their journals and computers, and join groups to write and perform their work; for this to happen, there needs to be a chemistry, a catalyst such as a facilitator or two with a dream, and some sort of community, as well as access to funds and people willing to put in the hard work needed to get the show together. But I am sure that *Unravelling* sets an example, a model that can be applied in other communities, and can be of particular benefit in isolated regional communities.

The women and men who created this production of desire were indeed aided, inspired and multiplied by their coming together in a creative assemblage that now has a life of its own, and will continue to grow and change in response to the desire of the participants and of their supporters to create more plateaus of intensity, more Bodies without Organs, more smooth spaces of desire on the edge of chaos and uncertainty, more unsettling metamorphoses, and carry this contagious recipe to other communities.

Endnotes

ⁱ The web page for the 2009 *Brave New Works* festival is at:
<http://www.denmarkarts.com.au/BNW16/bnw16%20program%20stage%206.pdf>.

ⁱⁱ Each of the women I interviewed has given permission to quote from our conversations.

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