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### Conference report

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## CONFERENCE REPORT

# Therapy and Experimental Poetry Symposium, Birkbeck, University of London, 28<sup>th</sup> September 2019

Organised by Vicky Sparrow with support from the Wellcome  
Trust

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Several months into the Covid-19 pandemic and the thinking about therapy and experimental poetry during the final preparation of this report is markedly different to the pre-Covid-19 thinking which formed my experience of the Symposium and earlier versions of this report.

During and following the symposium the concepts of 'therapy' and 'experimental poetry' were sites for questioning and exploration. Months into the Covid-19 pandemic the practises of therapy and experimental poetry as sites of interpersonal relationships which make these practices possible are emphasised. Relationships and their distance or absence are pressure points registering the micro and macro individual and societal challenges Covid-19 has forced into focus, even for those who previously turned away from the challenges of social injustices. If therapy and experimental poetry, therapies and poetics, arise in the crucible of relationships, what is happening to these relationships during this pandemic? At the Therapy and Experimental Poetry Symposium in September 2019, Scott Thurston advanced the argument that experimental poetics are a political subculture. How are these politics enacted towards each other during the unfolding societal consequences of Covid-19? The questions and ideas circulating before and after this symposium are magnified by global attention focusing on how the politics of care are enacted not only for ourselves but also for each other.

It is provocative to place 'therapy' and 'experimental poetry' together as a title for a scholarly symposium. It gestures towards experimental poetry as potentially some sort of therapeutic or cathartic practice. The existence of a profitable and these days easy to find 'writing for wellbeing' industrial complex posits wellbeing as the responsibility of the individual rather than a consequence of structural societal issues which crush individual lives. The 'therapy' and 'experimental poetry' in this symposium were not concerning themselves with 'writing for wellbeing', rather, they concerned themselves with interrogating language, signalling where the fakeries which pass as 'wellbeing' in a sick society – and during the Covid-19 pandemic sickness is itself materially present in every aspect of life – which emphasises productivity as the measure of value. Of course, an academic symposium on experimental poetry is another site for wringing an institutionalised form of productivity and value from a form of writing which makes claims and gestures towards resisting such co-option.

The symposium took place at Birkbeck, University of London, a well-known node on the experimental poetry 'scene', especially for those fortunate enough – or otherwise – to be based in London. Situating a practice in an academic building positions that practice in relation to the academy. Housing a symposium which presents a consideration of 'therapy' and 'experimental poetry' in an academic building in Bloomsbury in London orientates the terms 'therapy' and 'experimental poetry' towards the practices associated with these spaces and places.

Symposia are situated by the language which puts into motion its circulation prior to the event, its discussion after the event, and the space in which it unfolds. The language positioning the Therapy & Experimental Poetry Symposium reflected an approach of open and collective enquiry, speaking of 'how therapy (in its broadest sense) might be represented, enacted and/or contested through experiments with language and form'.<sup>1</sup> The symposium posed five questions:

What the experimental poem can do that the talking cure can't, and how we might conceptualise this as a mode of therapeutic work, or otherwise. Might there be a tension, for example, between the often impersonal lyric subject of experimental poetry and the wounded individual psyche of the

psychoanalysis? In addition, what tactics could we deploy to keep the vulnerable self in view whilst thinking about the politics of avant-garde writing? Might the experimental poem's disruption of conventional narrative be thought of as a mode of collective therapy, perhaps with connections to radical care?

As entry-points to the symposium these questions reflect the contemporaneous interest in psychoanalysis as a range of ideas in which experimental poetry engages. The appearance of such a symposium at this particular point in time also reflects the increased literacy in mental and emotional health and an accompanying reduction in the stigma which used to run parallel to mental health and associated social practices, including any sort of 'therapy' as a route to personal change.

Welcoming speakers and attendees to the day Vicky Sparrow offered insights into the origins of the symposium. Sparrow acknowledged the substantial literature on the therapeutic function of the 'narrative' 'declarative' modes of creative writing and expressive arts therapy. The enquiries undergirding this symposium were not aimed at criticising the function of these therapies but rather in trying to explore the gap where the 'lyric I' is not the writing self. Touchstones for the symposium were identified in Joe Luna's 'Following John Wilkinson',<sup>2</sup> Carol Watts' 'Her Mouth was Sealed'<sup>3</sup> and Andrea Brady's 'The Determination of Love'.<sup>4</sup> Sparrow emphasised the politics of therapy, where consolation is complicity, in becoming comfortable in an unjust world. The real-world context of mental health and therapy takes the form of severe cuts to mental health services, reduced access to health care, and the disaster of Universal Credit. Sparrow reflected on the term 'can of worms', acknowledging that in part the symposium was inspired by the 'repressed matter' of her doctoral thesis on Anna Mendelssohn, and quoted Mendelssohn; 'I avoid psychiatrists like the plague, they'd be poets if they weren't so rich'.<sup>5</sup>

**Panel One: Andrew Spragg, Ellen Dillon, Tom Betteridge.  
Chair: Sally-Shakti Willow**

Andrew Spragg's (Independent Scholar) paper, 'Tender Dialogues: Weiners, Weiner, Hauck and co', wove together notions of tenderness and dialogue through connections made between writing by Emma Hauck, Hannah Weiner, and John Wieners.

Sensitively navigating through dialogue between writers, writers and their writing, and readers of their writing, Spragg uncovered, 'an experimental writing that attempts to communicate the contingency of the self, the affect of language, [and which] brings us in proximity with a reconciliation'. Here Spragg considers writing 'experimental' not in a cultural sense but in a social sense; the writings that are unintelligible to others. Spragg has generously shared a version of his paper online, and the reader is encouraged to explore Spragg's ideas further for themselves.<sup>6</sup>

Next, Ellen Dillon (Dublin City University) teased apart the word 'occupation' in a paper titled, "captured for a moment inside my work": Meaningful Occupation in Experimental Poetry'. Dillon described this paper as rooted in the real world experiences of dyspraxia and sensory challenges and it zoomed in on ideas of occupation and occupational therapy raising questions around how tasks are imbued with meaning, whether therapists understand how tasks become meaningful, what occupations are and how they can become meaningful. Poems were offered as a material site of meaning making and reading. Under the heading 'Experimental poetry as meta-occupation', Dillon developed close readings of Bernadette Mayer's 'Everybody sleeps in royal blue satin sheets like cucumbers in a box of snow', Fanny Howe's 'Love and I' and David Berman's 'World: Series'. In these readings the practice of occupying was foregrounded as a form of occupation, with its resonances of work (labour) and the work of occupation as an act and site of resistance.

Tom Betteridge (Independent scholar) then took on 'Articulatedness, Material and Mourning'. Drawing on poems by Maggie O'Sullivan and Peter Manson, Betteridge sought to contest certain forms of 'articulate' speech-transfer in the therapeutic environment of some talking therapies -- those touchstones of association that push the process onwards -- with an 'inarticulate' but nonetheless therapeutic language-use found in the poems of O'Sullivan and Manson. Betteridge drew on Manson's invocation of the 'articulatedness' of Manley Hopkins' poems to conceptualise the inarticulate, but articulated, nature of some poetry engaged in mourning processes, and the contribution made to these processes by the poems' foregrounding of sonic material. Broadening the concept of articulation into a 'body' of phonic articulation,

Betteridge contested the idea of clear communication, turning our attention to potentially awkward sonic expression with its emphasis on the material over matter. 'Articulatedness' was defined by Betteridge as 'dynamic motions tethered to a single axis' and 'the act and working of vocal apparatus'.

**Panel Two: Holly Pester, Gareth Farmer, Lila Matsumoto.  
Chair: Azad Ashim Sharma**

Holly Pester (University of Essex) discussed 'Poor Pedagogy and Dream Work', offering insight into her pedagogic practice on the degree module 'Dreaming and Writing'. Pester's talk emphatically took the form of a talk and not a presentation, and located 'Creative Writing' in the context of lecturing within Higher Education as an institution. The practicalities of the module were described by Pester as journal based, with Blanchot's 'Dreaming and Writing' as a key touchstone. In the spirit of the collective dreamwork Pester was encouraging her students to participate in, I hereby represent my notes in a more associative thread: The sameness of dreaming and writing. The figure of the 'I' that comes up in the dream. The fallacy of re-telling the dream. The dreamer is in bed asleep. The dreamer is not the sleeper. In the dream, who is dreaming? To dream is to complicate self. The aim of experimental writing is to lose sense of self. Having to teach modules rather than let them get on with it. Dreams as similitude. Writers as dreamworkers. Producers of dreams as labourer; the dream becomes our work. What does it mean to turn our dream into work? Benjamin type of work. Talking about dreams is crossing an intimacy threshold. Learn to deprivatize the text, the dream, without depersonalising it. And that's also the aim of experimental writing. What is our collective nightmare? Factory, trauma, and manufacture. Childhood as a nursery revisited at night-time. Society is the traumatised baby. Societal memory is the writer's fate to write. The workshop is about how to be awake. The retrospective active. Construct an 'other' to write as 'I'. Other than true. Share dreams to find collective self.

Following Pester, Gareth Farmer (University of Bedfordshire) discussed consumerism, consuming and writing in his paper 'Reproducing Forms of Life'. Farmer considered the idea of consuming and being consumed by the text, locating

consumerism as unthinking reproduction. Writing perhaps poses 'therapeutic resistance' to easy consumption and the critical and creative work of close reading perhaps can be considered as a work of therapy. Drawing on John David Rhodes' work, 'style' was considered as a mark of human labour.<sup>7</sup> Farmer provided a close-reading, and close-ventriloquising through writing, of Anne Boyer's texts, drawing on 'At Least Two Types of People', *Garments Against Women*, and 'Not Writing'.

The final paper before lunch was presented by Lila Matsumoto (University of Nottingham) whose "Big contemplative utopia": latency and solace in the writings of Denise Riley, Lisa Robertson, and Lyn Hejinian' thought through bereavement, cancer and poetry as consolation. The mawkishness which trails the notion of 'poetry as consolation' was considered from the perspective of its accompanying rhetoric of impact, closure and outcomes. Matsumoto's interest here was less the denial of poetry as healing but in questioning what happens when poetry is not uplifting. In the example of Denise Riley's elegiac collection *Say Something Back* (2016), the baroque style represents a mind thinking through solitude and detachment. Riley's essay 'Time Lived, Without its Flow' presents the process of writing as inextricably linked to the flow of time where poetry considers trauma as theatre instead of a calm, collected space. Under the subheading 'Latency: experiment and performance', Matsumoto read Lisa Robertson on melancholy as contemplative Utopia, finding the transformative to include decay, multiplication, and reversal. Matsumoto describes an 'and-ness', thinking about the question 'does shifting through damage ease or re-sensitise it?' 'And-ness' speaks to and of the capaciousness of experimental poetry as a writing practice which elides foreclosure of resolution in mourning or consolation.

### **Panel Three: Sejal Chad, Linda Kemp, Scott Thurston, James Goodwin. Chair: Nisha Ramayya**

Sejal Chad (Independent Scholar) works as a psychotherapist, encompassing counselling and arts psychotherapy within her practice. Chad's paper offered insights from the sphere of professional practice under the title 'Qualities of therapeutic encounter: attunement, experiment, narrative, empathy'. Chad foregrounded qualities which make an encounter therapeutic, emphasising the role of listening, the

role of audience, and journal writing where the listener/audience is an imagined reader. Listening was modelled as a various practice subject to different interpretive stances depending on the therapeutic approach. The processes of creativity, in any form of creative art, were discussed as resolving something, an encounter within the individual as well as with others, in the context that any 'true' encounter with the 'other' is transformative. Chad's account provided a welcome insight into the range of practices which are subsumed into the word 'therapy', adding nuance into how 'therapy' is interpreted and understood.

"The question of damage held open": Form, therapy and care (a poetic encounter) provided a title for my presentation of a tripartite creative-critical encounter. Opening with a quote from Linda Alcoff – 'When I refuse to listen to how you are different from me, I am refusing to know who you are' – the piece approached the family in relation to violence, psychoanalytic concepts, and social reproduction.<sup>8</sup> Some excerpted lines follow to give a flavour: 'capitalism cannot survive without the family', 'Freud's dissatisfied partner removes his patient', 'the origin of *The Interpretation of Dreams* is *Hamlet*', 'segregation on the basis of linguistic cues'. The presentation concluded with a short audio-visual poetics film entitled *indices of irregular return*.

Scott Thurston's (University of Salford) paper, 'Reflections on Creative Writing for Wellbeing and Mental Health: the Role of Improvisation, Re-voicing, Interdisciplinarity and Multiple Selves' sought to question some assumptions subtending connections between creative writing, wellbeing and mental health. Thurston posited experimental poetry as a political subculture and in doing so teased apart discursive manoeuvres which seek to make creative writing and wellbeing synonymous. Thurston looked at the social, political and cultural contexts in which 'therapy' operates, making reference to the toxicity of pop psychology, a cross-party letter criticising the NICE (the UK's National Institute for Health and Care Excellence) guidelines for depression, and mentioning the existence of at least one Randomised Control Trial (RCT's being the 'gold standard' for evidenced-based practice in health and medicine) looking at expressive writing which found positive wellbeing effects of expressive writing.<sup>9</sup> Thurston's interdisciplinary approach provided nuance to the conflation of creative



writing and wellbeing, taking care to consider the risk of re-traumatisation when writing about trauma and also writing practices which form part of day-to-day survival. Thurston's paper provided evidence for creative writing being more helpful, in a wellbeing context, when focusing on technique. The politics of the 'arts for health' field were given attention, explicating the view that in these contexts art/creative practice is viewed as supplementary, the arts are instrumentalised and social barriers to art/writing are ignored. Interdisciplinarity, with a full integration of two or more disciplinary fields offers a route towards multimodal creative practices where different arts media can offer different ways into and alternative perspectives on the issues with which the therapeutic encounter is engaging. This approach connects with the notion of the self as simultaneously multiple and unified and pushes against the instrumentalist methods of using art practices as tools which can be straightforwardly applied to enhance mental health or wellbeing.

Finally, James Goodwin (Birkbeck, University of London) presented, 'Preservation and Decay, Poetics and Pharmakon, Living in the Wake, Blackness and Otherness'. He commenced with a reading of phenomenology which noted the 'critique of intentionality through phenomenological reduction', recognising how 'everything that happens in our world arises from the other world'. Goodwin suggested that if we live 'wakefully' in a 'common' language – although this is not a shared community but separation – we can think of life as relations grounded in difference and separation. He also asserted that language is not made by individuals but forms a community of empathy, and that the function of writing is as a sedimentation of experience which makes the transmission of experience possible. Goodwin drew on Christina Sharpe's concept of 'living in the wake' to acknowledge the experience of being under slavery as the literal embodiment of property of the transcendental subject.<sup>10</sup> To live 'in the wake' however is to live black existence as preserving a 'whole ensemble of possible events' – living dis/continuous brutality in and with terror. His conclusion characterised black poetics as a work of touching and being touched by language – that to touch language is to continue the work of putting breath back into the black body and that, in a duplex world, black breathing and breathlessness both enables and ends the world.

Following a break the symposium moved into a different format with Vicky Sparrow facilitating a Round Table comprising Samantha Walton, Sarah Hayden, Fran Lock, Verity Spott and Dorothy Lehane. The Round Table provided space for reflection on aspects of discussion and ideas raised during the ten presentations and also ranged into emerging thoughts. The digressions, cul-de-sacs, non-sequiturs, surprises and serendipity of Round Table talks are what make looser and live conversation so compelling. By way of placing a few of the ideas discussed on record, the conversation included but was in no way limited to: considerations of communities of experimental poetry, including questioning whether these are therapeutic spaces; the possibility of the vampiric in appropriations of language and experiences of trauma in arts contexts; obfuscatory discourses around therapy, self-care and subjective precarities; career experimentalism; experimentalism outside of the academy and questioning the ethics of excluding the body.

The symposium culminated with poetry readings and performances from Fran Lock, Verity Spott, Dorothy Lehane and Elinor Cleghorn.

Returning to the reflections on Covid-19 which open this report, I think about how gatherings for symposia, Round Tables, lunch, and – particularly – poetry readings and performances provide nodes of physical community and sharing. As I make the final corrections to this report, I hope that we will share these experiences again. Soon. They hold the therapeutic. The experimental. And poetry.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Vicky Sparrow, 'Symposium Abstract for Experimental Poetry & Therapy Symposium' (2019). Available at: <https://therapyexperimentalpoetry.wordpress.com/> [Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2020].
- <sup>2</sup> Joe Luna, 'Following John Wilkinson', *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 1–19 (2015) DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.16995/biip.1>.
- <sup>3</sup> Carol Watts, 'Her mouth was sealed: Scenes for a working through, after J.H. Prynne's "The Oval Window" and towards "Acrylic Tips"', *Sitegeist: A Journal of Psychoanalysis and Philosophy*, Vol. 8, pp. 57–89 (2012).
- <sup>4</sup> Andrea Brady, 'The Determination of Love', *Journal of the British Academy*, Vol. 5, pp. 271–308 (2017). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/005.271>.
- <sup>5</sup> Mendelssohn wrote in a poem that she 'avoids psychiatry like the plague, they'd be poets if they weren't so rich'. Anna Mendelssohn, *Tondo Aquatique* (Cambridge: Equipage, 1997), unpaginated.
- <sup>6</sup> Andrew Spragg, 'Tender Dialogues: Weiner, Wieners, Hauck & co', *Medium* (2019). Available at: <https://medium.com/@andrew.spragg84/tender-dialogues-weiner-wieners-hauck-co-dd5d87670939> [Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2020].

<sup>7</sup> John David Rhodes, 'Belabored: Style as work', *Framework* Vol. 53, No. 1, pp. 47–64 (2012).

<sup>8</sup> Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> 'MPs support concerns over NICE depression guidance', The British Psychological Society (September 2019). Available at: <https://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/mps-support-concerns-over-nice-depression-guidance> [Accessed 2nd August 2020].

<sup>10</sup> Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On blackness and being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

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## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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