

Entanglements between Art-making and Storytelling in a Collective Biography on the Death of an Intimate Other

ABSTRACT In this essay, the four authors explore the material and affective agency of art-making in a collective biography workshop. We work with our memories of the death of someone close to us, through stories, and through making art. Collectively we explore a specific, embodied moment of the particular deaths we have each experienced. The substantive focus of our work is methodological. We concern ourselves with what is made possible through including art-making in intra-action with the more usual storytelling/listening/writing/reading/making of collective biography. **KEYWORDS** Collective biography; Art-making; Diffraction; Intra-action; Death

The four authors of this essay came together, for the first time in this particular authorial assemblage, for a two-day collective biography workshop in an art studio at an Australian university.¹ Collective biography focuses on the material specificity of remembered moments of being. Developed by Bronwyn Davies and her colleagues, this methodology involves researchers working together with their memories on a topic they have chosen collectively.² They tell their memories to each other and they write them down, and then work with their memories to address the topic they have set themselves. In this project we set out to extend those practices by including a material, diffractive engagement with art-making. In doing so we were influenced by Karen Barad's claim that ontology and epistemology cannot be separated:

Discursive practices and material phenomena do not stand in a relationship of externality to one another; rather, the material and the discursive are mutually implicated in the dynamics of intra-activity. . . . [M]atter and meaning are mutually articulated. Neither discursive practices nor material phenomena are ontologically or epistemologically prior. Neither can be

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explained in terms of the other. Neither has privileged status in determining the other.³

Some previous collective biographies have included visual and other arts practices.⁴ We know from that work just how difficult it is to trace the entangled intra-actions between art-making and storytelling. Entanglement, as we are using it here, is closely related to the concepts of diffraction and intra-action. Theorizing entanglement moves us away from the more familiar “reflection” that seeks to capture something or someone that is assumed to already exist, toward a way of conceiving life as mobile and as mutually affective. To be “entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair.”⁵ A diffractive analysis “does not produce ‘the same’ displaced, as reflection and refraction do. Diffraction is a mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection or reproduction.”⁶ The methodology, the art-work, the memories, and each of the participants affect each other.

This article is thus an entangled composition made up of stories, images, conversations, artefacts, afterthoughts, theories, and multiple co-authored drafts, all gathered into an affective assemblage. That assemblage embodies the feel and the flow of the workshop and its aftermath, and it leaves space for the reader’s imaginings and becomings as part of the assemblage itself. Our project was inspired by Jody Thomson’s research with art therapists who specialize in end-of-life and palliative care.⁷ She was considering using collective biography in her research and was curious about what *work* art-making does, or might do, in the work of collective biography. So, we decided to experiment, choosing the related topic of “first memory of someone close to us dying,” setting out to work with our memory stories and the art-work we might make in relation to them. This present project, then, is a mapping of the interference of art-making in memory-work. In its tangible materiality, the art-making takes us in the Baradian direction of contesting those “unexamined habits of mind that grant language and other forms of representation more power in determining our ontologies than they deserve.”⁸ Our art-making became a diffractive encounter with our stories of death and dying.

Our methodological interventions included not only art-making, but also the audio-recording of our talk and video-recording of our art-making. Throughout this essay, we include moments from the unedited stream of our talk, in italics, in boxes. One such moment involved the fleshiness of memory.

What we are doing is not simply the embodiment of the experience from the past. It's coming back to the body, in the current moment. And if one writes in an embodied way, coming back to the body in the current moment, then the moment to catch in the transition to art-making is the moment at which those words come to rest in the body, so that you can then take them into the next art form. So that's the moment. . . the transition from the words coming back to rest in the body, or coming to life in our bodies now, and going into the art-making now.

We do not wish to set up a false binary here between words and art, as if one were epistemological and the other ontological. In our workshops words are voiced and fleshy—involving tongue, teeth, lips, vocal cords, lungs, and breath; they are vibrations in the chest and in the others' eardrums and in the tiny auditory bones in their middle ears; they invoke bursts of laughter, and tears. The words create vivid images, and feelings, and affect, moving between one and another.

The binary very quickly erodes for me between writing and art-making because to me they're both art, and they're both theory and they're both memories being translated into practice. . . they're different, they have a different materiality, different histories, traditions, discursive practices but they're not in opposition, and [I'm] wanting to explore the flow between the two, and what's the in-between.

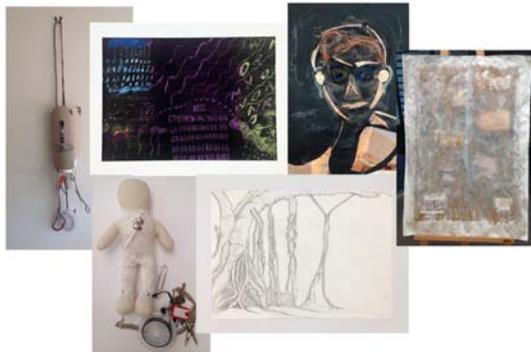
The *collectivity* of collective biography is vital to the methodology. Working together in the space of being listened to; being open to each other and to being affected by each other's memory stories; listening without judgement, but intent on knowing in one's own body the story that is being told,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

The *spacetime* that emerges through this collective, connected work often feels therapeutic. But collective biography is research, not therapy. We come together to enquire into a research question and in the process may also find our "selves" dissolved and reconstituted as other than we were before.

Research for a collaborative text is the focus, so that theoretical, political or social transformation through the production of an embodied text is something that one might aspire to rather than the personal transformation of each person in the collective biography, or even the transformation of the group of people and their relationships with each other, although that often happens.

The nature of the listening in collective biography is significant in its unfolding. Each attempts to listen to the other, seeking to know, in listening, and questioning, what it was to be in that moment; collectively coming to know each moment—each diffractive mo(ve)ment—as it is re-lived in telling and writing and reading out loud to each other.⁹ The mode of listening intra-acts with the mode of telling—cutting away stagnant thinking and clichés, explanations and moral judgements, telling and listening and re-telling from our particular bodies and the collective body, the swarm we are becoming. We are writing not to reveal an essential self that existed in the past, but to bring both self and other into the moment and movement, the mo(ve)ment, of being where present and past dissolve into the *spacetime* of working together. As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari say, there is already a great deal that has to be erased if new modes of thinking and being are to emerge:

The painter does not paint on an empty canvas, and neither does the writer write on a blank page; but the page or canvas is already so covered with preexisting, preestablished clichés that it is first necessary to erase, to clean, to flatten, even to shred, so as to let in a breath of air from the chaos that brings us the vision.¹⁰



Composite of art-making, first, second, third, and fourth stories. All images courtesy of the authors.

A breath of air that emerged from the chaos of this project arrived when one of us said, as a throwaway line, that she had thought of writing about the death of an animal. That provoked the telling of a story about one such death—a story offered in the spirit of such throwaway lines in the chaos of memories. But the others insisted that she write it down, that it held something that mattered, though no one knew what that was, yet.

The Lamb

Try feeding it with the bottle. It needs its mother's milk, so it'll probably die. If it starts scattling, you'll know it's dying. Just throw it out the back if that happens and let it die. Alone, sitting by the fire in my sister's farmhouse, holding the newborn lamb. It's scattling and it's shuddering all over. It's dying, not instantly dying, but slowly, painfully dying. I should put it out of its misery, but I don't know how.

I think of hitting it on the head to end its pain, but I don't know how to do it so that it works immediately. It could be a grotesque ending where I have to brutally hit it again and again. I can't bring myself to try. I feel futile and helpless. Hours pass sitting holding the lamb, talking to it, hoping desperately that it is comforted, quite sure if I were brave or competent enough I could have given it a swifter, kinder death.

Just throw it out the back my brother-in-law had said. Ignore its pain. He was a farmer. He saw death all the time. I longed for it all to be over; it took all day; holding, longing, futile. I was fourteen or fifteen years old.

COLLECTIVE BIOGRAPHY AS ASSEMBLAGE

Our written memories and our material art-works are always at risk of being treated as fixed objects. We prefer to think of them and work with them as an assemblage:

Assemblages are not simply objects or things, but qualities, speeds, flows and lines of force. Their character is defined not by what they are, but by what they can do, or become. And they are always in the process of becoming, not through an intention to arrive at a pre-determined end-point, but through multiple encounters with emergent multiplicities.¹¹

In this sense, art-making and writing is a performative practice of the not-yet-thought, or to put it another way, the “nonthought within thought.”¹² Our visual texts are materially affective, and intra-active performances of material enquiry. We probe our nonthought through our stories and our art-making,

putting imagination and creativity to work, in intra-action with conceptual analysis. We seek, in Jane Bennett's words "a shared, vital materiality."¹³

That vital materiality included the materials we worked with, which are themselves vital—alive, with their own agency in our assemblage. We were entangled in multiple agencies, including the force of the studio we worked in. It was a large, quiet, and very white room that offered the materials of learning and art. The shelves and drawers held paint, pastel, pencils and paper, sinks and laptops, objects new and old; and the workbenches were stained like colorful mosaics. There was a view through huge glass walls onto a grassy area, a road, a high fence, and an urban train line. The studio room assemblage held the absent present of our memories. And four humans, moving in different configurations throughout the day, moving in the spaces in between each other, the material landscape of the studio, and the wide-open space outside the wall of windows.

We began on the first day of this emergent art-based adaptation of collective biography by telling our stories. We listened closely to each other's stories, asking for clarification, following digressions, and exploring the interstices and omissions. We then separated to write our stories, setting out to record them in a way that was immediate, vividly imaginable, and visceral. Reading aloud our stories was, for some of us, highly emotional; for others, that mo(ve)ment would come later. After a break for lunch, we moved our inquiry into art-making, which we returned to continue, or write about, on the second day. Following the workshops, we each wrote our "afterthoughts" about the process.

I don't think that my art-making would be what it is, and have the power that it's had if we hadn't had the interaction around it, the questions that are asked, the comments that are made. . . so it's not just the art-making, it's not just the storytelling, it's the movement in between—the affect, or the words in between, that give it permission, or open up a different angle, or allow it to be seen differently, to take you to where you wouldn't have known how to go otherwise.

We had each lived in our memory—stories for decades, and the moments we related happened in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, about men with whom we had, and in some ways continue to have, a significant or intimate relationship. We were young women of about the same age then, young to be given responsibilities for which we were unprepared. The stories and artworks emerged from the chaotic assemblage of our storytelling/listening/writing/reading/making, entangled in moments of power and incapacity, control and helplessness, death and survival.

FIRST STORY

I am astride you on the bed and you are bucking beneath me. I jab the needle in again and again. They ask me later in the hospital about those bruises. Our six-year-old daughter had come to tell me you needed a wee. I found you mid-seizure. . . *MOVE, do something!*

Don't you *dare* die like this! *JAB*. Why are you fighting me, pushing me away? *JAB*. Not here, *not now*. *JAB*.

This is not the peaceful, comfortable death I have been planning. Something huge has changed. This hasn't happened before. I am barely holding it together, exhausted by lack of sleep, and drained in every possible way by this year-long responsibility. To you, to the kids, to the endless visitors who move about so carefully in our home, trying to be helpful, yet in reality, adding to my burden of care. No one ever mentioned you might fit, and they—my sisters, the doctors and nurses—*they knew!* You are no longer passively moving toward death, speaking gibberish, swallowing whatever I put in your mouth. You are violently taking control by being out of control—yet you are still my responsibility, and we are doing this violence together. So I jab you with Valium and call for an ambulance as my doctor-sister, on the phone from London, suggests. I move quickly, yet continue the façade of calm confidence so I won't frighten the kids any more than necessary, from wherever they are silently watching.

The hospital doctor tells me that you will not wake up, and that you will die in three days. I can hear nothing else, and float in this collapse of our agreed denial strategy. I want you home. I tell you that I have booked an ambulance for tomorrow morning. As I leave, despite having been in a coma for two days, you raise your arm in farewell.

A young policeman, banging on my front door, wakes me from a drug-induced sleep in the middle of the night. "The hospital has been trying to reach you." I slam the door and call the now-familiar number. I am furious and powerless—the nurse refuses to tell me whether you have already died. *Maybe I can get there in time.* . . I hear myself chanting *wait for me my love, wait for me*, as I drive like a lunatic with two very frightened little girls in the backseat. I'm twenty minutes too late. I slide my hands under you, to hold you, and to hold what remains of your warmth, under the sheets.

I would have stayed with you last night if I had understood—if I had understood that you were about to take responsibility for your own dying, and that your farewell wave was forever.



Art-making, first story

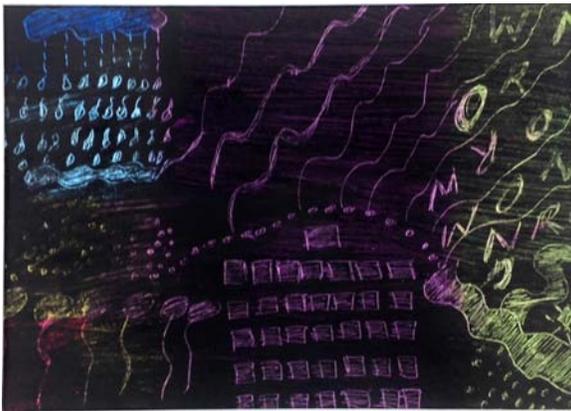
I bind a dolly with wire, twisting it around her body and tightly around her neck, arms, and feet, immobilizing her. She is trapped, vulnerable, and powerless. I hide the wire, and what it has done to her body and her freedom, mummifying her with pretty, feminine lace. She dangles from a hangman's rope. I hide how pathetic she looks with an open-ended box. She has become "it," unrecognizable, hidden, disempowered in every way. All that is visible is the materiality of what binds and what weighs it down. It hangs on the kitchen wall overnight. It bothers my sleep, like the startling question I was asked in the workshop, "Why did you choose such ugly things?"

I must attend to this right now. The story-wire of my own making has to come off. The wire has twisted it out of shape, hidden beneath the pretty strangling lace of acceptability, competence, and responsibility—of and toward others and myself, buried deeply within its flesh. Unwinding the wired assumptions, expectations, and shackles of others in deconstructing and deconstructing "it" releases "her," in a movement both backwards, closer to who and what she was before he died, and forwards, to what she might now become. The hangman's noose from which all else dangled is cast aside. Everything tied to the wire comes off, is undone, untwisted, and laid out on the kitchen table in pieces. She lies naked, waiting for the possibility of a different, not-ugly-thing story.

She no longer wants or needs the wire, or the rope, and re-thinks the lace she has stepped into as power. She understands that she is still tied by the weight of responsibility, yet thinks excitedly of the day she might reach down for those rusty scissors and snip the whole damn lot off.

SECOND STORY

We were best friends—knew the best, worst of each other and accepted—understood. We were at a restaurant for dinner—lots of others. Talking, laughing, drinking. He told me, quietly, that he had HIV and that he was dying. I focus and tell him all the things he might be able to—to find out more, to get help, advice, miracle drugs. Too late. He’s done all that. I should have known. He told me he wanted me to know—not the rest of his friends yet—he needed some time—he wants things to be normal. In this restaurant of talking, laughing, drinking, and loud music, we are in a quiet, intense bubble—everything else is blurred. I tell him I understand. The bubble fades and we are with the group—talking, laughing, drinking. Within three months he is dying. I see him at the hospital—he says it will be soon—he doesn’t have long to live. Maybe two days—he wants a beer. The next day I take him a non-alcoholic beer. I ask him what he wants to happen at the funeral. He is clear—“not a dry eye in the house.” We laugh. I had my job/task/responsibility. I can do this. At the funeral I am at the podium, am talking about him—his gifts, his life, his work, his friendships. I have tears running down my face—I look around—everyone is crying. I want to laugh out loud and shout “Mission accomplished—this one is for you.” But that would not be okay. It would upset others—so I don’t. Controlled. Performing emotions in responsible ways. After the funeral and the talking and the sadness, I drive to the after-party. I find myself driving up the “wrong-way” entrance onto the expressway. The “Do Not Enter” sign was invisible to me. I do a controlled u-turn on the expressway, safely, responsibly.



Art-making, second story

*When I look at this. . . controlled on top
Underneath freedoms?
Wrong wrongs?
Factory of death
Sadness
Happiness
At the same time*

I need the paper—the right paper—at least 130gsm (how do I know about gsm?—I always say I have a stationery fetish—how, when, did that become important to me? A4, not too little, not too big, just right—the usual size. I start with the oil crayons. In my head is a plan—the time he told me about being HIV positive and that nothing could be done; the talk about him at the funeral; the after-party; and?? Wasn't sure what then. The colors “matter”—purple, red, green, blue. I love the feeling of pushing the oil crayons—the way they cover, the thickness of the bits that come off and are re-blended with my finger. Then to obliterate it all with the black ink—making sure it is all covered. Letting it dry gives me time to think of the narrative. I start the scratching. Tight, controlled shapes for the funeral, freed by the smoke lines from the crematorium. Balloons at the dinner—fun turned to tight intensity—the cloud over everything and the “wrong”—the wrong way, getting wrong ideas of “control,” being a thing. Tied up in the binaries, I finish my art. I leave it done/undone. After a few minutes, I go back to it—is there a right/wrong way of the story to flow? Does it need to be “followed”? I attempt to have it be able to be read upside down. It doesn't really work—but what does that mean? I scratch in a diamond from the ring his sister bought me as he asked her to get me a gift. Incongruous—misreading the relationship. Amused, I smile—he would have laughed so much. It's there now. He's there now.

THIRD STORY

Why is it *her* job to stop them falling? Birds from nests; the woman who teetered for what seemed like hours on the edge of the cafe balcony on the fourth floor of the art gallery cafe before she jumped. Suspended between life and death, before and after the fall.

Blood, feathers, memories lie broken. Slip through her fingers. Slippery red when fresh, then sticky, brown, and drying in the cracks.

One crack opens into 1993, a few weeks before he died. The hospice bed; stiff white sheets. His arms freckled and pale. His hands, the fine bird bones showing through transparent skin. She holds one hand, her daughter the other, on either side of him, while he murmurs at first indistinguishably, *gedaga gedaga gedaga*.

And then in a rising chant: *gedaga gedaga gedagen gedagen, gedagun, gedagun getta gun getta gun get a gun*. . . . Hallucinating. Begging. For hours. Hands like claws and the marks still here.

Where did you go when they burned you up? What is left in that narrow drawer in the crematorium wall? The dead are filed there but you won't lie down. Why leave so much unfinished? She mourns you still, our daughter, this time each year, lonelier still if I forget.

Sydney was burning as you were dying. Ash falling. Curling red beard the color of her hair. Our daughter teetered on the edge for years while I clutched at her trailing sadness.

Sydney was burning as you were dying, ringed by bushfire as your ex-Air-Force older brother flew in. You brightened up, waiting for him. Asked the nurse for a sheet of paper. Said you wanted to write him a letter. Pulled out your penis and pissed out the acrid words. Unreadable and clear as liquid sunlight spilling into your last hours.

All of us went home except your lover. He called me at first light. I brought your daughter to see you dead. Did you ever think you would have three grandchildren, you dear old queer?

I tell you what, tomorrow I'm seeing the girls off on a boat at Circular Quay. Jess, twenty-one, fourth-year university student, taller than you, and gold-brown. Louella, black hair, white skin, blue eyes, and turning eighteen during the birthday cruise that her big sister saved for.

So climb out of that narrow brass drawer in the brick wall and come to wave goodbye. Sail out through the Heads one last time, salt on your skin and in your



Art-making, third story

nostrils, sun on your freckled arms. Live for—in—this moment. You'll be dead a long time.

The Cover-up Reveals

This needs lots of space. Need to work large. A counterforce of resistance tries to ease my pain with the formality of an easel. The large paper is too thin and won't be enough to hold. Try to draw but dissatisfied with the lines. The charcoal capturing and releasing what escapes me, him burning up and vaporizing. Resistance to writing about art-making. Why? Just want to make. Cut out and stick on cut out and stick on compulsively. Write with magazine cut-outs glue shining silver wash washes over washes away purifies eliminates no illuminates the savage rage and sorrow with and against the brutal fact of death that is so thinly described as grief. Right side up is wrong and blocks it in. Turn the work upside-down and doorways open. Resistance to writing about art-making. Why? Just want to make. Write with magazine cut-outs glue shining silver wash washes over washes away purifies eliminates no illuminates the savage rage and sorrow with and against the brutal fact of death that is so thinly described as grief. Turn it upside-down like Alice falling shrinking growing memory escapes its bottle.



Art-making, third story

Face up

This time draw on black with sepia copper wire raffia shells dead leaves a peacock feather eye with shapes cut out from that same home building magazine. A hybrid of dead and alive of him and me staring back from the black ground the gouged eye that worms cannot eat away love memory anger. This one speaks by forcing the wor(l)d out through dead pressed-leaf lips.

FOURTH STORY

“So it’s like black death when I walk in that door. You’ll never see me again.”

He had tried to strangle me, powerful hands around my throat until I blacked out. He dumped me on the bench by the stove that I’d desperately been trying to light to cook his breakfast, which had to be on the table by 7:45 every morning. He was pacing through the house; I guessed he was searching for the key to the chest with the butchering implements in it. The cleaver and the sharp knives. He’d asked me to hide the key because he wouldn’t be safe having access to them. He couldn’t find it. I’d hidden it well. In a packet of Bex, up high in the back of the cupboard in the laundry.

The three children were waiting quietly in their bedroom. They knew not to make a noise when he was about. My brother was asleep in the spare room. I concentrated on not thinking about the Bex packet in case the image of it moved from my mind to his.

He packed some underclothes into his briefcase, and into his shirt pocket he placed the sympathetic concerned letter his mother had recently written to me in response to my telling her about his increasing violence. Her letter had infuriated him, and as for me, I didn’t have “the guts” he said, that he needed in a wife.

Now he stood at the front door, flinging my own words back at me, leaving me in no doubt that his death was my responsibility. The letter in his pocket would let his mother know she must share the blame; she had betrayed him by writing to me.

He drove into town, to the insurance office, and cancelled his life insurance policy, took all his money out of his bank account and sent it to his father. He bought a bicycle tube, and then he drove to Sydney.

I rang his mother and told her I could do no more. I was exhausted. I had nothing left to give him, I said. I could take care of him no longer. I told her he was on his way to Goulburn, where he would attempt to kill the two screws he hated. He would then kill himself. It was a well-rehearsed story.

The alternative had been that he would kill all of us, but that was no longer the story he was playing out.

She didn't believe me. She said he'd be back. I was overreacting. She didn't see any need to do anything. I told her I could do no more; I was handing her the chance to intervene if she wished. Poor woman, she would never forgive herself for not taking me seriously.

He stayed overnight in Sydney with his aunt, who didn't guess anything was wrong. He drove to Goulburn the next day. He didn't find the screws and kill them, but he did kill himself, with my sleeping pills, which he had confiscated, and the bicycle tube stretched from the exhaust pipe to the hatchback door on a lonely dirt road called Mummel Road.

Late that night two policemen came to my door to tell me he was dead. I was waiting for them. I asked if anyone else had died in Goulburn that day and they told me no, and I said "Thank God for that." I didn't ask them in, and nor did they ask to come in like they do in the soaps these days.

My brother, newly graduated from law school, sat up with me all night, pondering the question of whether I was guilty. The prison system had handed him into my care. It had been my job to support him as he made his way back into life on the outside. I had failed the task they had given me. My brother questioned me on all I had done and all I might have done if I could have found the right person to help, and at the end of the night he decided I was not guilty. An incredible gift, though the words I'd spoken weighed heavily on my heart.



Art-making, fourth story

This drawing follows on from my earlier writing about his death and an art work I had done recently. I had written about my marriage being like the rock that the tree roots grow around; the rock always there, but the tree finding its way to live. In the recent art work, I'd wanted a Moreton Bay fig tree that would grow its roots around the box/coffin/marriage and seal it shut forever. But I couldn't see how to do it, and that art work had taken off in another direction.

So now, I came back to the fig tree. I had spent time looking at the trees on my usual walk around the harbor and taking photos of them. I had a drawing by Lloyd Rees of a Moreton Bay fig tree that I had pasted up in my kitchen, which I loved because of the gorgeous fleshiness of the trunk and branches. I had an image of a tree in my mind that I realized was a tree I had been drawing every time I had doodled on the margin of the page in all the boring meetings I had been to over the decades. They were usually thinner trees though, and there had been no rock.

My tree is made up of all those images, bits of the photos and the drawing by Lloyd Rees that helped me see how to get the fleshiness into the trunk and branches. I began with the rock, then the roots that grew round it, then the trunk and its branch, and finally the aerial roots. The roots were important, as they were to grow around the rock, and contain it, gracefully. The long branch that grew out across the top of the page was held up by the aerial roots that grew down out of the branch, containing the rock and supporting the life that grew. Those roots are no longer in the margins, but in the center of the page—they have become the central and centering matter. The twisted roots reminded me of my plaits when I was a kid. The roots in the photos I had taken surprised me when I studied them in detail as there were animated human-like figures among them, and I copied those details onto the page as part of bringing the tree to life/my life.

The hard, relentless work of the roots in holding up the branch, in supporting the trunk, the life, the life that will go on growing in spite of the rock, bring tears to my eyes. So strong and solid and yet so transient, so fragile. I could rub it all out, but I won't, of course. I find the image I have created on the page affects me, holds me; it makes a curious statement that I don't fully understand.

I have not, until now, through this workshop, been able to openly own those words, "it feels like black death when you walk in that door." But now I can own them as a powerful statement of what my world and my children's

world had become, terrorized by a man who was brutal and controlling and quite mad.

MATERIAL-DISCURSIVE AFTERTHOUGHTS

We are entangled in multiple agencies. In that multiplicity of forces, our experience of helplessness is palpable—and so is our strength. Critically, if we just had the stories we might have concluded that we were powerless over death in multiple ways, which the story of the lamb encapsulated perfectly. But the art-making offered a different focus. It made visible the weight of those forces that demanded more of us than we could bear. The matter and mattering of those forces, in all their illegibility, could emerge diffractively entangled with our own emergent agency and life force—the vibrant mattering that carried us through the death of the intimate other.

There were several pivotal moments in our collective thinking about death. Moments that became, or made possible, transformative shifts in the embodied natures of our stories, folding back between the material and the discursive in our art-making and afterthoughts. For one of us:

There were two inextricable mo(ve)ments. The first was the challenging comment from our collaborative thinking about art-making “Why have you used such ugly things?” The nonhuman others became powerfully affective in their embodied histories: keys, wire, tape, mask, scissors, lace, rope, chain. I hadn’t realized that they were ugly to others. They were things I was tied to and couldn’t let go of—things that bound and strangled me—story—things I had taken up as my responsibility. My overnight thinking/dreaming space enabled the second, extended transformational shift. Together, they became a powerful material-discursive movement—without the challenge of collaborative and emergent listening, without the materiality of art, and without the spacetime to undo and re-do “mystory,” they would have stagnated as a story of helpless responsibility, and not shifted to be-at-the-same-time one of courage and resilience.

She/me/we in all her rich materiality now stands on my mantelpiece, leaning against the wall—the weights are still tied to her but no longer weigh her down; they rest comfortably at her feet.

One of us asked at one point, provocatively, “so why is dying not okay?” evoking an emotional storm of answers about it being far from okay.

There's something about the transition from life to death, that's a really, really difficult transition and we're hovering around it, trying to make it okay, but it's never okay, it's not okay, even if the person who's dying accepts it, and maintains a sense of humor. . . of having to do the right thing, but that right thing can be too hard. . . "so why is dying not okay?" . . . to give up life is a terrible thing. . . it's terrible for everybody. . . choosing to go is a terrible choice to have to make. . . we're all going to die, eventually. . . well, that's totally unreasonable. . . this death business, to do with life, is not reasonable. . . it's not okay, it's not an okay thing to happen. I feel very strongly that death itself, as a so-called natural process, is fucked. For me, there is nothing after death. . . that's not reasonable, for me. . . it's not okay. . . who the fuck came up with that process?

An irreverent “pointy” humor worked to underscore this unreasonableness, restoring a sense of agency by disrupting and diffracting the discourse of inevitability.¹⁴ Another provocative and related comment about premature endings came at the end of our first day when the first storyteller said, “so do you [still] want to come back tomorrow?” The response was startled humor: “You can’t say that! You can’t just cut a workshop in half! I just take back what she said!”

Not only “not halved,” but indefinitely multiplied, the collective biography was not over “once and for all” at the end of the second day. Its *space-time* continued into our afterthoughts, into our emails, and into our circulating drafts of this manuscript; it continued into readings by reviewers, into re-revisions, and it will continue into readings of the published essay, into conversations that spin off into future collective biographies of which we are/are not part.

Thoughts that drifted to the surface out of the chaos of the art-making moved into our afterthinking:

*Every death a re-hearse-al;
I am after all a material girl in a material world;
We are wor(l)d-making;
We are separated every day from writing and art by mindless, driven, drivers of
bureaucracy—this is an everyday series of little deaths;*

The new materialism is very old. A stripping away of layers of separation. A doorway. Into the dissolution of self; the binary of life and death under erasure;

I love the viscerality, even the literalness of making—under the eraser/erasure for instance.

Out of time. Left wanting more. Is that what happens at the point of an untimely death?

When those mo(ve)ments come with a rush of breath, who knows what propelled them?

The aha mo(ve)ment is radically performative—bumping into bouncing off intra-acting with some indeterminate thing or agency, changed, catapulted randomly into an unanticipated line of flight. Not refracted as light through a crystal, not the crystallization of awareness. . . . Just as light passing through a diffraction apparatus—squeezing through a narrow aperture, spilling over an edge, broken up, thrown, spread—is no longer the same, becomes unrecognizable to its (imaginary) “self.”

Sounds a bit like dying/becoming; no wonder death is troubling. . .

Such diffractive and intra-active questions circulated around this collective biography and will continue to circulate. They are the scissors that cut away—sh(r)ed—“preexisting, preestablished clichés;”¹⁵ and simultaneously they are the glue connecting affect, thought and bodies to each other and to nonhuman agents. “We” are human and nonhuman, and the dissolution of that binary. What we are becoming, through this expanded sense of “us,” can “do theory.”¹⁶ The theory emergent from collective biography is thus in an important sense, a collaborative art work made by and of multiple human and nonhuman agencies. *We do theory / make art / do art / make theory* together with each other, materials, memories, stories, places, practices, and other theories, as the material and discursive nesting and intra-action.

. . . every *thing* can be alive, and everything that is alive does theory.

“Spinning off in any direction is neither theorizing nor viable; it loses the thread, the touch of entangled beings (be)coming together/apart. All life forms (including inanimate forms of liveliness) do theory. The idea is to

do collaborative research, to be in touch, in ways that enable responsibility” (Barad, “On Touching,” 12).

We might add that everything that is lively does “art.”¹⁷

One of us wrote of the art-making process and the intra-action of the vulnerability and helplessness of the lamb story with the strength that emerged in each of our stories:

I had brought my own materials, gathered the night before as I paced my apartment, sleepless, as the image of the Moreton Bay fig tree I would draw lit up my neurons, taking hold of me, pulling me out of sleep. By morning I was so sick of it I thought I would do something else entirely, something yet to emerge, from our stories and conversations, emergent in the listening and telling and writing and making.

By the time the space for art-making came around, I had decided to stay with the tree and its roots growing around the rock. Not being skilled in art-making, there is a challenge in putting pencil to paper—I concentrate like a child who is learning to write, who wants to write a story, and has to focus on how to spell and how to form the letters and how to make the space in between the words. Just so, it is that kind of a challenge to bring the image that has been growing in my mind to the paper.

My art work was already about being strong and responsible even though it began with the rock. The transition that came about in our talk was already on the page, along with the enormous effort involved in growing strong and supporting my life, sending roots down from the trunk and a branch to support my life and the lives of my children. I had made a balanced structure, a structure with endless potential to grow in different directions. It arrived, in a sense, before me, before I arrived at the tears and the ownership of strength, not only now, but also retrospectively in my marriage.

Drawing the tree was an emergent process. While I had known I would draw a rock and roots that grew around it, and I knew the trunk would go up the left margin of the page, and a branch would reach out across the top of the page, I had no idea that the aerial roots would become so powerful, enabling an emergent sense of the hard work I had done to hold up my life. I didn’t think of that, or plan that, or “know” that’s what I was doing—rather, I allowed or enabled it to emerge onto the page—not knowing or wondering to what extent our conversations had sent me off in that direction. The process of drawing was, as I remember it, totally focused and wordless, focused on each detail and how to bring it alive on the page. The words now, interpreting the roots, came out of our

conversations, which in turn sprang out of our storytelling and listening and writing and reading and making.

(IN)CONCLUSION

We have attempted to give a diffractive account of thinking our stories together, not in search of reductive themes, but by attuning ourselves to patterns of difference in thinking our stories, writing, and art-making through one another. We sought different colored threads in the “entangled nature of differences *that matter*,”¹⁸ and how matter *matters* in its relationality with discourse. We paid particular attention to “the ways in which such artistic work intra-acts with the entangled agencies at play.”¹⁹ We followed the threads that held the seams of our material–discursive texts together to think about *what was asked of us*—what we accepted or what became our responsibility—as young women in those fleshy moments. We collectively questioned and came to different understandings about discursive constructions of control and vulnerability, power and powerlessness, responsibility and irresponsibility, solemnity and irreverence. This thread wandered *textually* through our thinking–writing, and *texturally* through our thinking–art-making.

In thinking the stories together, diffractively, we came to new understandings that performatively, and dramatically, reworked the spaces between power and helplessness. Through our collective conversation in response to the memories we each told, we realized that the selves we depicted were tortured by the responsibility they had taken—they were stories of how we had barely mustered the strength to meet our responsibility toward the other in death. We were at times making ourselves diminutive, placing a great deal of power in the (male) other in whose death we were involved, yet all the while telling stories of enormous strength and competence. We were not telling straightforward stories of having taken responsibility and control, but stories of almost not coping, of almost dying ourselves, even though each of us had coped and been powerful in extraordinary ways. We were giving so much weight to the other that our own agency was disappearing in the telling of it. But we caught ourselves at it as we listened to each other, and our art work picked up and extended the entangled forces that made us both powerful and powerless.

For each of us, our story had lingered in our lives for a very long time. The talk of power and control and responsibility came and went around the

table, and our articulation became a mo(ve)ment, in different ways, toward a re-assembling of force. The fourth storyteller wrote in her afterthoughts:

The conversation amazed me; here was not a listening that found fault in me for uttering those words, but a telling back to me of all I had told about the terror of my life up to that point. I could claim those words, not as shameful, but as the words of a woman standing up for herself and her children who were every day both terrorized and prevented from escaping. It was really like black death, they reminded me. Collectively the assemblage we had generated together laid claim to the words as truth.

When I read out those last few lines, and started crying, I was taken by surprise. The tears were like a dam bursting, which I urgently needed to bring back under control, as I found the crying unbearable. Yet the release was there, the words had been re-spoken and without shame.

Tears and laughter operated powerfully, entangled with each other in this collective biography, burning through sedimented beliefs, releasing long-held shame, and dispelling the finality of death. In order that death does not get the chance to reassert itself in the final mo(ve)ments of this essay as the “absolute” we strongly contend that it is not, we give laughter the (pen)ultimate word:

*When you're cremated, they take all the guilt bits off the coffin—they're not going to burn. . . **ah, gee, is that where all the guilt goes. . . the “final” absolution. . .** ■*

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NOTES

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6. Karen Barad, "Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart," *Parallax* 20, no. 3 (2014): 172.
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8. Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," 802.
9. Susanne Gannon and Bronwyn Davies, "Postmodern, Post-structural, and Critical Theories," in *The Handbook of Feminist Research*, ed. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage), 65–91.
10. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 204.
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12. Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* 59.
13. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 14.

14. Cath Laws, "Re-thinking 'Pointiness': Special Education Interrupted," in *Interrupting the Psy-Disciplines in Education*, ed. Eva Bendix Petersen and Zsuzsa Millei (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 129–44.
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10 original emphasis, <http://journals.gold.ac.uk/index.php/atol/article/view/437/pdf>.
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