

DANCING ON THE RUSTY BROWN CARPET: A PLAY OR POST-QUALITATIVE ENQUIRY

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The closing words of Jeannie Wright's online Lapidus Living Research Community Community (LLRC) talk and workshop in October 2020 was an exhortation to us, CWTP researchers and enquirers, to collaborate and to dance! This came at the end of an hour's exploration of autoethnographic research methods around feminism and protest. I was

relatively new field of CWTP and that rigorous, disciplined academic research framed within recognisable methodologies is contributing to how writing for wellbeing is viewed and respected in the academic arena. Having made myself quite unwell completing my MSc research dissertation in CWTP in 2015 (the irony), and read many dense and highly



introduced that day to post-qualitative enquiry - a radically new way of exploring issues.

Post-qualitative enquiry is predominantly creative. It by-passes traditional humanist social science research methodologies to such an extent that it may not be recognised as research, at first glance.

At one point, Jeannie asked us whether we might prefer to frame our enquiry through broadcasting a poem, a play, a short story, than to create a published academic paper. Which would reach more people and impact more on their lives? I have always viewed Grayson Perry's work as robust, creative inquiry and admired his wide ranging exploration. It has challenged whole swathes of human behaviour and assumptions.

I believe that all research is vital in our

accomplished research papers during and since, I am drawn more to experiencing this new-to-me way of inquiring - the post-qualitative sort.

Later on the day I joined the LLRC, I watched Fiona Hamilton's play *Dancing On The Rusty Brown Carpet* with a live audience on Zoom. Among many other things it made me value the spirit of collaboration and the pain-relieving qualities of dance. I watched it with two others and sofa-dancing ensued. The next day I saw the performance a second time on my own. I have been dancing to the playlist ever since, continuing to muse on elements in the play. But it also opened my eyes to what happens when we press 'pause' instead of reacting to questions as we are expected to. It demonstrated what can happen when we take

a different route through a power dynamic. What happens if we refuse to participate in a lop-sided, traditional format of 'I ask you questions and you give me data, in words'?

For me, this play was also a new and creative experience of Zoom. As we could 'chat' to those involved afterwards, it felt like we had been admitted to the green room party. The play, designed for the stage and adapted for online showing during lockdown, reached over 80 households in each performance. There were sometimes two or three people in each mini-audience. The feedback and conversations at the end showed that it had engaged, intrigued, affected and involved its audience. I recognised quite a few people from our Lapidus cohort but others, from different backgrounds, were present too.

Fiona based the character of Gemma on the real-life circumstance of Victoria Wells. The drama is structured around a playlist that Victoria used to dance to and to help with operations and recovery. Victoria presented a workshop jointly with Stephanie Parker at the last Creative Bridges conference. Victoria had displayed the postcards she had written and drawn while experiencing varying degrees of physical pain. She has experienced hip

ourselves in these.

In the play, Gemma (played by Laila Diallo) steers her interactions with Alex (Joel Phillimore), a researcher, away from a traditional format of one-way interviewing, to a conversation where both parties are equal; both disclose in ways that cannot fit into tick-boxes because both of them use story and answers that defy and avoid the question 'why?'. Actors read from the script during rehearsal sessions which were recorded on Zoom. They performed in their own homes without having met each other in person. Technical producer Luke Emmett used software to adjust the Zoom recordings following directions from Fiona. A 'Zoom-like' appearance was retained while effects were enhanced such as screens shrinking or expanding, actors appearing in different places, audio only, silence – I really liked the silences. The technical craft wrought by Luke makes the whole thing feel coherent, fluid and creatively alive. Limitations of space and set design enhance the 'playness' of the play and also the playfulness. For example when Gemma describes the sensation of leaving her body, to avoid the pain, the slow, synchronised tilt of both her and Alex's cameras take us all into a

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dysplasia from birth and undergone three rounds of operations. Pain is something that she knows a lot about. Fiona has dramatised this story in a way that merges her own poetic way of exploring subjects with a compelling representation of the way that Victoria approaches sharing her story, including with health professionals. The result, I felt, was a playfully challenging, poignant and courageous call to all of us; a call not to underestimate our insights into our particular set of circumstances and the specific and personally tailored resources we may have devised to support

levitated perspective. The two use their profiles and full frontal facial shots to show when they are in interviewer/interviewee mode and when they have broken out of this and are actually negotiating those roles. The changing arrangements of the Zoom boxes on the screen influence the narrative in a subtle way that I was more aware of on second viewing. This is particularly effective when the third character, a therapist (played by Christina Shewell), is referred to. As Gemma recounts going under the anaesthetic her camera box shrinks in successive clicks, then disappears. Simple

drawn animation (created by Olivia Bailward) in a separate box serves to convey other less literal aspects of the stories being shared.

An especially lyrical part of the play for me is the imagined final letter from Gemma's surgeon which articulates in words what he had assented to through his actions. He acknowledges that 'a song is a neurological event', and that patients do have an emotional and therefore important relationship with music. During Gemma's surgery he had foregone his heavy metal music for her very specific and tailored music programme. The playlist is humorous as well as profound, and began, as Gemma is being wheeled towards

that her body is allergic to the metal implants. She experiences chronic fatigue and shingles. 'It was a fucking mess' she recounts to Alex. At one point a palimpsest of pulsed phrases and words overlay each other - 'you're sharp, you're smart, you're smart, you sting', addressing, it seems, pain itself. This serves to push the limited medium of Zoom in another dimension and included the the voice of Fiona, amongst others'.

My partner commented that what he liked was that the play was not preachy. The humanity of the two protagonists were seen in contrast to each other, but also - eventually - in contrast to systems that reduce us to ticks in



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Photo by Johnny McClung on Unsplash

the operation room, with *You Can't Touch This* by MC Hammer. The list includes *Lose Yourself To Dance* and *Get Lucky* by Daft Punk, Shakira's *Hips Don't Lie*, *Scar Tissue* by the Red Hot Chilli Peppers, and *Shake It Up* by Taylor Swift. When Gemma requests her music being played, she says that 'it allows me to escape between pulses of pain'. She asks for other things too, such as that her feet are held by someone throughout the surgery. She is told that she would not know if anyone was holding her feet as she would be unconscious. She persists in her request and is granted it. Gemma tells her surgeon that she appreciates that 'it may not be the norm (to do these things) but it's my norm'.

Snatches of the song lyrics amplify moments in the play's narrative including, poignantly, *You Came In Like A Wrecking Ball* (by Mylie Cyrus) when Gemma discovers after the surgery

tick boxes, patient reference numbers, data and specimens. This was shown through the unlocking of their stories. Gemma's centres around her hips and predominantly physical pain. She encourages Alex to share his story with her. When he tells her about his work as a researcher, she said 'that's your background, what's your foreground?'. She persistently refuses to play a one-sided story-telling role. Alex is finally able to tell her his story using metaphor to talk about a significant period of emotional and mental pain, of which he is evidently deeply ashamed. This is a powerful revelation and opens up whole new areas of thought around relative pain and the origins of different sorts of pain and how they can overlap. For example, persistent chronic physical pain is potentially depressing; conversely, mental and emotional pain can produce bodily pain and limitation.

The play ends with what I feel good research often throws up – more questions. Alex says of their interaction 'it touched me – something changed'. Their shared experience leads him to reveal to Gemma that 'it's not about answers'.

Questions from the audience at the end of the play covered curiosity about the technical challenges of filming during lockdown; creative enquiry – whether Fiona had started with the playlist and fitted the story around these or vice versa; people were curious to know whether there were surgeons and doctors in the audience (there were); people also wanted to comment on how the play had explored the differences and overlaps between physical pain and emotional and mental pain / depression.

Another example of the creative use of Zoom that I know of is the BBC series called Staged, which trades quite a lot on the status of two well-known actors experiencing lockdown and the cancellation of the production of Hamlet in the West End. It was light, with the occasional profound insight, and was filmed straight to the Zoom camera. I have seen some very beautiful collaborations involving dancers and musicians on multiple screens, performing single pieces of music.

Our Zoom host, Caleb Parkin, noted wistfully that he was missing dancing with large numbers of people. I agree to an extent and also feel inclined to take up Gemma's implicit invitation. She had long outgrown the tiny physical space of the 'rusty brown fake wool carpet' upon which she had danced in the early years of her conversations with pain. It remained for her, and by the end of the play, to Alex, as a symbol. One could dance anywhere, with or without other people, and 'shake it up'.