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Productive discomfort: negotiating totality in collaborative digital narrative practice

Abstract:

Working as a collaborative writing team, there are many different power structures at play influencing what stories can be told and how they are told. Creative practitioners must negotiate these power structures if they are to work productively as collaborators. Looking at the collaborative process through a Levinasian lens provides new insights into the complex nature of how power structures affect the narratives produced by collaborative teams and how creative practitioners can work towards more ethical and productive collaboration.

This study examines the process of producing the digital narrative, *We See Each Other*, as part of a collaborative writing team from my perspective as one of the creative practitioners. Interview and field note data is drawn upon to analyse the ways in which Levinas's notions of totality and infinity played out in the creative process revealing that productive collaborative relationships are formed when collaborators experience transcendent encounters with one another. Analysis of the creative process also reveals the often-blurred line between totality and infinity, making working toward these transcendent encounters challenging. Working towards ethical collaboration therefore involves learning to work alongside totality, a process conceptualised in this paper as 'productive discomfort'.

Biographical note:

Freya Wright-Brough is a digital narrative practitioner who completed her PhD in 2019 examining the opportunities and challenges for digital narrative practitioners to resist narrow representations of people from refugee backgrounds. She has worked as a writer for a production company and her work, the 24-hour writing project, won the "Most Innovative New Project or Work by Young Person" prize at the Express Media Awards. In 2014, she gave a TEDx talk about writing a story every day for a year online and more recently she expanded a digital history project about the history of women's football.

Keywords: Levinas – the Other – refugee – digital narratives – collaboration

Introduction

From 2017 to 2018 I worked collaboratively with four writers from refugee backgrounds to create the digital narrative *We See Each Other*. We experimented with digital narrative form in an attempt to create a space in which the writers were able to tell any narrative they wanted to their audience, unrestricted by the homogenous and totalising narratives usually told about them (Grove & Zwi 2006; Hightower 2014), or the 'refugee' migration narratives they are often asked to tell (Dennis 2013: 361). This process required us to work towards ethical encounters with each other, though attempting to do so was often challenging. As collaborators, many factors affected the experience of how we worked together and what stories could be told within the project. The challenge in attempting to avoid reproducing oppressive power structures in collaborative writing teams and in attempting to prevent those structures from inhibiting the creative freedom of collaborators is a task many creative teams face.

For our collaborative writing team, it was necessary to negotiate this challenge because many people who have been forced to migrate 'anticipate the end of their "refugeeness"' (Ludwig 2013: 8) but are still asked to tell their migration narrative repeatedly (Dennis 2013: 361). People may anticipate this end to 'refugeeness' because '[b]y expecting widespread trauma, Australia effectively views a large section of the refugee population as impaired; as such, they are not expected to participate in Australia' (Neikirk 2017: 65). The result of such expectations is that people from refugee backgrounds are further alienated from mainstream Australia and their capacity to participate in society as 'political, economic and social actors' is diminished (Neikirk 2017: 65). Attempting to avoid collaboration based on narrow expectations of what stories the other collaborators could or should tell because of their background was a central aim of the project. The opposing forces of reductive narratives and freedom from reductive narratives are two concepts that have been extensively explored by Emmanuelle Levinas. In this paper, I use the Levinasian notions of totality and infinity to analyse the collaborative process of making *We See Each Other*.

Levinas (1969) is concerned with the ethics of encountering the Other. For him, attempts to know the Other remove them from alterity (1969: 196) thus linking attempts to know the Other with possession (Raviv 2019: 67) and constituting his notion of 'totality'. Levinas (1969) also articulates 'infinity' as a more ethical engagement with the Other, where the subject acknowledges the Other's alterity by giving up their 'inherent tendency to force [their] own concepts onto what is different from [them]' (Raviv 2019: 67). He suggests that a key part of these more ethical encounters is welcoming the Other's expression in conversation (Levinas 1969: 51). While Levinas himself argued that art could not play a part in ethical encounter, there have been many scholars who convincingly argue that it can (Robbins 1995; Renov 2004; Cooper 2006; Saxton 2007; Nowak 2010; Burke 2011; Nash 2011; Burvill 2013; Balfour 2013; Baek 2016; Colusso 2017; Raviv 2019).

Levinas (1969: 227) locates transcendence in the saying, rather than the said, and is wary of any completed product, including art. However, Nowak (2010: 274) reconciles this tension between infinity and representation by contending that '[e]thics may at times involve representation which takes us away from the Other, while at the same time that same representation may refer us to that which is beyond representation'. In examining how totality and infinity manifested in the process of creating representations in the form of a digital narrative, this paper supports Nowak's argument that representations have the capacity to refer us to that which is beyond representation. Many documentary scholars have also claimed that Levinasian ethics offers useful ways of thinking about the practice of documentary making, in particular the relationship between documentary subjects and filmmakers (Renov 2004; Nash

2011; Colusso 2017). In this paper, I argue that Levinasian ethics also offers new insights into other collaborative arts practices such as digital narrative practice.

Through an examination of a creative process this study reveals the complex relationship between totality and infinity. This complex and intertwined relationship has been characterised by Oliver (2015: 487) who argues that attempting to think through the 'impossibility of ethics' may be 'the very condition of possibility for ethics'. Similarly, Matthes (2016: 363) characterises the complexities of negotiating totality by examining the tensions between cultural essentialism and cultural appropriation suggesting that if we care about the harms of both issues we are 'still faced with a dilemma'. Matthes (2016: 54) identifies 'compromise[ing] and distort[ing] the communicative ability' of 'members of marginalised groups' as one of the ways in which cultural appropriation causes harm. Compromised ability to express represents a form of totality, however cultural essentialism also represents a form of totality. For Matthes, ways of negotiating these two intertwined forms of totality is of central concern. While he provides a suggestion for navigating between 'the horns of the dilemma' (Matthes 2016: 363) he also describes situations where 'the harms of essentialism may be a necessary cost of seeking social justice' (365). Matthes' (2016) account of the complexities of negotiating totality when considering cultural appropriation is mirrored in this account of attempting to negotiate totality in collaborative digital narrative practice. This paper also draws on Oliver's notion of 'vigilance as response-ability' (Oliver 2001: 134) in order to shed new light on how collaborative writing teams might negotiate totality.

Research design

The following examination of resisting totality in collaborative writing teams is led by creative practice (the production of the digital narrative *We See Each Other*). Estelle Barrett (2007: 186) urges practice-led researchers to consider what the studio process might reveal 'that could not have been revealed by any other mode of enquiry?' In the case of this research, insights into the practical agency of digital narrative practitioners to negotiate issues of totality throughout their creative process could only be revealed though practice-led methods. However, as McNiff (2013: 110) points out, what is 'perhaps most challenging about art-based research is that it does not advocate set methods of enquiry'. This research, therefore, uses a mix of methods to create the richest and most appropriate way to explore the research questions.

While the primary method used to investigate was the process of creative practice and the tacit knowledge that comes along with it, documenting the creative process was necessary. Thus, recorded workshops and fieldnotes provide valuable data that captured the creative process as it happened. Recorded workshops were selected because they offer insight into how the co-creative team constructed the digital narrative and the intricacies of how co-creative relationships play out. Workshop design incorporated elements from established Digital Storytelling methods (Lambert 2012) to ensure the method remained robust. Fieldnotes were selected as they deliver insight into the parts of the creative process that happened outside of workshops, as well as providing a record of the tacit knowledge I developed as a creative practitioner over the course of the creative process. Emerson et al. (1995: x) point out that some researchers 'consider fieldnotes to be writings that record both what they learn and observe about the activities of others and their own actions, questions, and reflections'. For the purposes of this study, fieldnotes recorded both observations and reflections. The act of recording observations mimics the process Kozel (2007: 52) describes as a phenomenological method for examining lived experience as a practice-led researcher. Additionally, the act of recording reflections assisted in a reflexive process often used in ethnography where the researcher

engages in 'a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher's positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome' (Berger 2015: 220). This reflexivity was an important way of remaining cognisant of my own privileges and position as a white, non-refugee, native English speaker who is a part of a large educational institution.

Finally, it was also essential to examine the perspective of the other creative practitioners involved in the research. Therefore, one-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with each collaborator after the creative work was published. Semi-structured interviews best suit the theoretical framework of this research project as they allow 'space for interviewees to answer on their own terms' (Edwards & Holland 2013: 29). This approach meant I could explore the key areas of investigation while accounting for new areas that developed as a result of the collaborative process. By using a combination of creative practice, workshops, fieldnotes and interviews, a picture of the process and impact of the construction of a digital narrative can be built and consequently analysed. Having described the research methods used in this study, it is also necessary to examine the process and aim of the creative practice itself.

We See Each Other is a 'born-digital' narrative available at seeeachother.com. Scholar and digital author Kate Pullinger (2008: 12) calls narratives specifically designed for digital platforms 'born-digital'. Bell et al. (2010: np) expands on this notion, stating that 'born-digital' literature 'would lose something of its aesthetic and semiotic function if it were removed from that medium'. This description applies to *We See Each Other* as the content was designed for a website platform and uses digital functions to create immersion and interactive elements that are essential to the narrative: thus the creative work would lose much of its aesthetic and semiotic function if it were removed from its digital platform. There is much to unpack when considering how collaboration operates in the specific context of born-digital narrative practice. For example, there have been many born-digital works that utilise digital technology to experiment with collective narrative writing processes. *Beim Bäcker* (Klinger 2000) and *A Million Penguins* (Penguin and De Montfort University Books 2008) are both examples of these sorts of collaborative experiments. In these works, multiple online contributors worked on the same narrative, a process which resulted in collaborators vying for authorial control and taking little notice of each other's work (Simanowski 2001; Mason & Thomas 2008). These experiments often function under the assumption that concealing the social, cultural, and religious backgrounds of online contributors fosters a fairer more democratic writing process. Given the Levinasian approach to collaborative narrative practice adopted for *We See Each Other*, this born-digital narrative took a different approach. Productive collaboration throughout the creative process was only possible through a constant negotiation of responding to the unique alterity of each collaborator. The unique impact of born-digital practices on the collaborative process is a rich area for further investigation however it is outside the scope of this article.

We See Each Other is the output of four collaborators from refugee backgrounds and myself. While each collaborator constructed their own story on a dedicated webpage using their own aesthetic, the four stories are connected by an overarching narrative which the collaborators also contributed to. The gender and names of the four collaborators are concealed in this paper to protect privacy in regard to the details of our creative process. However, each collaborator opted to use their real name in the creative work in order to be acknowledged for their creative output and help build their careers as creative practitioners. I assumed various roles as; a team leader, facilitator, editor, mentor and web designer. In these roles, I organised meetings, ensured deadlines were met, built the website and provided support to collaborators (e.g.,

equipment, editing, encouragement, translating services and technical tutorials on how to edit their work on the website). Our collaboration was initially planned to occur through workshops where all collaborators were present, but the busy schedules of the collaborators meant that much of the collaboration also occurred through phone calls, texts, emails and sporadic meetings.

Welcoming the expression of collaborators

Levinas (1969: 51) states that 'to welcome' the expression of the Other 'beyond the capacity of the I … means exactly: to have the idea of Infinity'. Given totalising narratives are constructed in part by requiring people from refugee backgrounds to tell certain types of stories (Dennis 2013: 361), the creative process was designed to welcome the collaborators' expression in order to move toward more ethical collaboration. That is, I attempted to set up a collaborative space where any narrative content, style, lengths and genre choices were welcomed. This study revealed that lifting certain narrative restrictions was an important step in working toward more ethical collaboration and it resulted in collaborators feeling agency over their work.

However, convincing collaborators that any narrative was genuinely welcome was, initially, challenging. Three of the four collaborators anticipated having to tell a personal migration narrative when I first spoke to them about the project. The way the collaborators interpreted my interest in their creative work and skills highlighted the role totalising narratives can play in limiting the narratives authors feel other people want to hear from them. It was not until our first face-to-face workshops that a solid foundation of trust could be built by having conversations about the way the creative process would work. In the final ten minutes of the first workshop one collaborator, who had told their personal migration story through theatre and digital storytelling before, commented:

> I've done a few different projects here and there, but this one is very wide open, flexible.

In this moment the collaborator's perception of the project altered and they concluded that the creative process I had constructed would be the most flexible process they had experienced to-date in their career as a creative practitioner.

In contrast to the three collaborators who assumed that I expected a personal migration narrative, one collaborator quickly picked up on the objective of *We See Each Other* to resist normative 'refugee' narratives before the first workshop and interpreted this as cause for concern. Their concern was that they might not be able to write a personal migration story. In every instance, it was only through conversation that we were able to forge a space where each collaborator truly felt that all narrative genres, styles and content would be welcomed by me as the facilitator.

Once the collaborators felt comfortable that their narrative choices would be welcomed, they seized the opportunity to publish narratives they wanted told. From the earliest stages of the workshops, all collaborators developed a clear sense of the content, genre and style of their narratives, as well as who their audience should be and what message they wanted to express. Three of the four collaborators had a narrative concept before the first workshop. In the final interview, one collaborator explained why they had decided to engage with the project:

> Oh, for me I felt like I had a good story, I just needed the platform and when [another collaborator] told me about it I didn't hesitate. I was like, 'I think I should share this story'. …But I wasn't pressured into anything. I loved what I wrote. I felt it had to be said.

Sharing the narrative they had already developed was an important motivation for this collaborator and their statement provided evidence for one of the findings of this study: that considering the collaborative team's social and political context, and mitigating against totalising narrative expectations (by welcoming all content, genres and styles) resulted in a creative process that enabled collaborators to achieve their goals of sharing a narrative they had always wanted told. This seems consistent with Levinas' (1969: 51) idea that 'to welcome' the Other's expression is 'to have the idea of Infinity'. While some collaborators still chose to tell narratives about their migration and settlement experiences, it was as a result of their own agency.

Editing as productive discomfort

As a collaborator assuming the role of project manager, the other collaborators sought my feedback and assistance with editing their work. The professional role I performed as an editor revealed tensions between welcoming the expression of the collaborators and making changes to their expression. Deciding what sections of a narrative to edit and how major the edits should be was complex, and such decisions represent one of the many challenges in working toward infinite and ethical collaboration both practically and logistically.

One of the most pertinent examples of the tension that manifested between myself as editor and the creative role of the collaborators arose when one collaborator experienced a family emergency. It was difficult for the collaborator to find the time or creative energy to work on their narrative, though they still expressed a strong desire to have their work published. To alleviate some of the pressure, they asked if I could make the necessary edits to polish their draft in preparation for publishing, but without any further input from them. The collaborator's trust in me to complete a final edit of their work without consultation reassured me of the level of trust built between us as a result of the collaborative process I had designed. However, the responsibility of retaining the author's unique voice, while still making professional edits, was challenging, given one of the objectives of collaboration was to welcome the expression of the Other (Levinas 1969: 51).

The field of textual criticism addresses the editing of text and the complexity of 'preparing text for public consumption' (Greetham 1994: 295). Christensen (2008: 9) explains that '"contemporary editorial theory" refutes the notion that an '"ideal" text corresponding to the author's "final intentions" could be established by an editor'. Following this assertion that an editor cannot produce a text that corresponds completely to the authors' final intentions, it was clear that my role as an editor would have a significant impact on the expression of the author. This was of concern as LeClerc (2018) outlines the dangers of perpetuating stereotypes or victimisation when attempting to write in the voice of people from refugee backgrounds. Similarly, Alcoff (1992: 17) discusses the problematic nature of speaking for another, suggesting that retreating from speaking for another can be a useful response. But, Alcoff (1992: 18) also argues that retreating from speaking for another in every instance can be just as problematic. She states, 'the attempt to avoid the problematic of speaking for by retreating into an individualist realm is based on an illusion', and she goes on to describe this

misconception as the 'illusion that I can separate from others to such an extent that I can avoid affecting them' (Alcoff 1992: 18).

Alcoff's (1992) argument presents a useful way of thinking through the challenge of editing another's work without further consultation with them. My actions would have an impact on the collaborator's work and their voice no matter what decision I made. If I edited their work, there would be no way to establish an 'ideal text' corresponding to the author's final intention and I would undoubtedly change the tone and presentation of their voice. If I retreated from editing their work, the collaborator's work would be published in an incomplete state that would be less accessible for readers. For the collaborator to have their voice published and all of their hard work up till that point validated, I could not retreat to an individualist realm. One of the advantages of employing creative practice as a research method is how it can de-abstract theoretical ideals and reveal complexity through the logistical and practical considerations negotiated by the practitioner in order to apply a working theory. The unavoidable tension of welcoming the Other's expression while having to simultaneously alter that expression revealed that, in this instance, working towards infinity did not mean working away from totality. Instead, the process revealed a complex and intertwined relationship between totality and infinity where the collaborators had to learn to work productively alongside totality in order to work towards more ethical collaborations.

In building on the above, Alcoff (1992: 22) also states that retreating entirely from speaking for others can sometimes be motivated by the desire to avoid 'constant interrogation and critical reflection' and that 'such a desire for mastery and immunity must be resisted'. At many times throughout the creative process, this desire to be immune from critique was powerful. I often found myself looking for approaches which avoided totality completely to evade discomfort, but there were no such paths to take. Instead I had to learn to work through discomfort, to constantly interrogate editing choices and to reflect on my process. Below is an excerpt from my fieldnotes during the editing process, which illustrates this discomfort and how I made editing decisions.

> **17th January 2018**: I also re-read the collaborator's narrative to ensure that any final edits it needed were made (spelling, grammar or clarity). There were still some sections with errors or unclear sentences. Although some edits were fairly straightforward and mechanical, others were not so easy and it was difficult knowing that they would not be checking on my edits. Occasionally there was a unique expression or phrase that I thought expressed their voice but was not grammatically correct. It was difficult to decide sometimes if it should be kept. In most instances, I tried to keep these phrases intact or edit the surrounding words to make sure it could be kept. In other cases, a sentence involving factual information was hard to follow. In these instances, I tracked down the collaborator's original sources and read them, in order to make sure that when I re-worded the sentence, I was not misrepresenting their point.

The day we launched the website was the first time the collaborator saw the final edits I had made. They contacted me that night:

> **26th February 2018**: At around 10pm the collaborator messaged me saying 'I wanna thank you for helping me achieve such a huge achievement and thank you for understanding my circumstances' they also told me 'Actually the website is amazing,

> everything is fabulous.' I was relieved to hear that the editing process was successful for them.

Engaging in critical reflection often aided me in thinking through how best to support collaborators to construct their narratives. However, this positive outcome is not to say that every editing choice made during the construction of *We See Each Other* was successful. Indeed, there would be no way to accurately measure editing success. Furthermore, there is no methodology, which, if employed, could make editing decisions more comfortable and nor should there be. The editing process remained uncomfortable throughout the duration of the practice, pushing me to continuously critique and reflect on how totality was operating within the project and how my actions contributed to this totality. This informed the finding that discomfort plays a role in ethical collaboration and can be conceptualised as 'productive discomfort.'

This notion of productive discomfort is by no means a new concept. It mirrors the constant 'deliberations on the power dynamics' that Harrison (2018: 30) argues have been central to ethnographic research. Productive discomfort is also informed by Oliver's (2015: 487) acknowledgement that attempting to think through the 'impossibility of ethics' may be 'the very condition of possibility for ethics' as well as her notion of 'vigilance as response-ability' which follows Levinas's 'thoughts on insomnia' (Oliver 2001: 134). In practical terms, *We See Each Other* illustrates how notions of infinity and totality play out in collaboration, demonstrating that collaborators cannot deal with totality and infinity as separate. In fact, attempting to eliminate one's own capacity to enact totality in order to work towards infinity only conceals it, making it harder to work towards. Instead, working towards infinity involves a willingness to engage in productive discomfort, a process by which a collaborator remains vigilant in reflexively examining and critiquing their own actions and how they contribute to totality.

A series of face-to-face encounters

The complexity of the relationship between totality and infinity continued to reveal itself throughout the collaborative process. As the project progressed, it became clear that maintaining a sense of welcome for all narratives was a complex and testing task. One particular challenge tested the efficacy of working towards infinity in collaboration and forced me to examine the impact of my own assumptions. In this instance, a collaborator had pitched their idea during a workshop and expressed the message they wanted their audience to consider. I considered the message a positive one aimed at breaking down dominant perceptions of a particular group of people. However, the draft narrative included sentences and expressions, which totalised another group of people. Below is an excerpt from my fieldnotes on the day I received the draft.

> **October 31, 2017:** When the collaborator had explained the work to me in the previous workshop, I assumed that the narrative would be structured in a certain way. However, from the draft I read I felt that the structure was not as strong as it could be and, though the message of the narrative still resonated with me, it was not communicated in the way I had been expecting. There were some parts that I felt uncomfortable with.
>
> I was left feeling conflicted and confronted. I felt deeply committed to amplifying the collaborators' voices without restriction. I wanted the authors to have autonomy and

> agency over their work and the way they represented themselves through their work. However, at the same time, this particular creative work contained sentences and ideas, which totalised other groups of people and this made me feel uncomfortable with publishing it.

In the act of a transcendent encounter where the collaborator's expression was welcomed, totality had occurred simultaneously: an encounter with the infinite between collaborators, could also result in a moment of totality. Through the act of creative practice, one of the largest challenges for working towards more ethical collaboration had been revealed. Levinas's descriptions of ethics and transcendent encounters are pared back to the somewhat sterile description of encounters between the Other and the subject so that these notions can be teased out in a philosophical sense. However, analysing a specific instance of encounter involves acknowledging a complex web of Others who are not so separate from the encounter at hand. A single encounter between two people never occurs in a vacuum, it is informed by countless previous encounters and may even include the totalisation of a third Other. The capacity for an encounter to result in transcendence and the totalisation of a third party simultaneously evidences how infinity and totality are inextricably intertwined, and how the line between the two forces is blurred. It is not always clear where totality ends and infinity begins. Infinity is, therefore, not a goal that can be achieved and maintained; it can only be worked towards as totality and infinity constantly evolve and shift, requiring creative practitioners and collaborators to reconsider these forces constantly and adapt accordingly.

However, responding and adapting can be confusing. Initially, I responded to this particular situation by obtaining verbal consent from the collaborator to make some edits to the draft. During the editing phase, I attempted to remove or soften the tone of sentences that I perceived to totalise another group of people. This editing process was uncomfortable and I was aware that by attempting to shape the meaning of their narrative, I was not welcoming the collaborator's expression in full, and disengaging from the transcendent encounter we had initially experienced. But I also felt it was necessary to edit the narrative in order to prevent potentially totalising encounters between author and audience in the final work.

After reading through these edits, the collaborator expressed that they did not want to accept the changes, because some of the meaning had been changed. They also preferred the original structure. Below is an excerpt from my fieldnotes on the day they called me:

> **December 12, 2017:** They told me that they are a writer, so they are confident with this way of doing things. I replied that it wasn't a problem if they didn't like the edits. I asked if they would prefer to go back to the original version that they had written and they indicated that they would. I reiterated that this was no problem at all.

This conversation with the collaborator forced me to confront and examine the ways in which I had exercised totality because of my own political views. It was ironic that, by this point in the research, I was well versed in Levinas's (1969: 194) concept that 'the infinite is the absolutely Other' yet, by assuming that the collaborator would approach the narrative message in the way I had envisaged, I had subsumed this collaborator into what Levinas (1969) describes as 'the same'. During this conversation the collaborator called on me to trust their skill as a writer and accept their alterity. This conversation represented a moment of transcendence and, when our conversation was over, I re-read their narrative and continued to encounter their

alterity through the work. Both the collaborator and I had proved through our capacity to engage in transcendent encounters and totality simultaneously that totality and infinity are always intertwined, as the line between the two had again broken down. It had taken a moment of totality to trigger one of the most profound moments of infinity I had experienced during the project.

The collaborator's narrative was published without edits and, upon seeing their original version of the narrative displayed on the website, they commented during the final workshop:

> …our website is very beautiful.

This anecdote illustrates just how complex working towards infinity in collaborative creative practice can be. In this instance, there was no obvious solution that we as collaborators could have implemented to avoid totality completely. Instead, we both had to engage in a process of productive discomfort which included trial, error and compromise.

In this paper I sketch a journey that traverses a muddy spectrum of infinity and totality. The process of creative practice revealed just how elusive and ephemeral moments of transcendence and infinity can be. Even after a face-to-face encounter with a collaborator, it had been easy to subsume them into 'the same' (Levinas 1969), demonstrating that an encounter with infinity could not be held in one's mind, nor could an encounter with infinity be extended throughout the entire creative process. The very nature of infinity may be impossible to contain, and if so, then collaborative creative practice is an engagement in a series of encounters that requires a process of constant negotiation from collaborators. This need for constant negotiation supports Olivers notion of 'vigilance as response-ability' where vigilance is not only constant observation but also the constant need to respond 'to something beyond your control' (Oliver 2001: 134).

This finding is supported by Balfour's (2013: 223) similar conclusion about ethical encounter in performance: that 'meaningful, corporeal encounter with alterity is often accidental and momentary; therefore, the closer the art moves to trying to create a comportment towards the other, the faster the meaningful experience disperses'. Ethical encounters, as Balfour positions them, are momentary and elusive, and the collaborative process of making *We See Each Other* confirmed Balfour's claim that transcendent encounters disperse quickly. This finding also supports Oliver's (2001: 106) assertion that 'the paradoxical forces of witnessing maintain subjectivity through their equilibrium, which is never static and only precariously stable'. The creative process of *We See Each Other* revealed ethical encounter to be precarious.

The influence of an infinite network of Others

Toward the end of the creative practice process, it became apparent that even if we, as a collaborative team, had managed to create a relatively welcoming space for all kinds of narratives, there were still barriers to collaborators publishing any narrative they wanted to. This study found that a significant challenge for working toward infinity in collaborative encounters was negotiating the narrative expectations of people external to the collaborative team including friends, family and community.

This challenge became clear when one collaborator decided to change the content of their narrative completely. The collaborator had initially expressed a strong will to create a narrative

exploring a relationship between a character from their own cultural background and a character from a totally different cultural background. During a workshop, the collaborator explained to me that relationships between these two cultures are frowned upon by some people in their community, though cross-cultural relationships still occur.

> I myself, have seen these stories happen, but nobody knows about it.

The collaborator also predicted that they might be criticised by some people for depicting characters in a cross-cultural relationship of this sort, even if the characters were fictional.

> …most people have a fear of pointing it out. And they will be criticised for that. So I think I'll be criticised for that, definitely. But I think it is worth taking it out and doing it. Because that's the reality, I want to just point it out. Because, this is what it is, and you've got to find a solution for it. Until then, you can hide it, but it's the nature of human need.

Despite the collaborator's prediction that they would be criticised for their narrative content, they clearly felt that *We See Each Other* was a platform that would enable them to express a narrative they had always wanted to express.

Their draft depicted some of the complexities of cross-cultural relationships, including funny and positive moments, as well as problematic and sad moments. Yet, as we approached the website's launch date, the collaborator experienced pressure from people they knew not to publish the narrative. As a result, the collaborator informed me that they would be publishing a different narrative, which did not involve a cross-cultural relationship. When asked how they had decided on the content of their narrative, the collaborator replied:

> Unfortunately, along the way I had some difficulties and issues. Obviously because of our cultural and religious barriers, it was very unfortunate that I couldn't continue working on that … I don't think I am going to work again on that story, but I hope I can do something similar to that.

Despite the collaborator feeling that their controversial narrative was welcomed by the collaborative team, the expectations of others in their community had a significant impact on the narrative they chose to create and publish.

This creative process revealed that collaborative encounters are informed by others outside of the collaborative team. Encounters cannot be examined in a sterile way, instead, every encounter must be understood as a moment that is influenced by previous encounters and an infinite network of Others. A key finding of this study is that these influential outside encounters must be acknowledged as a significant challenge to working toward ethical collaboration. Subsequently, creative practitioners must find ways to support each other to work productively when moments of totality are triggered by the expectations of others outside the collaborative team.

Conclusion

The challenge in attempting to avoid reproducing oppressive power structures in collaborative writing teams and in attempting to prevent those structures from inhibiting the creative freedom of collaborators is a task many creative teams face. Analysing the creative process of *We See Each Other* has revealed the opportunities to work toward ethical collaboration and the challenges of doing so. For example, the project provides evidence that creating a welcoming space for the expression of all collaborators lays the foundation for more ethical collaborative relationships by broadening the often-narrow scope of what kinds of narratives that are expected from people who are part of regularly totalised communities. However, the creative process of *We See Each Other* also reveals that welcoming the expression of all collaborators at all times throughout a project is challenging. A moment of totality can lay the foundations for a moment of infinity and a moment of infinity can result in simultaneous totality. Similarly, collaboration is always influenced by Others outside the team, affecting how and what collaborators express. There is no effective way to avoid moments of totality completely in order to engage in ethical collaboration. Instead, collaborators must learn to engage in productive discomfort by working alongside totality and examining their own role in moments of totality.

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