



“Render the Tacit Tangible”

Or: How Insider Witnessing Practices Address Power by Raising the Means to Speak

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The ways in which we as Narrative therapists pronounce the word “power”, I sometimes half-expect to stumble over it some day and say “Hello and: a-ha. So we finally meet. And I see, such is your shape, your texture, your pain, your healing.” This is utter folly of course... but I dare you to listen for it in any round of self-respecting post-structuralists and maybe you’ll know what I mean.

Sometimes I have been tantalized to add the word “power” to a sweeping shit-list of fetishized, thingified, and mortified words that are used to frighten the living daylights out of a “trying” Narrative therapist.

Malidi: Mmm. Yes!!!

Questions about power are often posed in generalized terms, i.e. “but what about power?” or, “how did you attend to power?” and in those formats, become unanswerable and shed vague and self-conscious anxiety in their wake.

Malidi: I was thinking about how certain question can serve to further oppression: stifling enquiry.





For example, I was posed these questions in response to the presentation I gave about Zhen's life (see the previous paper in this issue), and I wondered what exactly I was being asked. It seemed to me I had shown, in detail, how to center a focussed attention on questions of power relations in Zhen's life and how her positionality as a woman, and a woman of colour had led to the binding of her freedom of movement and her storytelling rights at many junctures in her life. I had also shown my efforts to restore and amplify her words, her voice, and her narrative power above the dominant discourses with their disastrous effects on her life. I had done so by a careful study and representation of her knowledge and lived experience in the poems and metaphors she had endorsed (that had been dismissed by powerful others), as well as by the faithful representation of the transcripts of our conversations with her and about her, and most importantly, her responses to these efforts. The concentrated attention on Zhen's thoughts and her experiences, and the focus on these as the heart and soul of the presentation made it clear that I never thought myself in a position to judge the effects of my storytelling efforts, and that her deliberations on the real effects of my reaching efforts were all that mattered to me. Centering and studying our clients' responses to our work in this way is what it means to try to answer the question of "what our doing does." And yet I was posed disembodied questions regarding power, and therefore came to wondering whether speaking of power relations has grown so experience-distant as to be confused with something stationary, like an identity category, for example. I had a sense that perhaps I was asked, not for complex elaborations as to how to remain always-already suspicious as to my narrative power and its assumptions next to my clients and to show, in detail, how I reached for more justice in haggling out and fighting for clients' storytelling rights, but that I was asked for some glib words that would lend themselves to check-boxes to tick off in our anxiety about our power as therapists. But power relations are not a check-box nor an identity category, nor an object, but a purposeful reach, a negotiation, if you will, every unique conversation at a time, every particular person at a time. At the heart of Insider Witnessing Work stands the demand to come to understand how exactly a particular person has been up against and hurt by powerful people





in their lives who lean on the “Master Narratives” (Lindeman Nelson, 2001) of our time to give themselves permission to treat a person in a particular manner. It is the work of Insider Witnessing, in particular, to understand and resist these ways of relating. We already have no shallow alibis when it comes to the examination of relationships and our effects on our clients. Insider Witnessing work seeks to further remove the possibility of such alibis with the very questions it asks therapists to consider. The work of addressing power relations cannot be “told” in few words, it must be “shown” in the conversations themselves.

In the context of power relations, I yearn for a conversation that might take place in all the detailed particularity of a context and its people and in a sense of curiosity about our practices of power as therapists. May we take our own and each others’ critical capacities very seriously.

Malidi: I want to highlight this. This sentence called me into engaging openly with this paper.

“Power is not an essence,” Foucault reminds us. – it is not as simple as a statement about one’s social location, an examination of skin-colour, or even one’s prowess in “convincing” another – although all these might be beginnings of considerations. But I would like to step beyond simplicities and speak of “relations of power” in the details of a particular relationship.

“Power is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere... Power is not an institution, and not a structure; Power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared... Power is exercised.” Such writes Foucault (1990, p. 93-95) about power relations. Shored up by Foucault, I would like to claim to be curious about the particulars of this “exercising,” within relationships and their effects on our lives.

David Epston and Michael White have long invited us out of our traditional





therapeutic covering-up-our-practice places, out of words like “neutrality”, or “not-knowing positions”, or the effortlessness of simple “negative, repressive descriptions of power” to consider other places to stand and practice from that might help us assume responsibility for the “real effects” of our interactions. (For a review and critique of the hiding places, see Catrina Brown (2007) “Situating Knowledge and Power in the Therapeutic Alliance.”)

Brown (2007) concludes her chapter on power with these thoughts: “It is my view that if we wish to avoid inadvertently reifying dominant social discourses and social relations, we need to be reflexive in our conceptual practices. Holding on to a politicized practice requires therapists to come to terms with their own knowledge and power” (p. 19).

Malidi- Sanni, you are a welcome colluder here. I appreciate the enthusiasm with which you come into this space. It is important for me to acknowledge that I am white passing and that this affords me a certain amount of privilege.

This is where I hope to pick up the thread by asking “how?”. Or, in David Epston’s style: “show me.”

First, let me back up just a little. I recently had a joking conversation with a client about the fluorescent lights at our therapy office, and she spoke about “fluorescent lights sucking her soul out - and not remembering any times when creativity or something of the extraordinary came to her under the shine of fluorescent lights.”

Building on Foucault’s and White and Epston’s arguments, it is my assertion that our therapy conversations are arenas of power relations and their effects, in much the same way that they take place under metaphorical (and often real) fluorescent lights.

Malidi: Underline this!





We cannot escape our lighting issues by rhetorical wheedling even if we were to resolve to practice under candle light only -no fixes or lists can help us check off the matter of power relations at the therapy door.

Malidi: !!! Here I thought to myself. "This is a real page turner." I love these first pages. It is engaging and makes me feel like I want to collude with you. I hope you will collude with us as well.

But how do we sincerely avoid the second, sinister step in lighted conversations: the *denial* of other people's experiences of the lighting conditions in the rooms we inhabit with them? -In any practices of wrongdoing, there is the initial trespassing, but how are we to live when the second step to a trespass is a concentrated denial of said trespass?

And how do we as therapists endeavour to set up conversational conditions that seek to un-deny trespasses at every turn? Such endeavours are set against the backdrop of a whole tradition of a therapeutic ethos that has endowed therapists and their like with the authority to pronounce their conversation partners' exact position on scales of normal and abnormal, (Malidi- A suspicious binary indeed!) to have the last say as to the rightness of perception, memory, and sanity of the "other." Good intentions by themselves will not do here!

Surely these lighting conditions set the stage for "sweaty endeavours" around what Sara Ahmed calls "sweaty concepts." Ahmed is arguing against the rigid distinction between *descriptive* and *conceptual* work and asserts that a "sweaty concept" might be one that comes out of a bodily experience that is difficult, one that is "trying," and where the aim is to keep exploring and exposing this difficulty."

Well, let me both *describe* and *conceptualize* a scene, taking place in broad





daylight this time: 3 white therapists, 2 of them experienced and 1 of them a man (neither of the latter categories describes me, by the way), set up the room to interview a client, a young woman of indigenous heritage.

Malidi- Sanni, you are a welcome colluder here. I appreciate the enthusiasm with which you come into these spaces. It is important for me to acknowledge that I am white passing and that this affords me a certain amount of privilege.

And if this does not alert the power police, it gets worse: this interview is meant to be a follow-up reflection on an Insider Witnessing Practice, in which a group of white and passing-for-white therapists portrayed this young woman's life and asked questions and told stories about her moral character.

According to the traditional repressive-only notions of "power", there is only one possibility here: abandon all hope and run! If power is a stable and oppressive one-way lighting system, there is no hope for the interviewee to have life, say, agency, or authority in this room.

Sabrina Benaim writes in *Depression and Other Magic Tricks*:

*she is the sugar cube,
and this is the cup of
darjeeling – she
dissolves,
faster
than
you
think
she
will.*

As an aside, I think of this poem often in my therapy work with women. I think of the Master Narrative reserved for us as women





Malidi- And femmes and any other person who has had these expectations of caretaking and emotional labor imposed upon them.

to serve to “sweeten” rooms, conversations, and relationships by particular ways of speaking and behaving. Be pretty, be decorative, be nice, be polite, be sexy, say please and thank you and don’t forget to smile and say I love your hair, sweater, or shoes. And then I think about my undying hope to be able to invite exchanges that could be characterized as “unbought and unbossed.” I know the moments it happens too, when I and another achieve a measure of freedom together from the demands on our pounds of flesh by patriarchal narratives, the demands of behavior by Master Narratives, and the demands of some formalized decorum by the therapeutic enterprise.

Malidi-!!!

But on this day of this conversation, how could we hold on to the hope for substance rather than dissolution? Lively emergence rather than sugar-free sweetener? Authoritative voice rather than the magic of disappearance? We gambled the room and its lighting, no, indeed the whole house on Michael White’s words: “We can solicit critical feedback from persons of other races, cultures, and classes. We can openly acknowledge the political dilemmas that we face in our day-to-day work” (As quoted by Denborough, 2009).

Dear Michael, if we indeed CAN hope to do such a thing, “encourage people to draw distinctions around ways of speaking”, then this is what we tried, on this day. Here is an excerpt in which we are specifically asking Malidi about power relations and her experience of the interviews with us. In reading this excerpt in its actual halting words, you might appreciate the aforementioned idea of “sweaty endeavours” a slight bit:

Tom: This might be a perfect time to ask her one of the questions we had. About power, huh? So—





- Sanni: Yeah, Malidi you were just talking something about “colonizing spaces without even checking in with people after.” Where “some people tell other people how they are feeling...” One of the questions we have—in some ways this may be in this way of recognizing your authority to speak to us on matters of power - and I do realize this is a terrible way of asking because you’re sitting with three white people *again*... But I am wondering if you *were* free to speak about power relations or even the sense of “here we were in a room speaking about your life” and wondering about whether in that you might have felt “checked in with” or “told how you are feeling...” I am wondering how this was for you. Whether you felt you had a say, - and this is where you are our consultant, Malidi, to make this better for people who come after you—
- Loree: She’s wondering where you’re going...
- Sanni: I’m sorry, I’m not asking a good question.
- Tom: Well you’re introducing the question.
- Malidi: You’re, like, making sure that I know (said warmly, to Sanni).
- Sanni: So the question is what was it like for you to observe - I don’t know how many white people were in the room speaking about your life - and then trying to present it to you —what was that like for you and is there something you want to tell us about guiding that in the future if we were to undertake interviews like this interview, to make it a bit safer—or





Tom: So it's not colonizing.

Malidi- Just really realizing now how important this has been, it has given me a space to feel safe combating what I see as colonizing, without fear of being called "too much" or "reactionary." Wow! I didn't experience feelings of being colonized, my language at the time and way of speaking was respected and replicated so well by my therapist. I felt colluded with not colonized.

Sanni: Yeah, so we would never step into that space and pretend we know how others feel.

Loree: And I was wondering too, maybe more specifically, of what it was like for a young white woman to portray your life...

Tom: ...For your life to be portrayed by a white, young white person. Because these are matters that are important to us. One is that the telling not be a colonizing, regardless of if a person is the same race or not. But yeah, what was that like for you to have your life portrayed?

Malidi: It's funny because I don't think for me personally I would say that it was problematic because I really trust my therapist and I respect her and everybody here at the Collective. I think everybody here is open and we are safe to be open to criticism or being wrong. We can find better ways to do things, - but that can't really be faked to be *open* to this discourse. I think that maybe just doing what Sanni did and saying "we want to be challenged by it, tell us, we aren't going to be offended if this feels wrong." I think just acknowledging that is important, and especially with a lot of people that maybe—even just anybody, just





to be able to acknowledge it *when it feels off* or like injustice. To acknowledge that before speaking. I think that what I like about this is, because I feel you know why I like it here, you guys are my people, you know I can say and talk about theory and in relation to my own life. Things I learn in school where if you don't know about it I can send you whatever—it's like, not everybody is equipped to do that or has the privilege to do that. But if you find ways to invite... - like you are always inviting the protest or the contestation.

Sanni: I think there is something you are saying—I'm wondering if I can take it, or we might take this up? You said the one thing that might be important to us in the future, and correct me if I am wrong, is acknowledging that before speaking. And you used a phrase "when it feels off." I think this is another way of inviting the protest or the contest? Even before we start speaking, but this phrase, and I love this phrase "when it feels off" can we use that in the future?

Tom: Did you feel like you had that in the interview?

Malidi: Yeah I did. I feel like you guys are really good at picking up on - she's not like "okay let's talk about what I want to talk about" which is great for me because it's like you guys are open to following what I want to talk about. But I also like when you guys actually tell me before what you are thinking because it brings up stuff for me. It's collaborative, it's very cool.

Sanni: But the words to the invitations are important?

Malidi: And I think it's like—I don't know, for me I try to find





things—I started therapy with the intention of becoming more articulate about how I feel, and how I incorporate it into my schooling and everything. Because I like when they talk about Michael not being—because they talk about the tacit a lot, and not being comfortable with the tacit. I was thinking and maybe sometimes I think maybe for your—for clients it takes a longer time for these tacit things to be rendered tangible.

Tom: That’s great, tacit things to be rendered tangible. Sanni you might want to write that down (said playfully, as Sanni is obviously already excitedly writing). Did that happen for you in some way?

Malidi: Yeah, I use tacit as a place holder. And sometimes for me when I say “tacit” I mean obviously this is the structure we live under. I feel bad about this, tacit, like *obviously* the world is fucked and the patriarchy sucks. You know, and then I say it almost like a place holder for me. For me tacit is like the systems rendered visible, that’s what it is for me. Which I just realized now.

This interview continues to follow up on Malidi’ thoughts about the “tacit”, about “colonizing spaces”, “patriarchy” and specifically, her experiences of what made it possible to make the hair-raising statement of “trusting” us. What were the practices that created this “trust”, against formidable odds one might add, and what might we as therapists learn about such practices?

Malidi- There is so much consent happening always. That seems to be a huge factor for me. I don’t think that consent, at least in my experience, is taught in a robust way, and through these experiences I was amazed by the multitude of possibilities for consent giving and boundary making.





After this conversation, I returned to my copious hand-written notes that I took of Malidi's words while we were speaking and transcribed the notes into a poem. I was too excited this time to wait until a face-to-face meeting to read it aloud to her, so I sent it to her over email prior to a meeting. Malidi laughed about the subject line of the email that read "A few instructions on power, holy shit Malidi."

Behold the poetic transcript of my hand-written notes taken from the interviewee's own words in this very same conversation:

**Instructions on the Matter of Power by Malidi
because *obviously* the world is fucked and patriarchy sucks**

*Malidi- It seems so twee to say this it like this, but also, another tacit
placeholder*

In many spaces
What is tacit
Is rendered invisible
And no one is accountable.

And so we go around
Under surveillance, tone-policed, undermined
Colonized, mocked, alienated:
Too crazy too angry too irrational too loud
Too this too that...

Do not be satisfied with tacit
Take it from me:
Tacit is the place holder
For my articulateness.

And now I will tell you *tenderly*
How not to be an asshole:





May you show curiosity in my ideas
 May you want to be challenged
 And may you tell me *that* before you start speaking.
 May you introduce four little words:
When this feels off...
 And twelve more words:
This is not the only way we have to speak about things.
 May you invite my protest!
 May you write my words
 May you be open to following
 May you not talk over me.
 May you get excited
 -Enthusiasm helps you all!-
 And may you cry
 Over my words and my life.

And then maybe
 May you see
 How it all breaks down power.

My dears
 Behold your means
 Or shall I say power
 To render the tacit tangible:

Counter-mock all the white maned lions
 With an intention of tenderness, you all.
 Look to my articulateness
 And yours
 To finally name that which oppresses me
 And that which roots me
 Such that I can see it and feel it.
 Make no mistake
 This is belonging work:





It is a gift
The opposite of alienation.

*Majidi- A beautiful and challenging exchange...
disalienation*

And then behold:

I can emerge
Equipped for my own bystander intervention
And fierce in my threads that have continuity backwards and forth
And with *more* say rather than less.
Because when people see me
When I didn't even know I hoped
To be seen
I can step into the panopticon
And climb all the stairs into the tower
And hell,
Behold my life.

*Majidi- I love the tower imagery because it
also reminds me of the ivory tower and the
tower tarot*

You listened.
And all the sightlines afforded me
By your listening
And by my vantage point in the tower:
It is proof,
Proof of work, yes
But that's nothing yet.
It's the damn
Proof of life
You all.

I read this poem to Majidi at a meeting a few weeks later. She told a story of where and when she had first received them over email, and her laughter and delight in response. "Oh, I do make sense," she quipped. I asked her what it might be like for her if I read it to other therapists and we spent some time negotiating how it might be introduced lest it be dismissed as "decorative" or "just a beautiful addition" to theory, rather than pulling its own weight as a qualitative representation of our co-research. She had some





rather stirring words for practitioners in regard to a possible dismissal of her ideas: “if this is too difficult for them to understand, if they can’t, then perhaps they shouldn’t be practicing...?”

I will side with Malidi here and let her words stand as an authority to themselves. The worst thing to do in response to a poem might just be to wax poetic about it? So therefore, I will keep my commentary brief.

There were 2 interactions in the interview that Malidi addressed specifically to me that I want to point out. The first can be found in the transcript excerpt above, in which Malidi comes to my aid in phrasing a question about her experience of power relations with us. Obviously, I am struggling to word a question, and instead, I deliver a rather inarticulate preface, and almost lose my place and courage to turn statements into an actual question. “You’re like making sure that I know,” Malidi responds to my halting, sweaty effort. This mattered to me above all else, that despite my inarticulateness, she was willing me on, casting my efforts in an honourable light.

Malidi- If therapists aren’t able to have space to work through their ideas in order to thoughtfully engage, I don’t think that would work for me, you and Calgary Narrative Collective have been with me for a while and I would be wrong to expect all the answers... we still live under a system that doesn’t equip us to over throw it... revealing power and naming power is. a. process. for all. of. us. everyone has blind spots.

The second piece is a moment when Malidi is asked to reflect on the details of how she might have experienced “having a say” when meeting with us. In response Malidi points to me and says “she is writing, is she not? She is writing down my words right now. What does that tell you about whose words matter here?”

I want to focus your attention on the following lines:





...Look to my articulateness
 And yours
 To finally name that which oppresses me
 And that which roots me
 Such that I can see it and feel it...

Much has been written by Michael White and David Epston and others how we as therapists cannot afford to take up a “neutral” or “not-knowing position” as this would render us ineffectual to address the oppression and dominant cultural story-lines in our clients’ problem stories:

“If therapists wish to challenge oppression, they must challenge those stories that are grounded in dominant discourse. Power cannot be left out of an approach to narrative therapy if it is to be accountable. In politicized work, practitioners are positioned in making sense of clients’ stories. Practitioners on the side of social justice cannot take a neutral stance with regard to power” (Brown, 2007, p. 6).

And look how beautifully this idea is phrased here: “look to my articulateness and yours to finally name that which oppresses me.” However, Malidi goes beyond and adds: “AND that which roots me, such that I can see it and feel it.” In the same way as we cannot afford to take a neutral stance in response to stories that are grounded in dominant discourse, we can also not take a passive stance in the construction of counterstories, here named as “that which roots me.”

As part of an Insider Witnessing Process, Malidi had experienced the re-telling of the counter-stories in her life by her therapist in front of the Insider Witnessing team. This re-telling did not happen lightly and was prepared for with faithful attention to Malidi’ own dictionary, imagery, and imagination that she had shared with her therapist in their sessions prior. Could such an attempt be an imposition, yet another attempt to colonize her life? Absolutely. However, this was not Malidi’ experience, and as with all





therapeutic matters, we cede the last authority to her to tell us of the “real effects” of such an experience. The most significant part of Insider Witnessing Practices is the review of the stories that were told about a client by their therapist together with the client. In this review, and the many conversations that follow, every one of the clients’ words and responses matter. The initial stories told by the therapist about a clients’ life are but the means for the real story to be told, which is the clients’ own thoughts and responses upon considering the therapists’ version. All the work of the Insider Witnessing Interview leads to this moment, when a client reviews the stories told, and responds. It is in this moment in particular, when narrative power is ceded back to the client, and all of us hold our collective breaths to hear and write down what she will say next in her adjudication of the stories.

In her words then, rather than being an imposition, or in her own words, an “alienation”, Malidi describes it in the following manner:

...I can emerge
 Equipped for my own bystander intervention
 And fierce in my threads that have continuity backwards and forth
 And with *more* say rather than less.
 Because when people see me
 When I didn’t even know I hoped
 To be seen
 I can step into the panopticon
 And climb all the stairs into the tower
 And hell,
 Behold my life...

Breathtakingly, she is taking us into a world within worlds to turn Foucault’s panopticon into something we could not have imagined. I ask you readers, has she not climbed the stairs to the tower, and turned the tower itself, the very heart of surveillance and monitoring, into a triumph?

She goes on to say:

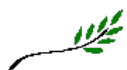




...You listened.
 And all the sightlines afforded me
 By your listening
 And by my vantage point in the tower:
 It is proof,
 Proof of work, yes
 But that's nothing yet.
 It's the damn
 Proof of life
 You all...

Insider Witnessing Practices place persons as witnesses to their own lives, as re-told by a trusted other. Malidi is telling us that this position, becoming a witness to one's own life, "equipped" her, and afforded her "sightlines" and a "vantage point" that she did not expect. Her word "proof" has emerged in many of our follow-up conversations with others who have experienced this practice: proof of care and attentiveness on the part of the therapist: "All that I have told you over the course of our meetings, it did matter. And you were not doodling. You were listening." And if our lives are witnessed by others, and if we behold that our living has moved another, to tears, to change, to inspiration, and if this can be shared back with the person, in a *convincing* manner, how might their lives appear to them afterwards? Here I walked, and my walking *substantively* mattered to another.

I propose that it might be right here, in this crux, that Narrative therapy can re-emerge as the anti-therapy it perhaps set out to be. So much of the traditional therapeutic endeavour concerns itself with the control of person's lives, the creation of docile bodies invested and inseparable from the cultural ideologies, the dominant narratives, of our time. Therapists and clients endlessly skirt a game in which therapy conversations revolve around the question "what should I do?", or phrased in another manner, "how ought we live?" – to which the therapist provides a more or less coherent answer, depending on their particular therapeutic persuasion.





Catherine Foote and Arthur Frank write: “Dominant discourses tell people what to do, and people who have been told then bring to therapy their chaos that what they are being told to do isn’t right for them....The objective is to witness this chaos and accept it while showing the client how it works: how dominant discourse necessarily creates lines of fault, and how the client has had the strength of conviction not to assimilate her or his experience to the dominant discourse. When the client is placed outside of dominant discourse, and no longer knows what is to be done, when any sense of what is to be done is understood as an external imposition that creates another line of fault, the person has reached that “true” position of strength and possibility that Foucault calls ‘no longer knowing what to do.’ That position is no more difficult and dangerous than life already is.” (p 183)

Malidi- Underline this!

Insider Witnessing is a practice that staunchly sets out to “not solve anything”, but instead, asks of a therapist to act as a witness on a client’s behalf. A therapist is asked to retell the clients’ particular stories of what they have been up against in life, - events through which, thanks to which, and against which the counterstories of their own responses shine through. Over the course of my involvement with Insider Witnessing, I have asked myself, why does this feel so different, so joyful and unburdened to take part in this practice as a therapist? Perhaps this is because, for once, we are intentionally and purposefully setting out to side-step any considerations of what “people ought to do” in favour of telling a story of the beauty and extraordinariness of what they have already known to do, especially given what they have been up against in life. In watching the interview, clients do not conclude that they have been given a single instruction of how to live their lives. There is freedom here, in what Foucault calls “no longer knowing what to do.” And we need therapists who can remember freedom!

Tom Carlson might rephrase this rather striking line “no longer knowing what to do” with an incitement to ponder the make-up of “good stories:” a good story, he might say, has the effect of a person starting to wonder, with





curiosity and tenderness towards their own lives: “what might I do next?” In the words of a one of our clients who experienced this practice: “Whatever I do next, I want to be free to choose my choice.”

Majidi- This feels important to me because it demonstrates the intention of creating a space where clients can be equipped with this reflection on their own stories and reveals the intentions and invisible labors of the therapist. I felt like my moral character was demonstrated with no instructions on what to do with it. That was left entirely up to me. It gave me access to the multiplicity of where it can be applied in my life.

There are a few unique ways in which Insider Witnessing as a practice is set up specifically to address relations of power. I will discuss, and more importantly show, 2 of these ways below:

1. Negotiation of Informed Dissent

Over the course of our work on Insider Witnessing, we stumbled upon and thereafter purposefully embraced a practice of negotiating “informed dissent.” Majidi supervised our stumblings by pointing out to us “you are always inviting the protest or contestation.” In fact, Majidi instructs us to “to acknowledge” our wish to be “challenged” “before speaking,” and to speak the words “when it feels off” (notice that Majidi does not say “IF it feels off”). This instruction by Majidi made it very clear to us that we need to move beyond the realm of “negotiating consent,” and even beyond the realm of “inviting contestation” to a “privileging of dissent.”

The following transcript excerpt occurred soon after our conversation with Majidi and shows the many different ways we tried to set the stage for dissent. This may be considered one way of showing our particular “how” on this day, but definitely not a “how-to.”





Tiffany: So, we've met twice before now, and the first time we met—I told them (Tom and Sanni) a little bit about what you've been up against. What some of our work had been like. I shared some of the poems I wrote for you with them. We visited for probably a couple of hours, it was quite a long time. And then from that—we went away and Sanni wrote a poem, which is something you know a little bit about, based on our conversations. And then we got together a second time where these guys interviewed me as you. So not some kind of cheap imitation of you, but kind of my best and most hopeful knowing of you. So, it's pretty hope-biased, which is intentional. But it's not something you have to accept—feel free to contest it "No this is a little much. I don't quite buy that"—feel free, please.

Client: "That's not how I would have answered."

Tiffany: Yeah, - "that's not how I would have answered!"—yes! What we would like to do is play that interview for you, and kind of like a movie, you know? But it's a movie you can stop if you want. So, it's almost if you have a pause button in your hand. Please just say "hang on there, I've got something to say. I don't agree with that"—

Tom: Or just start talking.

Tiffany: Or just start talking, you don't have to say stop. Whatever, interrupt or not, you don't have to do that either. You can just sit and watch it—you can say "I've had enough for today" whatever fits for you. You have—you are in complete charge of how this goes—

Sanni: I might interrupt at times too, I might stop it and see how





you're doing and how it's going. You can freely direct me "no, no, no keep going." Or "actually I'd love to add something", yeah. -Also, my phone is going to ring at 11:30, I have to move my car, but I will try to be very inconspicuous—

Tiffany: Maybe we could pause it at that time, - are you a smoker?

Client: Yes

Tiffany: So, there's—

Tom: Smoker's break?

Tiffany: We could have a smoke break.

Client: I'll have a smoke break, that sounds good. I'll have to go up to the second floor because I meet my sister for smokes [laughs]

Tiffany: Well there might be smokes around here.

[overlapping chatter and laughter]

Tiffany: Okay, and - first, very importantly, does anybody want a snack before we begin?

Tom: Probably.

[laughter and chatter as individuals move about]

Sanni: Okay. We have done this a few times with people, and I want to tell you that people have had responses like "this





is so weird!" right? So if you say that, you find yourself in good company. And there is nothing you can do to offend us, - in fact, any lively response, even if it's "shit, fuck I hate this, can we stop this?" is welcome. [laughter]

Tom: You don't have to be polite.

Sanni: Yes, you don't have to be polite or constrained by things, because this IS a weird thing that we did together. And we don't care if you hate it, or if you are intrigued by it - we care about whatever response you might have, and we WILL take up your response, because that's what matters.

Malidi- I starred this is my notes because this is such an important aspect of informed dissent as not just encouraged but that when it happens it will be welcomed and enhance the overall IWP.

I'm trying to explode the constraints of politeness around you. And you don't have to share your thoughts here either. You can be completely quiet the whole time and say "I'd like to talk to Tiffany later, please. When you weird people aren't around." [laughter]

Tom: Some people find that they want to talk during this, while others are like "I'd rather just take it in" and any of those is fine.

Client: Okay, thank you.

Tom: We've overdone it? [laughter]





- "I'd like to talk to Tiffany later, please. When you weird people aren't around."

In an effort to negotiate active informed dissent, we are giving the client quite a few options of actual words for said dissent because of our appreciation of how heavily the collective gazes of previous therapists (and other authorities of proper personhood) might be resting on our client in the moment of this conversation with us.

Malidi- Relating to "Informed Dissent". I love how this is a positive, empowered, constructive, productive framing of something that is usually dreaded or cast in a negative light. It is being acknowledged as useful and generative instead of stifling.

Invitations to disobedience and dissent are novel, especially given that we work with women who have all experienced the usual misogynist punishments that happen to women when we claim our speaking rights - in Malidi' words: "under surveillance, tone-policed, undermined, colonized, mocked, alienated, too crazy, too angry, too irrational, too loud, too this, too that..."

If we are asking clients to break rules of politeness and reverence of the therapist together with us, then we might just have to be willing to demonstrate our comfort with irreverence in a substantiated manner. Rambunctious laughter from our clients is often the response and gives us a cautious green light to proceed for the time being.

Malidi- I love that as I read through this paper I will write a comment then you will address it from your perspective.

As we proceed with the viewing of the taped interview with the client, we continue to seek dissent and ways for our client to have "more say." More and more, we have turned away from simply asking "how is this going?" or





“what do you think of this?” towards: “how did Tom do with his question here?” or “how did Tiffany do with her answer?” or “is there anything here that is of interest to you?” or even “did we get this wrong already?”

The secret is that the Insider Witnessing interview was constructed over many days of pouring over the clients’ words and stories and imagery, and a concentration of attention on the exact words and the particulars of a clients’ tellings of their life to their therapist – but by the time we show this taped interview to the client, none of us any longer care what it was that we said. The only care in the moment with the client is “and what will you say *now*?” What parts of this feel meaningful or moving to you, what parts do you disagree with, what makes you tearful and why, and what on earth does this get you thinking about NOW?

The secret is that Insider Witnessing is simply a device that seeks to raise a person outside of their story for but a moment, and for them to take a position on their own story from a novel and rare position of oversight. And all that matters is what they will say next.

Malidi- You all turned my goggles on myself in a way that was countering negative self-talk and give access to routes to self-compassion.

2. Observance of Story-telling Rights

In our interview we posed many questions to Malidi as to why she had evaluated the Insider Witnessing interview positively and her best guesses as to what particular practices within the interview had contributed to her appreciation of the efforts. We asked her to consider other participants in the future and advise us on the practices we might want pay close attention

Malidi- ...this, if it comes up and the client wants to, could be apart of the practice... giving them the chance to make a set of rules. Rules on how to set boundaries around what works and doesn't for themselves.





to in our hopes to make ourselves useful to other clients in the future. Malidi outlined the following instructions for future interviews:

May you write my words
 May you be open to following
 May you not talk over me.
 May you get excited
 -Enthusiasm helps you all!-
 And may you cry
 Over my words and my life.

Malidi is speaking about her story-telling rights and how they were observed in the Insider Witnessing interview. This is something each one of our clients has remarked on, the practices of faithful listening, writing, and following our clients' stories. You listened! The labour of love of an Insider Witnessing interview is not for the faint of heart. Our clients cannot afford broad strokes, privileged theorizing, or unsubstantiated story-telling by the therapists involved. In our preparations for these interviews, we rely heavily on the clients' own words for what they have been up-against, and work exclusively in imagery that clients have proposed to their therapists in their previous sessions. The stories that are told in the interview aren't invented, they are the stories that clients themselves have told in their sessions with their therapist. Again, and again, in our preparations, we ask therapists: whose words are these? What exactly did your client say about this? How exactly was it said? Is there a story your client told about this experience, and can you re-tell it in the clients' words and in all its particularity? An Insider Witness interview requires a return to the (almost lost?) arts of note-taking, transcripts, recordings, session notes, therapeutic letters, and poems that will tell us of our client's suffering in their own dictionary and imagery. Without our clients' words, we have no story that anyone should have to suffer to hear.

Below is a poem that grew out of our preparations for the interview with Malidi's therapist, written by Tiffany Saxton. In our poetry writing on behalf



How Insider Witnessing Practices Address Power by Raising the Means to Speak

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of our clients, in lieu of other summaries, both Tiffany and I have taken comfort in the words of the poet Neil Surkan (2018): *Words fail us when we need them to say exactly what we need them to say. Poetry reminds us that we are at our best when we risk everything with our second-best words on behalf of the life of another.*

Tiffany's poem represents an overview of the work of the preparation for our interview with Malidi' therapist. It outlines the story threads that were introduced and considered and retold at length, the companions that were part of these threads, the characters and moments and Malidi' own positions and declarations throughout her life in her own words. It will hopefully give the reader an idea of a concentrated attention to the details of Malidi' life:

A Bibliotherapeutic Exchange or a Momentary Parting Gift or Calling On All Old Souls

My grandma and I sometimes lose our way when we wander,
 Her spells of friendship enchant people into offers of hot chocolate and a ride home;
 We cast circles of warmth and safety and deep connection.
 After the funeral, I helped Grandma Gene undress and get into bed,
 As she did for me from a time before I can remember.
 To each other, we are perfect.
 Sitting in the dark, in solidarity with my grandpa-dad, unalone in the despair;
 Sitting and waiting at the window,
 Longing for you to help and love yourselves.
 My gut refused to be colonized by drinking the potion.
 Won't you join me in this generational protest
 Called by the ancestors who came before and those who are yet to come?
 Won't you join me?

Muggles struggle to connect
 To the magic-conjuring portals of pain and despair and anger;
 My therapist and I, together with the other generalists: Foucault, bell hooks
 and Judith Butler





Are willing to be possessed by our obscurus;
 Will not have our anger at injustice managed.
 We belong
 to the tacit dimension.
 Won't you join us?

I light a smudge in church
 To cleanse and reclaim ground zero of my ancestors' suffering.
 I use the power of my white-cloaked voice
 To chant incantations with a guardian angel at choir;
 Together, we cast spells of comfort and healing.
 Kent Monkman and I issue an invitation to decolonize
 to all Anglican priests who don't think the sun shines out of my ass;
 We zoom out
 and still see the Mounties and nuns tearing children from their families.
 Wakeupandbedisturbedious are the magic words;
 Won't you join us in lifting the curse of enslavement?
 Won't you join us?

I am the old and other-worldly soul, calling out the chef
 Who spread his legs wide
 And mansplained to me the modification of a burger.
 I summoned my powers, as I paced the room in my badge-laden cloak,
 A badge for valour, another for honour;
 Held to account by my obscurus.
 I refuse to forget,
 And connect
 through the residual pain of my ancestors,
 traced back through my grandmother's grandparents
 and find generations of belonging.
 We are committed to not being complicit with atrocities
 Won't you join us?

I felt the weight of the philosopher's stone, zoomed out,





and all who stand with me were revealed.
 We always have plenty of room and you are most welcome.
 Won't you join us?

Upon hearing this poem, Malidi commented: "It's just insane! How well you already know me and get me just by talking to my therapist. And not just an overview, but you get the bigger parts too. It's crazy! You captured the threads that run through my life in ways that even I wouldn't have been able to see it on my own."

Malidi- I can't imagine the kind of mental and emotional energy that doing a genuine IWP takes, to be able to fill so many other people in so that even Tiffany, before even meeting me, could write me a poem that rang so deeply true to me and continues to bolster me when I reread it is amazing. I feel kind of verklempt answering these because I am just remembering and feeling the connectedness which the IWP has made me feel and how that has carried forward in my life. I can now feel my opinions and how I choose to present them are valid, my personal experiences are my expertise, and that is enough.

Malidi- Hell yeah, also, holy shit all of you at the Collective. All of you make me feel seen in such a meaningful way, sometimes it feels self-indulgent.

Enough said.

A Conclusion

What if we tried a thought experiment to return to some of the ideas regarding power that were raised in the introduction to this paper? - What if I told you that one of the therapists who was involved in these interviews was of similar "social location" as Malidi and was therefore purposefully





given a central role in all the preparations, and our interview itself? Would this reassure you? I say it shouldn't! The ability to speak of Malidi's or our own "social location" is but the thinnest of beginnings: what does Malidi's social location tell you about what exactly it is that oppresses her?

Malidi- I highlight this because I had starred it in my notes because it acknowledges that understanding context alone isn't understanding the client and that it isn't so simple and there is a lot of questions and exploration that must happen for that which oppresses to fully be realized. To boil a client down to their social context is to deny their agency.

Not enough! And this, the concentration of attention on what, in particular, oppresses - and roots - a person in their own life, is exactly what the work of Insider Witnessing is about. Social location checkboxes are but the thinnest trace of a history of a person with its fullness and complexity and depth. Insider Witnessing work requires the fullness of a history, rather than a checkbox, to command a therapist's concentrated care and attention. If it were otherwise, we would run the risk of glibly objectifying our clients once more.

In the great game of power relations in therapy there are no alibis. No resting places, no proven prerequisites, no words of assurance. There is only this: one conversation at a time, one utterance at a time, we begin again, the sweaty work of attention, care, and effort to raise our clients to have more say against the details of that which is oppressing them.

Malidi- I highlight this because it reads in a way that I find meaningful, because, like the above highlight, it acknowledges the constant work and discomfort with the hope of empowering clients to own their narratives, boundaries, and power to change things how they feel they wish to, or not.





This work begins with quiet questions of what hurts you and how? What is the worst of it? Have I understood it or just replicated it? And have I also seen your joy and triumph against that which hurts? Have I heard what you have been able to live and say and do, in spite and in the face of everything, and can I tell of it? In Michael White's words, "I think that whatever 'good' therapy is, it will concern itself with establishing structures that will expose the real and potential abuses of power in the practices of the good therapy itself" (As quoted in Denborough, 2009).

The wish to refuse subjugation of another human cannot begin to be achieved by "reifying social locations" or by any other generalized analysis of power. The wish to refuse domination is to care to understand, in a particular person's life, the specific means and ways and words by which this person has been made a subject and to join them, personally, in the specific means and ways and words in which they have mounted a refusal.

Malidi- I highlight this section because of Sanni's loving words that demonstrate her complex practice and constant adjusting she takes on in order to validate the client in their refusals and validate them through mirroring back the parts of themselves that have enlivened her and made her feel like colluding with them.

In Malidi' own words:

Malidi- Lovingly arranged into a poem, by Sanni and demonstrates things she also found powerful in our conversations, which are collaborative and become so lively through our mutual trust, respect and engagement with each other.

Counter-mock all the white maned lions
 With an intention of tenderness, you all.
 Look to my articulateness
 And yours





To finally name that which oppresses me
 And that which roots me
 Such that I can see it and feel it.
 Make no mistake
 This is belonging work:
 It is a gift
 The opposite of alienation.

Malidi- I look forward to continuing to work against alienation from myself and that which affects me. Socially locating someone is not as simple as it sounds. It is a starting point from which to understand the particular ways that I have been oppressed in my unique experience of life. This experience allowed me to perceive myself from a vantage point I'd never experienced before. I am moved by how I've been equipped to be compassionate to myself. I wasn't instructed to show myself compassion, my worthiness of that compassion, especially from myself, was demonstrated in the IWP. I have met and spoken with several other women who have experienced an IWP. Meeting these women and seeing their transformations was powerful. The fact that many of us have gone on feeling empowered to protest and fuck with the powers that have oppressed us is a testament to the empowering nature of a well done and genuine IWP.





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