

# THERAPY, STAND-UP, AND THE GESTURE OF WRITING

Edited by Wyatt, J.

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With a pleasing serendipity, I found myself opening Jonathan Wyatt's book as I was closing Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, which I had just reread after a gap of 25 years. *To the Lighthouse* is a stream-of-consciousness novel where a linear narrative plays second fiddle to the desire to capture the way in which we make sense of a chaotic world from moment to moment.

And so it is with *Therapy, Stand-Up, and the Gesture of Writing*. With the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari at its heart, allied to a new qualitative inquiry concept that Wyatt calls creative-relational inquiry, this book is about reconceptualising what it is to be us and who we are in the world.

At the most literal level, this book is about a therapist exploring the connections between therapy (in particular his work with one client); stand-up comedy, both watching and performing; and writing as a method of enquiry. These, however, are simply the foundations on which a far broader exploration occurs. The book embraces not only the philosophical and conceptual but also the quotidian interactions of relationships—both with others and with oneself. We hear of visits to his ailing mother, his reflections on his late father, the stand-up gigs he goes to and his attempts at performing stand-up of his own. The connective tissue in this multifaceted, sometimes sprawling and tenuous, sometimes tight and dense body of work, is the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari and the creation of creative-relational inquiry.

It is not a conventional narrative, it is far from linear, it is not obvious. It is about being and becoming, and the writing reflects that. It's unsettling and sometimes frustrating—but I don't suppose this is an accident.

The everyday becomes the profound and the familiar takes on deeper significance. The single story of our lives is shattered into its millions of components, which are rebuilt to shape the unifying this-ness of each moment. The chaos of life is tamed and we find our place, albeit constantly shifting, in it. The book is, in Wyatt's own words, "experimental, playful: it is serious play" (p. 4).

Wyatt links live performance "where a performer and audience share material(izing) space together" (p. 6) with therapy: the immediacy, here-and-now, bodily presence, ebb and flow of energy and affect. He advocates that, when it works best, both audience and comic, client and therapist become lost in the moment. Later he points to a link between stand-up and therapy being that each has the same frame every time, but every encounter is different and labile. One word, one gesture can change the whole direction. Each has an illusion of control, an exercise of power, each is finely balanced.

It is interesting in this context that the most touching part of the book is a moving disclosure he makes to his regular client that sits at odds with the overall impression of this particular therapist-client relationship. The disclosure occurs because during a session he is preoccupied, understandably, with his son having been seriously injured in an accident; it provides an exquisite moment of connection between therapist and client, and feels like a mini-epiphany

that echoes the book's focus on the power of the emergent, the meaning that comes from chaos. It remains, perhaps, a challenge to us all to wear our expertise lightly and to be led by our humanity in order to avoid exercising the intrinsic imbalance of power.

The style of writing (actually there are many styles, from conventional narrative to abstract poetry)—can be challenging. It can be staccato, jumpy, full of hyphens, oblique strokes, portmanteau words and neologisms. Sometimes the toying with form and structure, breaks, punctuation and so on feels contrived and arch, while at other times curious and playful. I suspect this depends as much on the reader—indeed the reader-in-that-moment—as the writer.

Sometimes it felt to me too nebulous, too flighty, as though I needed it to be more anchored, certain, graspable, and at other times a little too knowing, a little too self-absorbed: “What kind of act, then, is writing? (I leave that question mark on the page, hesitate and begin the opening bracket, shaping its arc on the third line of my notebook)” (p. 19).

Wyatt reaches for a reconceptualising of experience with the new concept of the creative-relational inquiry. The theoretical framing of the book challenges “the personal's assumed human-centredness”, arguing against “the personal's implicit assumptions of the unitary, essentialist, humanist subject, which can no longer be held in a flattened, immanent ontology” (p. 124).

Wyatt references St. Pierre who suggested, “the personal . . . is one of many shibboleths we will need to find a way to let go of as we re-imagine qualitative enquiry” (p. 125). He goes on to discuss how we might move away from personal pronouns and look at how researchers' experiences constrain what they can know and how they can represent participants' views. He quotes De Freitas and Paton: “Autobiographical acts . . . are acts of ellipsis and erasure as much as they are acts of constitution” (p. 125).

This is a fascinating challenge to the status quo that feeds into the broader political question of whether the placing of pathologising diagnosis firmly on the individual absolves society and its leaders of addressing the root causes of psychological distress in the world today. While the political class divide and conquer, and our increasingly solipsistic society sees only the “i” in “society”, what chance a new way of understanding our being in the world?

Wyatt cites Laurel Richardson's huge influence in writing as a method of inquiry and how she opened up new possibilities for qualitative scholars. He describes an encounter with Richardson, during which he read some of his writing to her. He concluded, “I found a life in this story: Laurel listening to my writing. It was nothing much, and it was everything” (p. 9).

I was moved by this. Writing, for me, has always been an active and reciprocal process where I learn what I think, what I feel and who I am as the letters fall upon the page. To have someone then read or listen to them is an act of profound importance, of being heard, of being accepted, of being understood.

Wyatt, who launched the Centre for Creative-Relational Inquiry in 2017, says:

*This is a claim of and for this book, that writing matters, can make a difference; and that writing, in particular about therapy and stand-up, speaks to and of a world beyond itself; it connects. Connects theory and therapy, loving and losing, laughing and crying. (p. 20)*

He adds, “Creative-relational inquiry casts relating—to others, to ourselves, to the material world—as generative process, as doing, as dynamic . . . How ‘we’, bodies, meaning, life, are created in and through relating” (p. 47).

Writing as inquiry inhabits a similar space to therapy. At its most exquisite, we find we must live with the not knowing in order to allow the extraordinary. In therapy, the creative-relational is the emergent, the intersubjective space that is more than the sum of the two people in the room, moments beyond us, something more than. But be warned: “Writing, I am not sure what I will find and I am not sure that I will like it” (p. 69).

A considerable amount of the book is given over to Deleuzoguattarian concepts that seek to connect our subjectivity with the external, that aim to form our position in a chaotic world, that bring together a multiplicity of partial objects in a momentary self, that provide us with the illusion of a capacity to make sense of everything. It would take a better man than I to, in the space available, explain Deleuze and Guattari, let alone how Wyatt draws their theories to wrap around his three putative central themes, so I hope he'll forgive me if I end as I began, with Woolf: “In the

midst of the chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing . . . was struck into stability" (Woolf, 1992, p. 176).

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## REFERENCE

Woolf, V. (1992). *To the lighthouse*. London, UK: Penguin Books.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



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