Ventriloquation and ghostwriting as responses to oppression in therapy
Gail Simon
Institute of Applied Social Research, University of Bedfordshire, Luton, UK
Corresponding author. Email: gail.simon@beds.ac.uk

Abstract

Background: People coming to therapy as part of their recovery from torture may choose not to speak or write about their experiences, yet the process of seeking asylum requires that they must hand over their life stories for a true–false adjudication with potentially life and death consequences. When people have been silenced and speaking has become dangerous, there are major ethical challenges for the activist practitioner who, along with the person who has experienced torture, sees the importance of stories not only being understood and shared in ways which are factual but which contain truth. Methods: I share my experiments with writing as a form of inquiry, specifically ghostwriting and ventriloquation. Findings: These have the effects of (1) moving the therapeutic process into a collaborative inquiry between the client, an asylum seeker, and me as both counsellor and expert witness; (2) letting fictionalised tellings of ‘real life’ reveal the hidden and complex life stories of clients and counsellors and (3) sharing stories which would otherwise remain hidden and risk perpetuating oppressive practices. Implications for practice: Ghostwriting and ventriloquation offer the practitioner-researcher ways of speaking from a first-person position, from ‘within’ experience rather than a distanced ‘about-ness’ position. In this dialogical writing, I use actual and imagined inner and outer voices to enable the sound of talk and thought to be reflexively and empathically heard and felt by readers. Relational ethics are considered in how to imagine the other and manage ownership of stories without reproducing oppressive practices.

How can I make my writing matter? How can I write to help speed into this world a democratic project of social justice? (Richardson & St Pierre, 2005, p. 967)

About-ness and with-ness writing

Nona came to therapy but she didn’t talk. I could see she wanted to communicate and, in effect, she was communicating. She appeared to be having all kinds of feelings and thoughts and urges to share something. I sat in silence. I offered paper. We discussed sport. Sometimes I shared my imaginings of her inner thoughts and shared my reading of the atmosphere we were in, and I offered my wonderings to her in a loosely held kind of way so as to be careful not to mishandle her story.

My supervisor at the time, John Burnham, once asked her whether she experienced me more like a biographer or as a ghostwriter. What’s a ghostwriter? asked Nona. A ghostwriter, said John, helps people who are not professional writers tell their story in their own voice and in their own words so it gets out there and is heard. Whereas, he continued, a biographer can tell stories about a person’s life...
Ireland as a province of possibilities in language and imagination it also becomes a province or domain of ethics. If those from marginalised groups are to be able to tell the stories of their lived experiences in a context where normative compliances are expected then we must also recognise that there is a danger of subjecting them to silence and co-option. [........] We would hold that imposing normative expectations on marginalised clients without reference to their contexts of adversity constitutes a colonial therapeutic stance which distances us from the subjugated “other”. (McCarthy & Byrne, 2007, p. 330)

In the next section, I share a story which speaks to the problem of writing truth, the collapse of genuineness. It shows how professionals can also be subject to censorship of which stories can be told, and how, in what kind of voice, and with what addressee in mind.

From monologue to dialogue and back again

My research nearly killed somebody. I know that might sound a crazy thing to say and even when I explain, you may still feel it’s a statement which is unreasonable. But it felt like this to me. What am I talking about? I am talking about being asked to write a report for the Immigration Courts after I was called as an expert witness to offer ‘evidence’ (deep breath)… evidence that my client, Yuma, was really a lesbian. Really, really, really a lesbian.

The thing is, after such a long period of my experimenting with practice writing which critiqued authority implicit in authorship, I had forgotten how to write in a depersonalised way – with facts and an objectifying tone to construct a particular rendition of a professional relationship: that is expert therapist and ‘needy’ client. After the extended immersion in my doctoral research on writing as a relational practice and my devotion to developing ways of writing reflexively, transparently, collaboratively, with public sharing of inner dialogue (like this), I struggled to remember how to write a court report. I had to remember the young social worker I used to be who had been proud to join in a language of professional expertise with my colleagues of the court. Trying to remember that way of being, that way of speaking, of writing, simply exposed the great gaps between what I believed to be good practice then – appearing ‘professional’ by writing about clients – and what I believe to be good practice now – collaborating reflexively on texts with people-coming-for-therapy.

I felt desperate. A life almost certainly depended on my conveying the truth in a believable style. I believed Yuma would kill herself rather than face deportation to life imprisonment and further systematic torture, abuse and possibly murder. So once I had written my report, I had to put it through the washing machine many times to wring every last drop of humane voice out of the text. The washing machine was a small select group of friends and neighbours who worked in the court system. This
I was called as an expert witness because I was not only Yuma’s therapist but her lesbian therapist. Lesbian. In the court’s eyes, my expertise lay, I would say, about 10% with the therapist identity, 15% with the lesbian element and 75% with the combination term: lesbian therapist. However, in becoming an expert witness, I also ceased to be a lesbian – a real lesbian! I had to play by different ‘professional’ rules and write all my statements in the first language of the racist, homophobic institution. And I worked hard to erase the familiar, the sounds-like-me-talking and do the opposite of what Black American novelist, Toni Morrison, says she has to do which is to write many versions to erase the sound of the mainstream authorities and dominant culture. I had to put back the mainstream. I had to be a nice, not too nice, non-threatening lesbian therapist. However, in the court’s eyes, my expertise lay, I was called as an expert witness because I was not only Yuma’s therapist but her lesbian therapist. Lesbian. In the court’s eyes, my expertise lay, I would say, about 10% with the therapist identity, 15% with the lesbian element and 75% with the combination term: lesbian therapist. However, in becoming an expert witness, I also ceased to be a lesbian – a real lesbian! I had to play by different ‘professional’ rules and write all my statements in the first language of the racist, homophobic institution. And I worked hard to erase the familiar, the sounds-like-me-talking and do the opposite of what Black American novelist, Toni Morrison, says she has to do which is to write many versions to erase the sound of the mainstream authorities and dominant culture. I had to put back the mainstream. I had to be a nice, not too nice, non-threatening (improbable) lesbian and not look like I was suppressing subversive thoughts. I had to look like a therapist who was a certain kind of lesbian – not sure what kind. I couldn’t be a sister. I must suspend all personal beliefs about race, class, gender and privilege. I must not question anyone else’s thinking. I must speak and write from an about-ness position (Shotter, 1999). I must answer questions in the court about my ‘professional’ opinion of ‘my client’s’ sexual orientation and sound certain without sounding opinionated.

And I must be impassive as I participate in further objectifying her life experience. She has had her story told, retold, misquoted, interrogated, framed as untruths – in effect, trampled on by the authorities. The ‘facts’ of her life have been paraded in public courts, evidence photocopied in colour, challenged and ripped to shreds. Her lived experience ripped to shreds! Her life is at stake because she cannot produce officially witnessed transcripts from her former life, abuse hurled from a passing car, serious assaults, threats to her life and that of her partner.

At times, I fantasised that presenting the everyday inner dialogue of Yuma to the life-granting authorities would be more successful than the decontextualised parading of a catastrophic catalogue of events always referred to as ‘alleged’. But, they would say I ‘made it up’ – so it wouldn’t count for anything.

Perhaps we were all in a bind: to be believed her story had to be sufficiently evidenced and moving. Without sufficient evidence, a moving story is discounted. The subtle, subjective and complex ways of practitioner knowing (Scott, Brown, Lunt & Thorne, 2004) are not considered sufficiently scientific, and are therefore, not professionally robust for monological spaces such as immigration courts where knowledge must be evidenced in certain kinds of ways. This is especially the case concerning lesbian, gay or transgender asylum seekers as there is a chasm in comprehension in the statutory systems (see Bennett & Thomas, 2013; Gray & McDowall, 2013; Jordan & Morrissey, 2013).

By positioning ourselves neither inside or outside but both and somewhere else which is always shifting, we describe the experience of being in relation to something or someone. There is no thing apart to be described but an interactive, mutually changing relationship between people or things.

(Bakhtin, in Shotter, 2011)

In the piece of writing, below, where I imagine Yuma sitting in the park, I am exercising an attempt at understanding but I am not presuming to present this as a truth of how it is for her. This writing of my imagining what Yuma would say, notice, feel, is based on hours and hours of conversation, sitting with Yuma, being in conversation not just about or with facts but with an emotional presence. But if I am going to speak about my own experience and about Yuma’s or someone else’s life, how do I do that without stealing their voices or exploiting their stories, without being sensationalist but honest, without becoming another colonising appropriator of lived experience?

I have used ghostwriting as an opportunity for reflexive collaborative inquiry with Yuma. It has helped me to imagine and understand the complexity in her everyday life, in her inner and outer dialogue. And readers may position themselves as critically informed participants. Texts, such as the one which follows, in which I imagine Yuma, are not intended as single, comprehensive or objective attempts at depiction. They are a human response to something complex and unspeakable in everyday talk and for which there is often no audience.

In using the notion of representation in research, it is therefore important to problematize the relationship between representation and reality and to examine how texts can be seen both to represent something other than themselves (i.e., the experiences of research participants) as well as presenting themselves as texts. (Rhodes, 2000, p. 514)
**Risking writing ‘as if’**

In exploring alternative forms of writing, so do we open the door to new modes of relationship. Thus to hammer out forms of relational representation may bring into being new forms of action. (Gergen, 2009)

In the piece of writing below (Gail imagining) Yuma, I felt, still feel, a huge sense of responsibility. In the context of her and my relationship and many aspects of the wider world, I am a person with privilege: I am white, English speaking, professional, have some financial stability, have UK citizenship; I have an education under my belt; I have a home, a partner and a different history in relation to safety. On the other hand, I wear chips on my shoulder with a Lesbian Feminist, European Jewish, Socialist Pride. These are cuts which speak to my metal, those of my sisters and brothers and act as a reminder of my responsibilities to those whose lives and life stories are at risk of erasure. They inform my commitment to creating opportunities for the telling of stories even if the reading or hearing of the story invites discomfort.

I try to set out stories to invite reflexivity from the readership. I write from inside and outside of my ‘own’ experience with the responsibilities of what Vikki Reynolds calls a ‘fluid and imperfect ally’ (Reynolds, 2010).

Lorraine Code raises the problem of claiming to understand the other:

> Often we do not understand even “our own” experiences as well as that seemingly sacrosanct expression of ownership implies; and only rarely can we presume to understand exactly how it is for someone else even of our own class, race, sexual orientation and social group. (Code, 1995, p. 27)

I am writing ‘as if’ from within the inner dialogue of another person, Yuma. Harlene Anderson (2005) has invited practitioners to imagine someone with whom they work by speaking their imagined thoughts and feelings ‘as if’ from within the first person of the other and from within the present tense. Imagining the lives of others allows us to peek into a person’s environment, show interpersonal intimacies with others and identify areas of their lives where relational contexts influence personal choice and human rights.

The ‘as if’ exercise, like this form of ghostwriting, does more than simply portray imagined inner workings, content and narrative. It creates an invitation to intimacy between the ‘as if’ speaker and the person whom they are imagining. It extends their relationship. The reader is also entering into an intimate relationship with the speaker. They are getting to know this person.

**(Gail imagining) Yuma. A May day in Bloomsbury Square, London**

It is a cold day. But not as cold as I have known these last few years. I slept through that winter in Manchester. On the streets. That was cold! The blossom in the trees around me is calming. Pink, white, purple against a blue sky. I sit up straight with focus, with optimism and then inwardly sink back with a silent knowing and sigh slowly. Don’t go there. It’s not safe to feel safe. I wait to hear the word ‘yet’ on the end of my sentence but it doesn’t come. ‘Yet’ too is an unsafe word in my desperation to stay calm while I await my fate.

Do the people who will decide my fate sit in offices like those surrounding this beautiful London square? Who are the people who work in such old and upright buildings? I wonder how they got a job there? Perhaps I too will one day work in such a building. I will walk with confidence in my salaried step. With security in a world as small as a list of things to do at work and a plan for lunch. And what I am going to watch on tv that night. Yes, I would have a tv, and a tv licence and I would cook for my friends, instead of them feeding me. I wonder whose house I can go to watch football this weekend? The sun makes for nice thoughts. I brace myself again. I cannot afford to relax. I am not a member of this society. No! I cannot say ‘yet’! I cannot say that word. It is not in my power. It does not belong to me. I do not decide. I sag further into the park bench and feel the heaviest of nothings.

I think some time has passed because it has clouded over and someone is sitting eating their lunch on the other end of the bench. I am hungry. I wonder if Gail will have a hot chocolate waiting for me. I feel my spirit go up a degree but I also feel a twist inside, a tiredness at being seen as someone who has no money. I am so tired of that. When I was working as an administrator, I had my own money. I paid for myself. I am trying to keep that feeling of pride. That’s why I get angry sometimes with those people who do not listen, who do not read, who do not believe me or the lawyers or the doctors. I feel anger rising in me and I hear myself grunt. The
person on the end of the bench looks round. I want to say “I am as good as you!” They are folding up half of their sandwich to throw in the bin. Why have they spent money on food they are not going to eat? I want to tell them “You don’t know how lucky you are!” but I don’t say anything and neither of us is sure if we have been noticed by the other.

I do not like being a charity case. I still give money to charity. Once a month. When I get my money through. To that homeless man at the tube station. I have my pride and I know they have theirs. And that we are all deserving, worthy of a chance and the right to be respected. I like to think Gail giving me hot chocolate is a way of her showing me respect. She knows I like chocolate. But sometimes, I see her look awkward. She tries to play down what she is doing and I too play it down. That’s what we have to do. That’s alright. It’s okay...

I am so tired again today. My nights are filled by scenes of me being picked up again, thrown into a van, taken to the removal centre. I try to get away but they always capture me. It is dark. They are raping me again...

A big red bus is coming close to the kerb. I pull back. A part of me wants to keep going but I hear a sensible voice saying stand back from the kerb and mind the gap. Perhaps it is my father’s voice, perhaps my mother’s, perhaps Maxine’s, perhaps Gail’s, perhaps mine. For now, I try to cross the road carefully. I must stay alive in case...

A form of inquiry

Imagining the other is likely to bring forth new information to the ‘as if’ speaker but potentially also to the person being described. ‘As if’ writings and speech acts need to be understood and treated as a form of collaborative inquiry in which there is room for the person whose life is being described to edit the descriptions. A responsibility of the imagining person is to hold their imaginings lightly and not become convinced that one’s own imagining is the correct or only version of events. In principle, space should be made for the added voice of the other to establish that this attempt at description is accurate enough. The power of speech (especially with an audience) or print is seductive. Writing with an eraser is a moral stance but not to be confused with censorship. The ethical requirement is to make it clear to the reader what the context is for the writing. Who is speaking? How clearly has the writer set a clear and transparent context for the reader? And to consider what consequences there may be for the ‘as if’ writer and the person imagined in the text.
Rhodes also understands ghostwriting as a form of inquiry,
the textual practice of research as a form of ghostwriting can provide useful avenues for understanding the relationship between the researcher and the researched and for accounting for reflexivity. In this sense, ghostwriting is used to refer to a practice where a researcher engages with a research participant and, as a result, creates a new text that both tells a story of that participant and implies the involvement of the researcher. (Rhodes, 2000, p. 514)

Human research takes place within relationships. My task is to find ways of writing from within those relationships which reflect aspects of the dialogical and relationally reflexive ways of being in practice relationships (Simon, 2014). Research into human experience takes place in different landscapes and, by locating ‘as if’ writing in a real townscape, for example, we can imagine Yuma imagining the other sitting next to her on the park bench throwing away their half-eaten lunch while she is hungry. We experience not only a ‘transient convergence’ (Anderson, 2009; Cornforth, Lang & Wright, 2012) as readers imagine Yuma in that space but also we witness the transient convergence of Yuma in the telling of her story alongside a stranger in a London square feeling peripheral to the claim on the space.

There are ways in which I render myself visible in ‘(Gail Imagining) Yuma’ through my commitment to foreground her story, to amplify her voice. The title immediately oriented the reader in that it describes my role in imagining Yuma speaking. No one is pretending Yuma wrote this piece. In it, I include an imagined reflection ‘by her’ on our relationship. The act of sharing and discussing this writing with her has some resemblance to Karl Tomm’s and John Burnham’s Internalised Other Interviewing (Tomm, in Burnham, 2006; Epston, 1993) in which a therapist interviews a person ‘as if’ they were someone or something else and reflects with them afterwards on the experience. Speaking from within a first-person position also connects with Jane Speedy’s writing on witnessing in the use of definitional ceremonies as a form of research (Speedy, 2004).

Ethical and technical choices

How do we create texts that are vital? That are attended to? That make a difference? (Richardson, 1994, p. 517)

I think of this kind of writing as a ‘fifth province dis-position’ (McCarthy & Byrne, 2007, p. 3). In their writing, ‘Towards an Ethics of Imagination’, McCarthy and Byrne make links between creativity and care.

Imagining another calls for an ethic of care. To imagine the life of an other is to adopt a stance of ethical responsibility towards the other. Placing such a stance within a therapeutic domain, which features issues of social justice, is also a political act. Thus imagining a fifth province dis-position in systemic therapies is, for us, about occupying a borderline territory between one’s own world and that of those we are in conversation with. (McCarthy & Byrne, 2007, p. 330)

Writing ‘(Gail Imagining) Yuma’ presented me with both ethical and technical challenges. Actually, it is hard to separate out the technical from the ethical. Am I borrowing her voice to write with? I think so. I may be lending her my articulation of my imagining of her thoughts, feelings and bodily responses. I may be imposing my sentence construction and language. And it may be that in ‘imagining Yuma’, I am also writing my concerns. ‘I cannot dare to hope’ and ‘I want to hear the word “yet” on the end of my sentence but it doesn’t come’. I know those feelings. There are some overlaps in our language now. But this isn’t make-believe. Yuma is not a ‘made-up’ character. She is someone I know and am in moving conversation with, silent and spoken. She has often told me what she feels and thinks about her life, about the people she meets, the authorities, the place of her past in her waking and sleeping life. When I remember the conversations with Yuma, I hear her voice. It is the voice of an African woman. When I ‘transcribe’ some of ‘her’ thoughts about her life, I hear her voice. I try to write and read it with her accent, with a certain kind of African voice in mind but I am not in a position to write in her country’s accent. Perhaps Yuma sounds quite English to people from her country. I write with my inner ears and read back with a listening for what I call ‘sounds enough like’ which I feel is the best I can hope for and offer.

I discussed all parts of this text with Yuma and asked her if this piece of writing sounded like her talking or thinking – or was it like hearing an English person speaking for her. She said it sounded how she thinks and she gave me an example. She made some dry and humorous remarks and she was moved. She says it is important for this piece of writing to be out there so others can know what is really going on. But
there are complicating issues to do with power and resources which influence the exchanges between us and which may create a sense of indebtedness to me.

I have been likening writing choices to that of taking a professional stance. McCarthy and Byrne suggest ‘that a professional stance is never “innocent” [. . . . .]. This is because professional discourses are shot through with normative and professional judgements, that inevitably collide with marginalised personal accounts’. (McCarthy & Byrne, 2007, p. 330).

Imagining the other is part of my everyday living ethics and practice as a counsellor and supervisor. As I write my imagining of her, I write in the hope that Yuma feels something important has been understood by me about the complexity of her experience. Perhaps my writing ‘as if’ Yuma was a form of ventriloquation, a way of creating distance between the speaker of the words and their writer (Tannen, 2009, 2010) while bringing her experiences and thoughts closer to a reflexive reader.

The taking on of voices, then, is a resource by which speakers negotiate relative connection and power, because it allows them to introduce a persona, then borrow characteristics associated with that persona, to, for example, downplay the relative hierarchy between themselves and interlocutors or create closeness with interlocutors or with those whose personas they reference. (Tannen, 2009, p. 6)

When Yuma says, ‘I think to myself “I should write. I should write about . . . everything that has happened . . .” I have so many things I could tell. But, I cannot write’. I hear not so much a lost voice, as Visweswaran (1994) suggests in trying to account for the gaps in first-person voices in the ethnographic literature, but perhaps a censored voice or a person traumatised into silence. The word ‘lost’ sounds more innocent than ‘censored’, ‘overwhelmed’, ‘silenced’ or ‘murdered’. I have found it useful to borrow from Burnham’s practice of ‘lending someone his imagination’ (Burnham, 2003) in thinking about lending voice, courage or, indeed, borrowing their voice, courage or imagination with which to speak.

Rhodes suggests

research can be examined as a form of textual practice in which researchers create images of others and also enter those images… In such a practice, research can be understood as a dialogic process where researchers are never neutral in their attempts to write about the lives of other people. This then leads to a need for researchers to account

for their textual choices and their role in producing accounts of the experience of others. (Rhodes, 2000, p. 511)

This writing has done more than highlight issues facing many lesbian or gay asylum seekers or facing counsellors working with asylum seekers. It has provided material for Yuma and I to discuss in our conversations and she has said how important it has been for me to try to understand her situation through my writing.

Writing with a responsibility to a social justice agenda

This writing is not intended as finalised text or finished telling, not as ‘neat, Hollywood tales, but hard-fought, messy forays into the unknown’ (Wyatt & Tamas, 2013, p. 7). My attempts to speak through writing had three main research objectives. The first was an attempt to offer Yuma and me a space for reflexive and collaborative inquiry about my understanding of her experience. The second involved a concern to find ways of exposing and making sense of the contradictions in what counts as truth between the worlds of counselling and immigration officers and immigration courts. Their dangerously ill-informed and methodologically weak means of establishing truth on which to base their decisions meant they had to rely on limited experience of the person and a belief in the power of their superior position to know better than a number of expert witnesses all in agreement. Detailed and meticulously prepared reports by expert psychiatrists, psychologists, lesbian and gay specialists, trauma specialists, scarring specialists (many reproduced by subsequent experts after the first reports were thrown out by a judge on spurious grounds). Her life, her embodied evidence, her hard to speak history had been twice, thrice, four times struck through with deliberate cuts showing no care for her or for the other people whose life lay in photocopied reports on desks, in briefcases and filing cabinets, in the cars of professionals between workplaces while she – and others – had no freedom of movement or platform from which to speak. The third objective was to expose and discuss the complex workings of counsellors and counselling relationships using writing to reveal and discuss inner dialogue, dilemmas, imagining and ethics in order to learn more about how we work as counsellors, our identities as people in the world and how we live our ethics.
Ghostwriting and ventriloquation can be used to expose forms of oppression by collaborating with those not able to tell their own stories. These are reflexive and collaborative forms of inquiry opening opportunities for sharing of reflection and furthering understanding. A commitment to heightened reflexivity and relational ethics reduces the risk of further exploitation to people who have already been oppressed. Ventriloquation makes it possible to render audible a range of voices within i) inner and internalised dialogue, ii) outer talk and iii) the insistent, pervasive presence in everyday life of oppressive dominant discourses and their embodied practices of power.

Acknowledgements

This study is dedicated with respect and appreciation to Yuma and all those within and beyond this study who have helped it find a voice and a place and thanks to the Baltic Art Center, Gotland, Sweden for the space to write this paper.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

References


Biography

My field is reflexive practice research mostly with systemic practitioners in the therapy or organization fields. My research specialism is on writing as a reflexive and relational activity. I teach and study how practitioners can find ways of writing ethically and creatively from within their work relationships and not so much about them or about their clients. My practice home is the Pink Practice, a radical LGBTQ systemic therapy practice in London which I co-founded in 1990. Working within my own community has always provoked many questions about how to critically and reflexively work with power in professional relationships. I lead the Professional Doctorate in Systemic Practice at the University of Bedfordshire which promotes post-positivist qualitative research suited to researching with a concern to challenge social injustice. I have taught systemic therapy and systemic research at several universities. I have been writing papers on post-method approaches to therapeutic practice and research. I live and work in the UK moving between green hills and the built environment of the city.