Poet as Mediator

I observe the dominant narrative around the function of community-oriented poets in my context to be one centred on empowerment through the course of platforming underrepresented voices. The goal of this approach is to strive for representation until the currently underrepresented feel visible enough and heard enough, leading to more people knowing about a particular group's experiences. However in this section I offer a more expansive possibility for how a poet could function in a community context. Instead of the poet primarily being a voice for expressing their own hearts and experiences of existences, or that of their socio-political tribe, I propose the poet as Mediator as a fitting suggestion for facilitating processes of exchange and interaction across differing communities (islands) within the Community as Archipelago. This is in my opinion the preferred model for community engagement because representation does not necessarily equate to increased understanding or empathy for any given social group.

Unlike most arts-based community engagement activities, this approach assumes latent and open conflict *during the process of poiesis* as a healthy step towards building better understanding across difference. Scholars in organisational behaviour,[1] David Buchanan and Andrzej Huczynski provide a helpful definition of conflict; they describe it as 'a process that begins when one party perceives that another party has negatively affected, or is about to negatively affect, something the first party cares about.'[2] Within the Community as Archipelago model, there will inevitably be groups who perceive other to have negatively impacted their own group and the poet-Mediator is attuned to these dynamics. Assuming conflict allows spaces for real honesty which in turn repurposes it towards a constructive goal. The poet-Mediator seeks to engage relationally mature, curious members of the community to foster a culture that values working across differences through creativity.

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[1] Carol M. Kopp, Organizational Behaviour, Tuesday April 27th 2021, <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/o/organizational-behavior.asp>, [accessed Thursday 11th November 2021], (para 1 of 21). Organisational Behaviour is the study of how people work and relate together in groups.
[2] David Buchanan, Andrzej Huczynski, *Buchanan: Organizational Behaviour*, (London: Pearson Education, Limited, 2015) p. 719.

It is useful at this point to include a definition of mediation. I take Bristol-based arts therapist and restorative justice facilitator Marian Liebmann's definition as quoted in Ridley-Duff and Bennett's paper. She defines mediation as:

> 'A process by which an impartial third party helps two (or more) disputants work out how to resolve a conflict. The disputants, not the mediators, decide the terms of any agreement reached. Mediation focuses on future rather than past behaviour'[3]

Although mediators are not arbiters, they exercise a level of functional authority to help those engaged in conflict move towards a resolution they themselves decide. What is relevant to this exploration of poiesis in communities is how the mediator achieves this. In essence, a mediator teases out and tactfully engages that which is *concealed* in both parties. This may include underlying desires, interests and fears which, prior to the point of assisted negotiation, were veiled to those engaged in a dispute. Mediators help bridge the gap and highlight discrepancies between what is felt or meant versus what is openly communicated by each member of the process in any given conflict. Mediators help those involved in a conflict prioritise their future relationship and help them to focus on the possibilities of working together which are ahead of them, rather than the difficulties and misunderstandings of the past.

I use four principles taken from mediation in law to help constitute a framework for how I might go about facilitating poiesis in my locale. I wish to explore voluntariness, neutrality, empowerment and a unique solution.[4]

First, voluntariness assumes both parties involved in a conflict want to be present during the mediation process. A poet as a Mediator should take opportunities to capitalise off the fact that the audience members or those participating in community project or workshop with

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[3] Marian Liebmann quoted in R. J. Ridley-Duff, A. J. Bennett, 'Mediation: developing a theoretical framework for understanding alternative dispute resolution', paper to British Academy of Management, University of Sheffield, 2010, p. 4. Original source: 'History and Overview of Mediation in the UK' in *Mediation in Context*, (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2000).

[4] David Spencer, Michael C. Brogan, *Mediation Law and Practice* (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 83.

the aim of working across difference are present on a voluntary basis. This might look like coming up with a creative exercise which fosters clarity around why the participants' feel this type of poetic engagement might be beneficial for them, whether that engagement looks like writing their own poetry in a workshop or listening to a piece and spending a few minutes sharing their responses to it. The poet-Mediator might give a prompt or provocation around the theme of voluntariness to help participants work through their motives for coming to a specific event.

Spencer and Brogan summarise the principle of neutrality as such:

> 'The mediator's role was merely to facilitate the mediation process. The parties owned the content; the mediator controlled the process. It was not a mediator's role to act as judge or jury, to support one party's view over the other, to say who was right or wrong, to provide advice, or to suggest or impose solutions.'[5]

Neutrality is something which the poet as mediator should strive for. Although art is never truly impartial (Wynter has taught us we are never epistemologically neutral), it could be to the poet's advantage to *present* an unbiased, or at the very least, non-inflammatory position with regards to how they write, deliver their work or engage with their Community as Archipelago. This is where the poet carefully balances being a speaker with being a facilitator of other voices different from their own (I use the word, *'facilitator'* not 'speaker' as one cannot authentically speak from a perspective that is not theirs). The poet-Mediator who gives an aura of neutrality signals to those who engage with their work that they have not set themselves up as judge over participant's thoughts. One way to achieve this is through prioritising an 'observational voice' rather than a didactic one and positioning oneself far from overt moralising. Scholars Raina J. León and Norma D. Thomas who have had success using poetry to build relationships across difference helpfully state, 'The use of poetry, when implemented effectively, can enable individuals to communicate in non-threatening ways and open themselves up to other views of seeing the world.'[6] I believeThe poet-Mediator seeks to encourage this in other people by modelling it well in their own writing first.

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[5] ibid., p. 85.
[6] Norma D. Thomas and Raina J. León, 'Breaking barriers: Using poetry as a tool to enhance diversity understanding with youth and adults' *Journal of Poetry* Therapy, 25 (2012), 83-93 (p. 83).

As the poet-Mediator becomes a facilitator of other voices through the principle of neutrality, this gives way to empowerment. I take Spencer and Brogan's definition of empowerment as 'derived from the recognition that participants were quite capable of negotiating for themselves and reaching their own decision. The parties' ability in this regard was acknowledged and respected.'[7]This process of empowerment has faith that those involved in the conflict have the ability, knowledge and wisdom to make the decisions that work well for them. From a practical perspective, this will involve seeking and working with people who already have an interest in creatively engaging across difference. It will involve finding people who have the emotional awareness and will to put one's own persuasions on the back burner for the sake of understanding something new. There is little chance of this approach succeeding with people who are completely inflexible in their opinions or who do not see the benefits of engaging with people who are very different to them. This also links with the principle of voluntariness.

Finally, a unique solution is agreed and developed by both participants in the conflict. Spencer and Brogan found that:

> 'resolution need not conform to legal precedents or community norms (with the exception of illegalities). This encouraged creativity. The possibilities were endless. This linked in with the concept of parties' empowerment. It enabled wider underlying interests and needs to be discussed and resolved, and not just sterile legal rights and outcomes.'[8]

The poet-Mediator encourages those who want to gain understanding across difference that the possibilities of working towards collaboration need not conform to cultures or expectations that have previously been standardised on both sides. For example, the student and young professionals community might find a 'unique solution' in working on a joint exhibition with the predominantly white working-class community of Knowle West which bring together disparate political positions and create work which promotes ideas

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[7] Spencer and Brogan, p. 83.

[8] Spencer, Brogan, *Mediation Law and* Practice, p. 85.

around common ground. This would inevitably go against the grain of the norms which exist on both sides. In facilitating a unique solution, the poet-Mediator approach puts on equal footing different groups within the context of creative engagement. Suddenly, those involved become co-labourers towards something which involves necessary and active participation on both sides.

The salient question after reflecting on these principles then becomes: how could the poet-Mediator achieve this activity of poiesis as defined by revealing that which is concealed across differing communities? How would the poet-Mediator know what is concealed in differing communities outside their own?

 Similar work has already been done and been a success. Norma D. Thomas & Raina J. León speak of activities they carried out around diversity over a duration of years. In their paper 'Breaking barriers: Using poetry as a tool to enhance diversity understanding with youth and adults',[9] they explain some ideas which helped them achieve healthy engagement across difference through poetry participation. After many years of running workshops on diversity, this is the point at which their fruit started to bear:

> 'the authors began using a nonthreatening methodology through the use of various poetic means and the inclusion of personal artifacts to enable workshop participants to talk to each other without feeling blamed, getting defensive or shutting down. Poetry allows workshop participants an opportunity to immediately engage in an understanding that reflects their own journey in becoming who they are. It embodies the journey to become more human in content and form more easily than using a didactic approach.'[10]

They root their approach within the concept of 'writing as a method of inquiry' as opposed to writing as presenting the thoughts of preestablished conclusions. They quote professor of sociology Laurel Richardson who, in her paper the Handbook of Qualitative Research explains:

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[9] Thomas, León, 'Breaking Barriers', p. 83.
[10] Thomas, León, 'Breaking Barriers', p. 84.

> 'Language is a constitutive force, creating a particular view of reality and of the Self ... Writing is no exception. No textual staging is ever innocent (including this one). Styles of writing are neither fixed nor neutral but rather reflect the historically shifting domination of particular schools or paradigms.'[11]

The reference to 'personal artifacts' mentioned in their summary of how they started to gain traction with diverse groups highlights an important point I want to now make. As aforementioned, the poet-Mediator's role is primarily oriented around bringing clarity to the voices of other people. But this is not at the total expense of their own voice. My suggestion for achieving this balance looks at some principles of autoethnography for some direction. The definition of autoethnography which fits best with this Community as Archipelago approach is the following by interdisciplinary scholars Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams and Arthur P. Bochner:

> 'Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act.'[12]

With the concept of poet-Mediator in mind, the community based poet seeks to use the principles of autoethnography as a springboard for prioritising experiences which bring into sharp focus cultural experiences of contention, whilst using an observational voice to not give away too much of their own personal opinion on an issue.

Here is a live example from an ordinary experience today. I came across a news story of a sixteen-year-old girl who managed to escape a kidnapping situation because she used a sign trending on Tik Tok to alert someone of her situation.[13] She was found by the police and rescued. The comments section largely praised the girl and the concept – saying more people should be aware of this sign so that other people should use it when they feel unsafe. But I came across a few comments from men which angered and disappointed me.

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[11] Laurel Richardson in 'Breaking Barriers' p. 85. Original quote from 'Writing: A method of inquiry' in *Handbook of qualitative research*, ed. by N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994) 516- 529.
[12] Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams and Arthur P. Bochne, 'Autoethnography: An Overview' *Historical Social Research*, 36 (2011), 273-290 (p. 273).
[13] Guardian News, Girl rescued in US after using TikTok domestic violence hand signal, online video recording, Tuesday 9th November 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oU3jZT3b9Uc>, [accessed 9th November 2021].
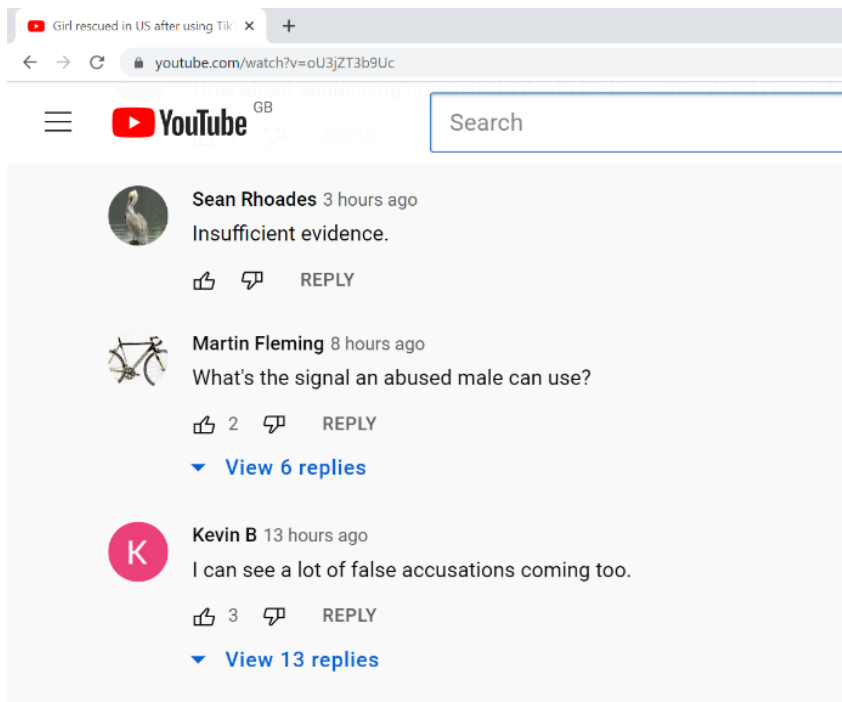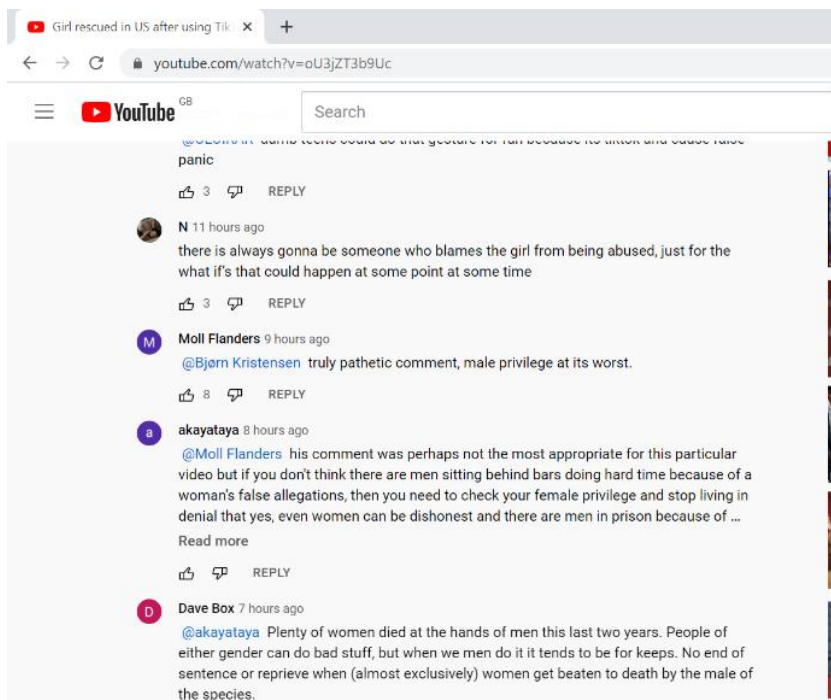
Figure 2.0

Figure 2.1

one commenter replied to what looked like a female user account:

'his comment was perhaps not the most appropriate for this particular video but if you don't think there are men sitting behind bars doing hard time because of a woman's false allegations, then you

need to check your female privilege and stop living in denial that yes, even women can be dishonest and there are men in prison because of false allegations whether you like it or agree with it or not.'[14]

Even though my natural inclination is to be annoyed by these comments, the poet-Mediator approach uses this as an opportunity to try and produce something where both the men and women would feel safe enough to share more of their views on this topic. Here, I take inspiration from intimations on injustice from the previous section and use is as an anchorage to unite the women and the men in this comments section. I interpret this interaction as ultimately a desire for injustice to be acknowledged, listened to, and understood.

1.4

Until bleak shadows fly away

Until bleak shadows fly away,

a woman's mouth is sealed silent

in the backseat of a stranger's car,

her shoulders manhandled,

her throat coiled in fear,

her stomach loosened in dread,

and... at precisely the same time some thousands of miles away

bleak shadows are here to stay,

knees melt at the sound of the sentence,

as he takes one last glance at the witness stand -

all eyes avert.

His eyes replay the night through tears-

her touch was rejected and now they're here.

his future manhandled,

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[14] 2.1.

his throat coiled in fear,

his stomach loosened in disgust.

And so unwanted shadows come…

This is an example of the poet-Mediator using an autoethnographical approach to highlight these two injustices in non-didactic way. If this were shared during a community engagement project, with the right participants, this would hopefully open conversation around the safety of women and the fear men feel of being falsely accused in a sexual assault allegation. In reference to the aforementioned definition of autoethnography, I have analysed and redirected my personal experience of initial disgust of going through a comments section to make a point about the notion of injustice which can damage any group. This does not mean to suggest that all groups face the same kind or amount of injustice, rather it highlights a pinpoint for our humanness. To successfully achieve this would take a great deal of interpersonal maturity and concrete skills in mediation practice to make sure the creative environment remains emotionally safe and productive.

Conclusion

Initial ideas for this project began as an inquiry into how Caribbean poets view their practices with the intention of focusing primarily on their experiences. But this journey has developed into an investigation of self through the poetic and theoretic writings of Wynter, Das and Pollard. I have come to highly value Sylvia Wynter's ideas and in some ways am left with more questions than answers to her theories of being human as praxis and autopoiesis. Delving into the richness of Das and Pollard has enabled me to tap into more of my own poetic voice and I feel I have taken mature steps during the process. I have explored ideas around truth, creativity and human nature with a conscious effort to avoid overbearing assumptions about exactly what those things are- hence the focus on the term *intimations*.

Ultimately, this project has affirmed a growing desire to explore across difference and strengthen communities through working with people from diverse backgrounds. The deepest value of this dissertation will lie beyond the hand in date as I refer back to it

strengthen my poetic practice going forward. In the short term, this will look like using funding received from Arts Council to experiment further and think more deeply about how creativity through poetry can remain integral to this aim. The poet-Mediator approach with the view of the community as Archipelago, given enough professional investment I think will enable greater understanding, insight and empathy across different communities in Bristol.

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Personal (original) Poems:

into unknown Waters	1.3 …and Other Victims
1.0 Cord to Sister	Enclaves
1.1 Untitled	1.4 Until Bleak Shadows Fly Away
1.2 And So Woman Spins	