

# Entangled embodiment(s) with trauma: a play in six acts

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**Exposition**

This play is about entangled embodiments of early career family therapists attending to clients' trauma. It is drawn from research based on the theoretical framework of Karen Barad's agential realism (2007). As part of agential realism, the world is always already entangled and connected (Barad, 2007). I/we are not separate from one another, as in a murmuration, a shifting mass of starlings, thousands of birds flying together in dynamic shapes, shifting and moving in concert, responsive to one another and their larger environment (RSPB, 2022). In performing a murmuration, the birds cease to be distinct but instead are connected, communicating and entangled as part of the larger form that is ever changing and becoming, allowing us to consider how thinking of systemic practice as a murmuration entails flowing lines of entanglement, connectedness, and iterative responsivity. To trace and track a murmuration, to learn from it and be a part of the embodied entanglement, is not to sit still, but to follow embodied shifts, to draw temporary and moving boundaries around the amorphous shapes and patterns that are forming/dissolving/re-forming in turn. Barad, a feminist quantum physicist (2007), refers to these boundary-drawing practices as agential cuts, or enactments that show what is inside/outside a phenomenon, not as inherently distinct, but as temporarily separated so the murmuration can be looked at, examined, and explored. This play is a series of agential cuts, six acts that together provide a broader narrative. This narrative weaves through/in/between the murmuration of systemic practice, exploring with curiosity what happens to the embodiments of systemic therapy practitioners when a client discloses a traumatic event or history. Based on Amber Kelley's dissertation research, and presenting findings as poetry, this play follows an arc of exploration, an embodied journey through the entangled becomings of therapy practice and of being intimately with/in the trauma of our interconnected world.

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## Act I: Trauma, Dread, and Honour

I (Amber) sit in the therapy room, feeling my heart beat louder inside my chest and my stomach twist in knots as my client, with low voice and diverted eyes, shares a history of abuse, neglect, and assault. From my very earliest clients, I felt a sense of simultaneous dread at the disclosure as it began to unfold and honour at the opportunity to sit with clients, to bear witness to their deep wounds and courageous efforts to seek healing from the pain of carrying the weight of trauma within their bodies. The dread stemmed from the horror of hearing the atrocities that comprise trauma, the ways in which humans enact violence physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually against one another and seeing those atrocities written in the bodily manifestations of my clients. The dread also emerged from an aching sense of inadequacy to help, to make a difference and do the therapeutic work I said I wanted to dedicate my life to. I did not, and have not, always felt equipped to engage in the work of healing from trauma with clients. From my systemic perspective as a marriage and family therapist (MFT), and in the words of one of my professors during my graduate studies that continues to ring in the front of my mind, “my presence is the intervention.” Meaning the therapeutic relationship I have with my client, the way in which I embody a relational safe place, is the catalyst for change and healing. The sense of dread bubbling up during the disclosure of trauma felt in direct opposition to the healing intervention I was supposed to embody and cultivate for my clients. The fears of my (in)ability to help mingled with the honour of being trusted with my clients’ stories and pain, and though I have developed my own skills through clinical trainings and use of models proven to effectively treat traumatic stress, the complexity and oftentimes intensity of my own internal experience during trauma disclosure remains.

These intimate and evocative moments with clients lead me to question the salience of my experiences of trauma disclosure for other MFTs. In conducting a brief pilot study to examine this question within a qualitative research course as part of my doctoral studies, the initial findings seem to point to trauma disclosure as moments of heightened emotionality, arousal, and distress in the bodies of MFTs with approximately as much training as myself. In searching the literature on trauma disclosure, the lack of research on the experiences of MFTs, particularly those with fewer years of experience (i.e., not defined as trauma therapy “experts”) was glaring. This personal question converged with a professional interest, as I explored deeper how systemic practitioners experienced moments of trauma disclosure, not by seeking to concretise their experiences but examine the ways in which trauma disclosure is multiple, embodied, and entangled. Led by Karen Barad’s agential realist theory (2007), I considered how systemic therapists respond, are responsible, and take responsibility for sitting with clients and their trauma in the therapy space. Barad (2010) spoke to the ways in which the past, present, and future entangle and are on the move, and how systems respond to moments of pain and hardship, such as during the disclosure of trauma:

“To address the past (and future), to speak with ghosts, is not to entertain or reconstruct some narrative of the way it was, but to respond, to be responsible, to take responsibility for that which we inherit...for the entangled relationalities of inheritance that ‘we’ are...to open oneself up to indeterminacy in moving towards what is to come...Only in this ongoing responsibility to the entangled other, without dismissal (without ‘enough already!’), is there the possibility of justice-to-come.”

Barad, 2010, p. 264-265

This work examines the evocative-ness of what is produced in the entanglement of systemic practitioner and client, exploring how becoming-with clients, engaging in systemic intra-action and entangled embodiment, can create possibilities of justice-to-come, of change, and of healing, in real, material ways. By exploring experience through poetics, this work speaks to the complexity, the messiness, and the reality of holding space for clients as a systemic therapist.

## **Act II: Agential Realism and Entangled Embodiment**

Barad's (2007) theory of agential realism is an ethico-onto-epistemological framework that entangles practices of knowing and being, highlighting how both are tied up in ethical responsibility to the other. This ethico-onto-epistemological perspective is inherently relational, going beyond anthropocentrism that emphasises humans as the "only intelligent and purposeful agents" (Webb, 2020, p. 2), and instead considering all bodies and matter as equally important and intertwined, co-constituting the world in its becoming, where becoming "is not an unfolding in time but the inexhaustible dynamism of the enfolding of mattering" (Barad, 2007, p. 180). This approach is performative and diffractive, in which knowledge is produced through intra-actions and is on the move, itself a material practice that shifts as part of the world in its becoming (Barad, 2007). Agential realism highlights a re-turn, that is a turning back towards, the materiality of bodies, attending to how these bodies come to matter, both in terms of significance and substance.

### *Materiality and Embodiment*

Agential realism considers matter, including human and non-human bodies, as intra-active and performative (Barad, 2007). From this perspective, bodies are not distinct, but entwined together and on the move, consistently relating and entangling (Barad, 2007). Barad (2007) therefore employs the term "intra-action," as opposed to interaction, to highlight how matter is not separable or discrete, but instead is co-constituted and always already entangled. With a foundation in the material practices of quantum physics, intra-action explicates how all matter, down to the subatomic level, is entangled in and as part of the world in its becoming. As opposed to Vygotsky's theory of intrapsychological, or intramental abilities, meaning the cognitive processes that occur within an individual's mind (Vygotsky, 1978), intra-action underscores the co-configuration of the world through entangled knowing, being, and relating (Barad, 2007). Indeed, "the universe is agential intra-activity in its becoming" (Barad, 2007, p. 141), and therefore therapist, client, trauma, and trauma disclosure are all intra-active productions on the move and part of the world's becoming. The specific practices and intra-actions unfolding within each moment, including the enactment of the therapeutic process and the disclosure of trauma, are embodied. As Barad (2007) underscored, "embodiment is a matter not of being specifically situated in the world, but rather of being of the world in dynamic specificity" (p. 377). That is, concepts such as trauma disclosure are meaningful because they are comprised of specific material arrangements, of intra-actions, that matter physically and significantly (Barad, 2007). These specific material arrangements are understood through agential cuts that hem in what embodied intra-actions are within the purview of exploration and what remains outside of the phenomenon of interest (Barad, 2007). These cuttings are enactments that separate subject from object, including one phenomenon from another, to allow for specific phenomena to be studied, explored, and known in greater ways. Within this exploration, agential cuts were placed around the phenomenon of trauma disclosure among pre-licensed marriage and family therapists, examining the entangled embodiments of this phenomenon.

Inherent within the entanglement of embodied intra-action, agential realism purports that materiality and embodiment are not separate from discursive practices, nor is matter a consequence of or made real through discourse (Barad, 2007). Instead, all phenomena are always already material-discursive (Barad, 2007). With this understanding, “matter and meaning are mutually articulated” (Barad, 2007, p. 152), as the material and the discursive entangle in intra-activity that (re)configure one another and the world (as matter is not separable from the world in its fullness; Barad, 2007). To explore systemic practice creatively, with an emphasis on embodiment, we explore trauma disclosure as a material-discursive phenomenon, questioning and considering the entanglements of somatic, affective, emotional, psychological, and relational practices during the process of disclosure (Barad, 2007).

Importantly for therapists and clinicians working with trauma-affected clients, Barad (2007) noted, “neither the past nor the future is ever closed. It's not that the new is generated in time; rather, what is at issue is the intra-active generation of new temporalities, new possibilities, where the ‘new’ is the trace of what is yet to come” (p. 383). As those suffering from posttraumatic stress experience shifts in temporality, where trauma is not past/passed but instead remains present through physiological activation (e.g., during re-experiencing such as flashbacks or nightmares; World Health Organization, 2019), the possibility of shifts in temporality through therapeutic intra-action creates space for healing and new ways of intra-acting in and with the world (Kelley, 2022). This opportunity for newness and the exploration of the trace includes consideration of recovery and different becomings for client systems. As therapists are engaged in efforts to explore this trace and how to produce new possibilities for the client, they are also entangled with the trauma and client in ways that matter for the therapist. Attending to how trauma materialises and moves through the therapeutic assemblage, co-mingling with client and therapist and their coeval embodiments, therefore holds implications for how systemic therapists conceptualise and do therapy, how they move, engage, and respond. Through poetics and creative writing, we therefore investigated this entanglement of pre-licensed MFTs, clients, and trauma within the space of therapy, tracing and tracking therapeutic embodiments on the move in the space of marriage and family therapy, guided by agential realist theory (Barad, 2007), to consider what is produced and how these intra-actions matter for systemic practitioners.

### **Act III: The Study—Poetics and the Messiness of Embodied, Systemic Practice**

In her seminal work *Poetry is Not a Luxury*, Audre Lorde (1984) declared poetry is “a revelatory distillation of experience” (p. 37), “the skeleton architecture of our lives [that] lays the foundation for a future of change” (p. 38). In attuning to what is produced in the embodiments of novice MFTs during trauma disclosure, poetical analysis of semi-structured interviews with 11 systemic clinicians presented the opportunity for evocative understandings of traumatic stress, therapeutic relationality, and hope for healing and new becomings. 11 individual interviews with Amber lasted approximately 60 minutes, exploring each therapists’ unique experiences, opening space to specifically ask about embodied, in-the-moment responses to trauma disclosure. Audio, transcripts, and creative representations brought to the interview by each participant were analysed poetically, considering the evocative experiences of trauma disclosure from the perspective of the systemic therapist.

Barad (2012) underscored, “poetics as a mode of expression...lure[s] us toward the possibilities of engaging the force of imagination in its materiality. The force of imagination puts us in touch with the possibilities for sensing the insensible, the indeterminate...the other” (p. 216). I (AK) therefore employed poetics as analysis and representation of findings, seeking not to uncover and display *the* experience of trauma disclosure but instead to invite all who intra-act with the work to be in touch,

to be connected, and to engage in the work of creating knowledge on the move (Freeman, 2017; Barad, 2007). Indeed, poetical thinking includes not only creating poetry, but thinking about connection, evocation, and experience as it is experienced, not as a reflection of an experience (Freeman, 2017). Within this study, the production of poems and poetic analysis strategy primarily consisted of found poetry, or poetry that employs solely the words of the participants crafted by the researcher (Lahman et al., 2019). By engaging in found poetic practices through iteratively listening to the interviews, reading transcripts and notes, and writing memos, I sought to intra-act with the participants' embodiments, to highlight their experiences, and to explicate evocative moments of aliveness and entanglement, including between participant and their clients during trauma disclosure, and between myself and the participants. Participants were supplied with the found poems as a form of member checking where they provided their insights, feedback, and reflections on their embodied experiences during client trauma disclosure.

As this study is conceptualised through the lens of Barad's (2007) agential realism by considering intra-active becomings instead of static beings, a representation of the data in a way that promotes multiple understandings and active creation of knowledge or truth as described above was fitting. In addition, just as Barad (2007) noted the researcher is entangled in the research process and is not an objective outsider, so is the reader entangled in the reading and meaning making, part of the web of performances that produce trauma, traumatic stress, therapy, healing, and change (Richardson, 1993). Indeed, the participatory nature of poetical analysis offered the opportunity for intra-actions to be seen, felt, and embodied by participant, researcher, and readers in ways that other forms of data analysis and representation may not permit (Freeman, 2017). Further, as poetry is not tied to linearity and instead holds space for ambiguity, contradiction, and complexity (Snyder, 1996), it also lent itself to further thinking with and through agential realism within the trauma/therapy assemblage, tracing trauma and how it comes to matter for pre-licensed MFTs (Barad, 2007).

#### **Act IV: Poetic (Re)Presentations of Embodied, Systemic Practice**

In moving from analysis to (re)presentations of this examination of embodiment during trauma disclosure, two found poems from two different participants (pseudonyms employed) presented here underscore the embodied experience of trauma disclosure, of being with/in trauma and with/in the client system:

##### **There [Courtney]**

Even though  
 You didn't experience it  
 Personally,  
 You were  
 There now.  
 Feeling the same  
 Emotion.  
 Devastating.  
 You can't believe it.

You feel  
Hurt,  
Anger,  
Sadness,  
Betrayal.

Those stories stick with you.

### **Embodied [Nicole]**

We're zooming in,  
Slowing down.  
Time almost stops still.

It's no longer about the words,  
It's about our bodies' experiences  
As the story is being told.

We're in the foxhole together.  
I'm willing to get my hands dirty,  
I'm not afraid of the sludge.

We turn from the story  
To the essence of  
What it is to live with trauma.

As my (Amber) experience of dread and honour collided with the experiences of Courtney and Nicole, it became evident that bearing witness or holding space to hear stories of trauma and pain are not neutral acts where the therapist stands outside the client, unprovoked and untouched. The intra-acting body of the therapist is materialised differently in moments of trauma disclosure, where the discursive practice of trauma disclosure produces embodied entanglements that matter for therapist, and by extension, the client and therapeutic assemblage. This is an epistemological and ontological shift towards relational entanglement, where entanglement is “not a name for the interconnectedness of all being as one, but rather specific material relations of ongoing differentiating in the world” (Barad, 2010, p. 265). Attending to therapy as entangled and embodied performativity, then, allows the therapist to attend to the specific material relations at work in their own body in moments of trauma disclosure in their complexity. These poetic (re)presentations underscore how intra-acting with trauma during moments of disclosure is embodied and multiplicative, highlighting how trauma is not past/passed, not mere history, but present and enlivened in ways that affect the clinician to whom the client is disclosing. The systemic practitioner does not remain untouched.

## **Act V: Meditative Interlude**

In attuning to what it means to be touched, be affected, and be a systemic practitioner, we invite a pause and turn towards one's own embodiments that are intra-acting with this work and these words. As we consider our agentive cuttings as partial arcs of the Undivided, we come back to murmuration. As in a poem, each of us in part and in connection are weaved into embodiments. Many of us often act from only the discursive embodiment or material embodiment. We are memories and anticipations and much more. We sometimes are stuck to discomfort, pain, and suffering. We can also embrace and open to appreciative joy, compassion, and space.

When we consider our embodiments, such as physical, discursive, emotional, energetic, spiritual, microbiome, time, sexual energy, intuitive, and more—as a murmuration of being, each embodiment taking the lead at different moments, but all the embodiments connected both within and out—we strive for attunement. Like a moebius strip of a sheet that recursively turns with no inside or outside, or both inside and outside, we strive to appreciate all our embodiments that reflect our becoming and reflect our connections to the world and other beings/becomings.

As a meditation, inviting us in parts to notice each agentive embodiment, feel your body on the chair as you read, notice your thoughts as they arise, attend to the spaces of emptiness between thoughts, observe your breath. What emotions arise: excitement, boredom, anticipation? How is your energetic self, your spiritual self that connects you to the intra-acting universe? Attune and harmonise these embodiments in a murmuration of flowing transitions. Connect a thread from your heart to the heart of others. Those you know, those you love, those who love you, those you may feel hostility for. Extend love and compassion from your heart to their heart. Bring in love and compassion from their heart to your heart. Breathe. Let each embodiment arise and move and maintain fluidity. Be aware of black holes that can capture us into divisiveness and frozen partiality. Accept, breathe, attune. When you struggle find compassion. When and as you are agentively cutting, exploring varying phenomena within your practice, your work, your play, find compassion and connection.

Let the world breathe us together.

## **Act VI: A Re-turn to Trauma, Dread, and Honour**

As I (Amber) pen the words of this work and the many that have come before it as I navigated the doings of this study, as I meditate on my own intra-acting embodiments, I re-turn (turning back towards, again, turning to see anew; Barad, 2007) to trauma, dread, and honour. Just as my heart beat loud in the therapy room, so my embodiment was enlivened in interviewing the systemic practitioners as part of this study, intra-acting with trauma through their experiences, their clients, again and again. Similarly, my material-discursive body feels and performs the same dread even now, when intra-acting with trauma through watching the news, learning of new mass shootings in the United States, seeing the continued spread of a virus that has for two years ravaged the globe. Indeed, even while writing these words, we as co-authors have both experienced shifts in our own material embodiments through battling the coronavirus from separate continents in this intra-connected world.

I further find myself drawn back to the trauma and the dread as I look ahead to transitioning from student to professor, from practitioner to supervisor (yet, always already a student, remaining a

practitioner), knowing the entanglements with trauma are not ending but may have only just begun. Yet even as I am drawn back to intra-acting with trauma, feeling moments of dread transform my embodiment, I feel the gift of honour that comes from entangling with others as part of this world in its becoming: clients, participants, students, and supervisees alike. As the participants of this study spoke to and continue to speak to through their poetic words, the stickiness of trauma, the essence of how it is felt and embodied is meaningful and matters, materially and discursively. Intra-acting as part of this world in its becoming is not simple, easy, or neat. It is a movement of starlings, a collection of connected parts that are both hurting and healing. To be a systemic practitioner, a systemic thinker, part of systemic becoming, is to enter with others into spaces of hurt and pain, to feel the impact of entangled embodiment. In these moments, we may realise and feel in our bodies that “the entanglements we are a part of reconfigure our being, our psyches, our imaginations” (Barad, 2007, p. 383), offering space for connection, for newness, and for the immense honour of being entangled within embodied systemic practice.

The embodied entanglement of systemic practice is therefore personal and emotional, relational and material. It moves and is moving. The messiness and stickiness in the embodiments of the systemic practitioner are therefore inherent, built into the agreement to go to the deep, dark, and painful places of the client’s past that come readily and radically close during client trauma disclosure. To entangle with pain, to hold the tensions of shifting embodiments, to go into the past, to jump into the foxhole: this is the call of the systemic practitioner.

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