

Routing Diaspora Histories: Navigating (the Research) Questions

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Why was Routing Diaspora Histories necessary?

The seeds of this collaboration were sown during the culmination phases of a previous project. One which dealt with community histories in London and involved grappling with some of the violent and damaging consequences of British colonialism.

It was felt by us (as people with West and East African heritage) and also by participants of that project, that spaces were needed to process painful and frustrating histories in a way which allowed for the rotation of old and new narratives. Working with earlier African histories and indigenous knowledge in creative ways was seen as a worthwhile route for The South North to explore, in an attempt to access a more holistic version of African heritage for members of the African and Caribbean diaspora: central concerns for the work we do as an organisation.

The project asked these questions:

1. When we look at pre-colonial African histories and frame our responses to narratives which (rather than foregrounding slavery, oppression and the fight against oppressors) highlight ordinary life, practices, rituals and societal exchanges, what opportunities arise for looking at Black and diasporic identities in new ways?
2. What can we learn from responding to more expanded histories in creative and personal ways?
3. How do our lives contribute to the making of history in the present moment?

Collaborating pitfalls: finding the right fit & questioning academia's spaces

Because we were embarking on learning about blackness in white spaces, we were sensitive to the importance of collaborating with a partner who could support our ideas not only with knowledge of pre-colonial African societies, but also a mindfulness of the nuanced, complex and shifting reality of diasporic lives. We understood that finding a good match depended on effective and widespread outreach, and on alignments of purpose, timing, accessibility, lived experiences, geographical location and so on.

Interestingly, at the time we were planning this project, the University of Chichester was being petitioned to halt its axing of the MRes History of Africa and the African Diaspora led by Hakim Adi (the UK's first African-British Professor of History): a troubling event, given the highly

imbalanced British academic workforce if we look at heritage. Despite protests, the university suspended recruitment to the course and Adi's employment was terminated.

Going into a collaborative situation with an academic partner, then, had its own very real questions. Maintaining an ongoing dialogue about values was a really important part of helping guide the project according to sets of clear intentions.

The process of interviewing potential collaborators was interesting and useful, but is also one which cannot reveal the underbelly of the potential partnership, nor any undisclosed motivations or concerns.

One particular application seemed a good fit: a lecturer with a specialism in West African performance, and a student and creative whose work centres redefining blackness and black identities. As our project evolved, however, we inherited a historical issue tied to the university's failure to adequately resolve a fall out from a previous project which involved racist microaggressions. That past became our present.

As it collided with our project, our work was directly impacted by one participant's decision to boycott. This brought with it a heavy burden around implications not only for participants' wellbeing and our own, but also the project's aims and our organisational reputation. We paused and allowed space for difficult conversations. Mediating between the parties involved, we were able to partially mitigate this incredibly stressful disruption. And whilst we were able to successfully complete the project 4 months later, it affected the format of our final event and the length of time we were able to share project outcomes in an exhibition: for us, a vital element in exploring questions and ideas with a wider network and encountering possibilities for the evolution of this work beyond the project's life.

Given this rupture, questions of where and how we learn about ourselves and who we want in the room when we do this, became louder. This issue was in many ways a repetitious chime (or clang) with the histories we were questioning within the project itself, and a reminder of Audre Lorde's warning that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.

Research questions

One historian in the final symposium commented on how we think about what history is. She argued that it should be more fluid, dancing beyond text books and academia's prescribed conventions.

Whilst this is hopeful in terms of our research question about more expanded histories, and points to looking at diasporic identities in new ways, it raises questions about who is looking, and how meanings are created. The forms of knowledge which come out of academic spaces compared to cultural spaces carry with them very distinct spheres of influence, with signification around implied value, use and usage. Any serious attempt to challenge these ways of seeing on a societal scale requires genuine institutional shifts at systemic levels.

Equally, if we look at our question, '*How do our lives contribute to the making of history in the present moment?*', we are left questioning where as much as how. Certain heritage and cultural spaces (those which are not too institutionalised) are more able to provide spaces where examination and treatment of history is more open. Not without their own challenges. We are still left dealing with value judgements and questions around the currencies of knowledge.

Perhaps the biggest potential for change occurs within more intimate, individualised spheres of creativity. And whilst this can be seen as problematic because it's a form of separation from the wider questions and issues of history-making, it is nonetheless in the more private spaces within the project that I found the most edifying responses to the research questions. I understood that when history is personalised, it can become a more powerful way of responding differently, of changing things.

Participating: embodying the research questions & finding politicised somatics

Being participants helped reinforce the non-hierarchical space we wanted to create. It also allowed me to keep actively returning to our research questions as I worked through both organisational and creative processes. This served to anchor my thinking in an otherwise organic approach.

Initial ideas centred around the creation of a group piece. As individual interests and experiences were explored, we naturally fell into our own directions of creative interest, and the shape of later meetings with participants included 1-2-1s to support responses which (whilst connected by shared historical and social experiences) expressed distinct identities.

This shift offered a deepening of my own creative pathway. I followed spirals driven by a need (but also questions around my "right") to form a relationship with ancestral pre-colonial history. One extract we read in workshop stated: '*In The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon plainly states that these new narratives were not to be found dwelling nostalgically in a pre-colonial past of atrophied fragments; this was a recipe for political and cultural inertia, not the ground for

action.¹ These questions reverberated against the reading I was drawn to about West African spiritual philosophies and ritual practices. And those definitely held the potential for Fanon's fruitless nostalgia and atrophied disconnection.

But by learning about indigenous African spiritual practice, which holds nature as foundational, and reading that: 'Collective memory is not a vast well that exists separately from individual people. It is the sum total of the personal memories of each person...[and] each individual must master the ability to remember the knowledge that lives in his or her bones,'² I was motivated to connect not to an *idea* of ancient history but to an experiential approach and understanding.

By taking my body into nature and observing, I felt more rooted in the present and simultaneously more connected to my ancestral past. Not in a romanticised nor distant way. Through an active, generative process of ritualising my relationship with nature, I naturally shifted away from intellectualised knowledge towards somatic forms of knowing. In the context of our research questions, somatic enquiries became a powerful way for me to engage with the questions of social justice and change that were being explored.

Emerging questions

Aware that the nature of our inquiries could not be contained in a 6 or 9 month window of time, we didn't impose expectations of having "finished products" on the final event. It was curated as a public space to show ideas and texts, share in workshops, engage with artworks. Amongst all of this, conversations were held around the research questions and responses. What resonated most powerfully for me during the symposium was the suggestion of exploring a less textual, more embodied way of doing history.

And through this reflective writing process, questions arise around: **a)** how we might go about embodying knowledge, and **b)** what forms of trauma-informed support and practices are most powerful for such explorations.

The seed that I'm picking up at the end of this project is one that considers politicised somatics for social justice: practices which work with participants' relationships to their own and to collective bodies, as to historical forces and oppressive structures, as social agents of change.

¹ Kobena Mercer (ed), *Exiles, Diasporas & Strangers*, Iniva and the MIT Press, (2008)

² Malidoma Patrice Somé, *The Healing Wisdom of Africa*, TarcherPerigee, (1999)