

RDH Reflections Georgina Evans, September 2024

I am an Art Psychotherapist, Artist and Yoga therapist-practitioner. I am occupied with thinking about the formation of 'Self' and 'Other' and how we become who we are. I explore the development of self as emergent, relational and influenced by both conscious and unconscious forces. Through these lenses, I consider identity as manifestations of body, heart and mind that give rise to memory and a shifting sense of self over time. These themes are explored through my interdisciplinary practices of Art, Psychotherapy and embodied group facilitation.

I consider my creative and therapeutic practices to be mutually informing. They occupy different contextual parameters of use: art in the cultural domain, bodywork in the well-being sector and art therapy in the community, schools, or in hospital wards. They are all bound by the different considerations that influence the holding and unfurling of creative and therapeutic dynamics and processes. These arise within social (e.g. legal, cultural) frameworks of a given environment to encourage, enable, and at times constrict, activity in the relational integrations that support healing and creative self-expression.

Context

- I was invited to participate in Routing Diaspora Histories (RDH) and to 'hold space' and provide a compassionate, open and receptive stance towards others, should this arise in response to diaspora material being explored. For me, this spoke directly to the history of enslavement and acknowledged the reality that intergenerational post-traumatic responses might be triggered for those participating in such projects.

Shifting needs and boundaries

- I found the idea of the project highly interesting and was stimulated by this opportunity to participate as a dual practitioner. This made for a rich interplay of concerns and internal dialogue that oscillated between various portals of enquiry. In the context of holding 'a safe space', what do we mean by 'safety' and how might we seek to manifest safety for people of African Diaspora? What might safety mean when African peoples have been forced and are still invited to ignore, forget and disembodify the trauma of enslavement? What does this mean in the context of African Diaspora, which by implication is discursive, ruptured, meandering and unfixed? It was challenging to consider how to hold safety in mind and offer a sense of this in the context of shifting boundaries and my own absence from some of the events? This seemed to me to call for more deeply embodied investigation which I took into physical and creative self-practice.

Absent Trauma

- I wondered about individual and collective contents of psyche in relation to the African Diaspora. Diaspora histories across three continents awash with unspeakable pain and death from transatlantic crossings that many attempt to voice: perhaps always incompletely. The Atlantic Ocean has come to represent a repository of untold trauma - a bottomless sea of absented memory and emotion that still struggles to be heard and borne. I thought about the great need for care and reclamation of aspects of self among the sons and daughters of the unheard voices of our African ancestors who perished.

There is a call for remembrance and a growing need for accountability on the one hand, and grave challenge in bearing and listening on the other. How do we address this? How can we learn to hear, to listen and bear the pain?

Framing Safety

- I called on my professional therapeutic knowledge to support the thinking and framing of safety. I worked with the facilitators to consider how this might be met and held within the project. I devised a framework of care that could be reiterated at each event to contain and support the work. This included direct support to contain material that might emerge, or cause overwhelm during the workshops. My therapeutic approach of employing boundaries of place, time and code of confidentiality initially informed my thinking. However, I found I needed to shift my approach to address issues of care within the project's cultural and structural context. I adopted more of a conceptual outlook of mutuality with the invitation to hold self-responsibility in a wider constructed framework of care and support held by the project overall. As it was, direct use of individual support was not required. I wonder whether the thoughtful invitation to embed and make the availability of care visible in this way through the project contributed to this outcome.

Possibility and transformation

- From my therapist's perspective, I had wondered if RDH sought to access the abundant creativity of the diaspora experience without the challenging work of sifting through trauma: a kind of bypassing of diasporic pain, which felt understood but unsettling. However, after the engaging discussion at the first 'Long Table' meeting of participants and my own subsequent processes of creative enquiry, I experienced a shift in perspective. I had the insight that the energy that activated trauma could perhaps be redirected and utilised in different ways. If named and acknowledged, the absent presence of tortured ancestral 'being' might become evoked and pursued through new rivulets of enquiry. This insight clarified a golden thread which guided me through the project: the inherent possibility of routing abject energy of trauma through creative activity to catalyse healing through community and kindred engagement.

Participation

Dialogic and communal embodiment

- There was a performative aspect to the project that came alive for me during the first creative workshop - a shift from the 'Long Table' dialogues towards non-cognitive engagement between participants. For example, several people reading aloud from literary texts while moving around the room and navigating each other's bodies in space. I had a heightened awareness of non-verbal communication - sensing, feeling, looking, speaking, listening - as we moved around the space, interacting with each other's work while creating our own. I recognised text from the book 'Of Water and Spirit', by Malidoma Patrice Somé, which evoked thoughts and resonance of traumatic experiences held in body tissues; lost and stuck in time. Malidoma Somé's articulation of African spirituality explores the role of ancestors in understanding and healing the trauma of diaspora experiences. This, along with the emergence of 'performative presence' that I experienced in the workshop, informed the 'Circle piece' I made and presented at the final RDH event. This work aimed to symbolise some of what can be absented in diaspora

histories while continuing to wield dynamic impact through time and across cultures and continents. In other words, the importance of holding awareness of intergenerational trauma within African Diasporic histories.

Loss and grief

- The project inevitably ignited enquiry about disembodiment, rupture, loss and grief. It raised questions about the brutality of complex trade relationships across continents, countries, families and individuals, all contributing to the warp and weft of diasporic identity and experience - even in absence. There was a highlighting of gaps in knowledge across space and time: the presence of absences; and the enduring remnants of belief, knowledge and wisdom. This aligned with my interest in thinking about how fragmented experience informs our relationship with Self and Other. Such fragments are passed down through the centuries to be glimpsed, grasped, held onto, re-articulated, reimagined and disseminated, again and again, transmitting archetypal ancestral meaning through cultural practices.

Importance of Black women's cultural practice in routing African Diaspora

- I was aware of the prevalence of female participants. This recalled thoughts of the tropes of black womanhood as 'vessel' and 'container' of all manner of things that have, and continue to be, projected onto the black female body and subjectivity. I couldn't escape this aspect of diaspora history, nor the fact that this reading can be skewed, reviewed and interrogated anew through individual and group endeavour. This informed my embodied enquiry as I progressed through the project. I was moved to revisit the work of numerous Black women (and some male) artists, historians, writers and cultural activists, who work to give voice to the complexity of black female identity and explore the continuation of entangled diaspora histories and experiences across transatlantic space and time. For example, the powerful sculptural works of Simone Leigh; the writing and black feminist aesthetic and scholarship of Hortense Spillers and Christina Sharpe; and curator and choreographer, Rashida Bumbray.
- I aligned with Bumbray's understanding of the body as 'archive'. She researches cultural practices as symbolic movements that "allow us to have access... this idea of possession...to access what it means to be self-possessed in a body that is possessed by someone else." I was also stirred by the book 'Indigo' by Catherine McKinley, which one of the participants shared during the first 'Long Table' meeting. This rekindled my interest in indigo dye and this hidden aspect of diaspora history. I learned more about how the world economy of indigo operated as currency in many parts of the world, and that one enslaved body could be exchanged for 2 yards of indigo cloth! I was also intrigued to learn that indigo was closely related to the identity of wealthy women in West Africa and the role of 'fashion' in their lives. Wealthy woman and women traders would collect special pieces of cloth, particularly indigo cloth, symbolic of their wealth, status, independence, self-expression and sense of self as powerful influencers in trade circles or wealthy society.

Emergence

Knowledge projection

- There was a pedagogic strand running through the RDH with the involvement of universities and the access to resources: funds, text, sound, image and space which informed and contributed to the development of ideas; as well as the complex conceptualisation and reach of the project. In addition, there was the reflexivity of the invitation to self-enquire through personal and public lenses that informed participants' creative output. I wondered about the Shadow side of both personal and institutional dynamics. The restrictions, constraints and personal impediments that may have been unconsciously at play, contributed to challenges in the group dynamics. As was said, during the project, collaboration is not easy!

Respondents and Enablers

- The Respondents, Open Knowledge Advocate and Public Historian, Kelly Foster and Activist, Writer, Historian, Stella Dadzie brought a further layer of pedagogical complexity and richness to the project, with specific historical expertise and contextualisation. Their generous sharing of rich personal stories and cultural insights opened and intermingled diasporic narratives across time. They offered an interweaving of participants with varied creative contributions of film, installation, a live workshop, photography, mixed media works and interviews. This injected a 'present moment aliveness' to the final public event, which seemed to be a central outcome of the project.
- The wealth of knowledge, cultural awareness and skilful facilitation brought to the project by the facilitators, Damali Ibreck, Vanessa Ansa, and Mya Onwugbonu also has to be recognised. Their cultural sensitivity, thoughtfulness and compassionate interest in finding new ways to work with oral histories gave voice to more valuable Diaspora experiences that remain culturally unmapped and unspoken. Their passionate attention throughout the project felt like a driving force that propelled the work through numerous challenges to a vital, thought-provoking and inspiring final event. I look forward to seeing what may emerge from this iteration of the RDH project

Relational presence – being there or not

- Movement, embodiment and glimmers of healing. There was a sense of sharing and bonding in the group work - even if only for one session. Sometimes people might be seen again. Sometimes not. I was also popping in and out. This felt strange for me as a therapist: a role premised on consistency. A client might normally fluctuate in attendance while I remain very consistent: always there, available at a given day and time. There was a call to occupy a more creative and fluid coming in and out and to think more deeply about how to offer safety in the context of shifting parameters of engagement. This led me back to ongoing enquiries about Self: how one brings intention when present in 'real-time' and how this might be done when not there in person. This led to the exploration of spiritual and transpersonal aspects of diaspora histories that were explored in the symbolism of water and healing rituals in the new Circle piece I made.

Cultural practice as / and symbolic presence

- 'Circle': A symbolic representation of safety, ancestral holding, and healing ritual. Two-yard lengths of paper received my indigo ink and red ink drawings, made while listening to podcasts by cultural practitioners (Hortense Spillers, Rashida Bumbray, Saidiya Hartman and Gale Lewis). The two-yard length drawings were torn to pieces and arranged into two

ritual circles: one inner, and one outer. presenting an opportunity for participants at the final event of ADH to engage. This piece was an invitation to participants at the final event of the RDH project to step across a boundary - a threshold - into an intentional and potentiated space to experience themselves with present-moment awareness. In the circle, one could contemplate, remember, reflect and recall diaspora histories. Then one could choose to communicate what was experienced, verbally or in writing. There was some interaction with this piece in quiet and private ways that were shared with me towards the end of the day.

- Cannon Ball: 'Tie your cloth to my cloth (named retrospectively). This piece emerged from my creative exploration and research of Indigo and cloth in relation to the RDH project. Specifically, reading the book, 'Indigo, by Catherine McKinley, and sitting with her descriptions of death and grief, as held in communities in West African cultures. The author describes an experience she had in Ghana when conducting research for her book:

"The other women erupted with a low humming. Eurama's body shook with her crying; her body buckled, and she fell into me. Someone pushed a chair beneath me, and she lay across my lap. The women bent down and took the wrapper tied at Eurama's waist and dramatically wiped Eurama's tears with it. Then she took the edge of the cloth and tied it to the hem of her own wrapper.

"Oh, my dear!" she wailed. "We are here with you. We are here! We are here! Tie your cloth to my cloth. Forget everything. We are here! We will carry this sorrow with you!" (Catherine E McKinley, Indigo, 2012).

This piece was made from two yards of cloth cut to pieces and tied together to make a long strip of tied cloth that was wound around like a ball of wool. The display of this work reminded one of the respondents of a ball and cannon and her visit to Elmina Castle where she learned that African women who refused to be raped by high officials were chained to a cannonball and made an example of. I sat with those women as I cut the cloth and tied each piece together as a symbol of shared grief and remembrance.

- Petals. Dismembered roses. Petals were placed in a surface and made available to be mindfully arranged at will into patterns, shapes etc. An activity of meditation, mourning, grief, remembrance, love, loss and perhaps to stimulate reflection on Diaspora histories. I have worked with petals for many, many years drawing on them as a symbol of love, temporal and textural beauty, passion, symbolic fragility and tenderness. They are used for perfume and medicine and have associations across Africa.

Creative Collaborative community

- My lasting impression of being a part of RDH was of the project as a creative group experiment and collaboration. It started from a place of rupture, particularly, for me, regarding how to work with safety and grief in the context of diasporic grief, absence and loss. The final event of the RDH project manifested the powerful creative impact of being together in relational mutuality. Being together in the space made available for sharing and embodied presence held the possibility and potential for co-creation of self. There

was also healing potential in the interest-sharing inherent in participation in the various aspects of the project: taking part in dialogue; embodied co-mingling through the space; looking together at the artworks and listening to the exchange of ideas and personal stories; sharing and enjoyment of good food; the joy of simply being together.

Diaspora Histories as collective and personal enquiry

- I am curious to see how Routing Diaspora Histories, might be continued to offer further opportunities for intersubjective interdisciplinary thinking and ongoing collective enquiry. A kind of social dreaming that works with live imagination to reveal and liberate diaspora identity and being. I found the intentional deflection of focus away from trauma, without foreclosing its presence and voice, opened possibilities for cross-fertilisation of individual and group enquiry. This gave rise to a different kind of recognition, acknowledgement and perhaps gentle healing of some of the loss and grief, inherent in working with diaspora histories.