

Windrush Day: Stories Forgotten

A research and development insight narrative by Lisa Stephenson and Dan Brown



This story tells about an event that happened in November 2017 as part of an MA in Drama and Creative Writing course at Leeds Beckett University. The event involved a drama and creative writing-based immersive learning day, delivered by our MA students to 18 children, aged 7-18 years old, attending Ujima Education and RJC dance, both established and valued community-based organisations. Ujima Education is a community programme in Chapeltown which supports Young people in Maths and English. The day drew its inspiration from the theme of Windrush, proposed by the community as a focus for the up-and-coming Chapeltown Carnival. The pedagogy drew from research which shows that process drama can offer rich opportunities for embodied, affective experiences, which, when harnessed to promote children's investment in writing, can offer a further space for children to translate these experiences using authentic, felt writing choices. We term this creative problem-solving process "agentic Writing" (Dobson and Stephenson, 2018). This is set against the hegemony of school writing where children are "alienated" from the process of writing (Lambirth, 2016).

As a University lecturer, I will tell the story of the day from my perspective, as for me it had moments that affected me in surprising ways. I refer to these moments as 'critical incidents,' seemingly minor incidents which when placed in a wider educational context become critical through analysis (Tripp, 1993). I acknowledge that this story does not have space to analyse the wider political and educational context of these incidents in detail but instead aims to tell the story of their occurrence in context. To add depth, texture and dimension, the story of this day is also told by 2 further authors who shared the experience: Dan, an MA student; and Jay, a young person from Ujima. This story draws from research using "Twice told Multi voiced autoethnography" in an attempt "to theorise what happened in an experience-near mode" (Ellis et al, 2017, p.1). Our story will therefore be thrice-told, to offer multiple perspectives on some key themes which arose between all of us. We feel that this multi-voiced writing choice is authentic as it mirrors the co-constructed, community making, embodied, creative processes that we were facilitating with the children on the day. On this day, we all kept writing journals – including the children. We use these journals and the artefacts from that day to tell our stories and have ethical clearance from the University to do so.

Beginnings

I (Dan) am feeling ill. It's the end of a long term at university where I've been studying for a Masters as well as carrying on with my regular work. We're waiting for a group of children to arrive from Chapeltown. I'm not entirely sure what to expect. But I'm feeling very 'White British' right now: slightly tense and nervous.

When the children arrive, they seem excited. I make conversation with a few of them as we walk around the green to the lecture theatre where the day will begin. As we walk, I run through the schedule in my head: *Introduce myself and the team as 'University Artists', play the video, ask them if they're happy to think as if they're someone travelling to Britain on the Windrush in 1948, hand*

over for the visualisation, unveil the time capsule, pass around the objects, read the first part of the stowaway's letter.

I'm introducing the day, using my identity as an author to inspire and raise aspiration – one of the stated aims for the day. I'm carrying my books, *The Firebird Chronicles*, as we walk into the lecture theatre. I'm going to give a copy to the person who makes a particularly good contribution. There's Jamaican music playing, and Olivia is giving out mango. Introducing myself as an author feels a little 'tacked on'. My books have nothing to do with the Windrush. In fact, I'm aware of how 'White British' they feel, stories of quaint villages and gentle landscapes. Who am I to talk to these children about a story that's so important to their heritage? Being an author sets me up as an authority, something that, in this case, I'm not. *We're setting them up as the experts*, I remind myself, *experts who we're learning from. Seeing a 'real author' will encourage them to engage in the day.*

Despite feeling ill and being nervous, I'm excited too. It feels like the start of an uncertain adventure.

Beginnings: Critical Incident 1.

I (Lisa) feel the nervous energy from the students as we enter the lecture theatre, a heady mixture of sweet mango smells and Caribbean beats greet us as we venture into the space. It is a liminal space between the real and the imagined world that the students have thoughtfully crafted for these young people. Children clamber onto the theatre seats, a few playfully slide out the tables which are tucked away behind seats. I take the back row, where an older group of children aged 14-16 years sit, hoods pulled tightly over heads, eyes waiting in anticipation. *They are the same age as my two children, yes, I can defrost teenagers...*

The students have framed the opening to the imagined world well, images of the Windrush boat stream across the screen as the rich, captivating tones of John Agard are heard, reading his poem 'Windrush Child' (<https://vimeo.com/34658318>).

"What do you know about Windrush?" I ask, to the side of a hood. "Not much, we did Titanic at school instead," was the answer I did not expect. *Surely, they must know something...I know how inquisitive my children are about their own grandads' journey from Jamaica...perhaps they are just warming up...* I move over to another slightly younger group of children and ask the same question. I receive the same reply. I find it hard to concentrate for the next part of the student input - I think that I feel cross.

Visualisation (written and read by MA student, Clarissa)

Imagine you are on a boat. It's a cruise ship, bigger than anything you've seen before. It used to be a war ship, but now it's your ride. It's packed full of people. The deck is wooden. You reach down and touch it, listening to the waves through the chatter of people. You close your eyes. Above, the birds are talking to each another, they must be wondering where you're going. The wind blows, and you shiver. Taking a deep breath, you taste the salt in the air. The ship's movement makes you feel sick. You try to concentrate on where you are going and the new life you are about to start. What words do you think of when you imagine the place called England?

The Time Capsule

I (Dan) open the time capsule and we pass around the objects:

- A bag of marbles

- A harmonica • Some tools • An old photograph • Jewellery • A stone that's says 'LOVE' on it • A trilby hat • Dominoes

The children take them excitedly, feeling them, smelling them, talking about them. The last object I pull from the time capsule is the stowaway's letter. I draw attention back and read it aloud.

The Stowaway's Letter Part One

7th June 1948

Dear Diary,

They've found me!



For the past seven days, I've been hiding in one of the store cupboards on the lower deck. The constant rumble of the engine made the whole room shudder. I thought it was going to shake the bones out of me – it took all my effort not to be sick. It still looks like a troopship down there, all bullet grey and metal. I've been hiding under an old tarpaulin behind one of the shelving units.

Now they've found me, I can breathe the air above deck again. And the light, that summer sun, sparkling like a gold coin in a sapphire sky. It reminds me of home.

But I mustn't look back. I've chosen a new life. When I saw the advert in the newspaper, I knew I had to get on this ship – the Windrush. It didn't matter that I couldn't afford a ticket – that wasn't going to stop me. I needed a fresh start. I knew the Windrush was my hope, my ticket to freedom, whether or not I had an actual ticket!

They've called a meeting tonight to decide "what to do with the stowaway." I've heard tales of people being thrown overboard. I don't want to think about it. Maybe they'll let me stay, help me get to Britain; after all they're going there, aren't they? I'm just like one of them. But I've got no money, I can't pay. What will they decide to do?

I tell the children that the letter has been ripped in two. The bottom part of the letter is hard to read. We'll have it sent away for analysis and hopefully be able to bring it back later and read what's been written.

The Journey – Selected Memories (Dan)

Who decided to have everyone in the same room? With both groups creating their characters it's hard to hear! All the children have ideas about who the objects could have belonged to. They're all writing on the Role on the Wall. I try to draw my group together, to shape their disparate ideas into a single character.

Who decided to use marbles! I try to get them all back, to stop them being rolled along the table. They're making such a racket!

We move to a different room for a sensory visualisation and the children relax, sitting on the floor, lying down. There's a lovely atmosphere. I watch as they jot down their thoughts and ideas.

The discussion about what to do with the stowaway is animated. The children are much more vocal than I'd expected. They obviously feel invested in the story.

I'm waiting outside in the corridor. It's quiet. I'm holding the second part of the stowaway's letter in my hand. I'm excited to read it to them.

I watch the children listening intently as I read the second part of the letter. I love it when a story holds attention like this. There's something special about it.

Journey: Critical Incident 2

I (Lisa) can feel the children's curiosity, investment and confidence growing. Hoods are down and the older group have engaged enthusiastically in conversations about the campus after our tour. "I hadn't thought about coming here to study," I heard one of them say. I smiled inside.

The MA students have just read the second letter and the group discuss the letter "as if" on board the Windrush. There is huge investment in the story from them and the MA students - although the age range is a challenge and I think we should have differentiated by age more. The children are drawing from the words which they have collected within the imagined drama, convincingly arguing about the fate of the stowaway. *I wonder where they will take this part of the imagined story, how they will treat their stowaway...?*

Later we find out the stowaway was one of two women on Windrush, she was a seamstress. "My grandma was on Windrush and she was a seamstress," I hear (16 year old) Jay say.

My heart is racing, surely this discovery was what a contextually, culturally relevant and meaningful curriculum was all about. "Really? Honestly? I can't believe it," I over-enthuse, "Do you know if she was a stowaway?"

"No, I don't know much about it," she replies.

The Stowaway's Letter Part Two

The meeting's finished and it's been decided. They say I can stay, that I can complete my journey to Britain, to a new life. More than that, they decided to have a whip round and pay for my ticket! £50 they got. I can't believe it! When they told me, I nearly hugged the Captain! They've even given me £4 for myself. £4! Today, the men and women on this ship have shown me what it really means to belong. They're my brothers and sisters. And now I'm on my way to join a bigger family in the Motherland, in Great Britain! I feel like I've grabbed that gold coin out of the sapphire sky and put it in my pocket.

I (Jay) am happy to read out my letter to the group. I wrote it during the drama experiences.

Dear Diary

I am shivering in the Utility room at the back of the ship. I have just enough food to last me a week if I don't get any hungrier that I am right now. I miss my mums rice and peas and fried dumplings. Rumour has it that a stowaway in on the boat, though I don't know what to believe as I am trapped in this room. I can't see anything, all I can hear is the faint murmuring of people drifting past the room which I am stuck in. I am terrified to be found. I am on my own and I don't have a ticket. I am starting to feel envious of all the people above deck. Now, I can hear dominoes being whacked onto boxes which are used as tables. Back at home, in Jamaica, I was one of the greatest domino players in my village but I can't go back...I need to find any way I can for a more fulfilling future. It is starting to get colder, I am not used to this. Back at home we love to play in the sun but goose bumps are beginning to surround my arms like mosquitos.

Destination

At the end of the day, as we walk back from the lecture theatre, I (Dan) chat to one of the older students, Jay. She's won my book and I've signed it for her. I ask her how she felt about the day. She says she didn't enjoy some of the activities because they felt a little young for her. I agree. Then she tells me about a book she's writing and how she would like to be an author. She seems pleased to have won my book – it's her first signed by an author. As the children start to climb into the minibus, I feel content. We've reached a destination. Perhaps it's not everything we thought it would be, perhaps the feedback is mixed, but there are moments of beauty and of connection, and at least one student is leaving inspired enough to tell me she wants to be a writer, and that feels good enough.

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Response to Windrush Day: Stories Forgotten

A think piece dialogue by Dr Remi Joseph-Salisbury

That these sessions were so demonstrably engaging and enjoyable for the young people not only attests to the virtues of culturally-relevant pedagogies, but also offers a searing critique of the Eurocentric curriculum to which young people are too often accustomed. Why is it, we must ask, are Black students more familiar with the history of the Titanic than they are the history of African Caribbean migration?

A plethora of research (Doharty, 2015; Joseph-Salisbury, 2015; 2017) has shown the negative consequences of the curricular erasure of the lives and achievements of Black and Brown people. From the wellbeing, self-esteem and educational attainment of Black and Brown students, to the racial and racist tensions we continue to see unfold (with the government having recently threatened the Windrush generation with deportation), the consequences are near immeasurable.

In her seminal work on culturally-relevant pedagogy, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995: 483) implores educators to centre 'student culture in the classroom as authorized or official knowledge'. It is this pedagogical practice that we see play out in the recollection of the Windrush day sessions. The power of the sessions lay bare the failures of traditional 'whitewashed' schooling and call for a reimagining of the way we do education.

References

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