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Border identities

Dance Artist **Dr Adesola Akinleye** reports on how a pilot project, Movement, Narratives and Meanings, used dance and film to voice the stories of people living next to the Northern Ireland / north of Ireland border, following the vote for 'Brexit'

She stepped on to the edge of the mat to dance and closed her eyes...

He lay in the snow and hugged the ground...

She took a breath and seemed to fill the spaces between trees and distant houses...



Places of home

The Cure Violence Foundation, initiated by Dr. Gary Slutkin in 1995, proposes that violence spreads or behaves like an infectious disease. Slutkin suggests the procedure for

working with infectious diseases maps directly to strategies for curbing community violence(1). After experience fighting diseases such as tuberculosis in Somalia, Slutkin returned home to the USA to find similar clusters of death due to street violence. Slutkin's theory for treating violence as an infectious disease draws on health strategies for reversing epidemics, summarised in three steps: interrupt transmission; prevent further spread; and shift norms (for long-term group immunity).

It does not escape my notice, as I sit reading and watching Slutkin's

work, that the people involved are primarily composed of Africans and African-Americans and are in communities I would call home. Slutkin's model resonates with me. I feel dance-arts have a presence in the metaphor of violence as disease. Dance is not readily a part of the immediate trauma response of the first step (interrupt transmission) but can contribute to the steps 'change individual behaviour' and 'change norms'. I theorise that within this medical-based metaphor dance-arts boost the 'immune system'. They strengthen the individual's ability to avoid infection and recover from the infection of violence. >>



Movement, Narratives and Meanings. Photo: Adesola Akinleye. Inset: Dr Adesola Akinleye. Photo: Foteini Christofilopoulou.

Therefore, dance-arts are important as a preventative measure. They would be a part of the 'health' of the environment, they counteract the degree to which an outbreak of the infectious violence affected a community.

Outbreaks of violence under the skin

My partner's face dropped entering the room on the morning of June 24 2016. 'The leave vote won!' That same cold shock I was to feel down my spine the following November, as Her-story parties sat silently watching the map of USA turn Trump's red on their television screens. Votes won, it appeared to me, on the back of fearing my brown skin and female identity. Across 2016 and 2017, wounds that we had thought were fading scars, appeared to have been just under the skin - open, contagious and oozing infection.

Growing up in London I had always felt an affinity with Northern Ireland. The violence of Northern Ireland seeped into my life through the bomb scares, explosions in London and restrictions made to public space in the name of protecting us. But Northern Ireland spoke more to me of the multicultural project of how people identifying from different cultures lived side by side. A project my young white-English mother and my black-Nigerian father had entered when they married and gave birth to me. Born British and Black, in 1970s London the clash of these two identities appeared to be mirrored in the troubles of Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. And then with the peace process of the 1990s and Sade and Alicia Keys and other 'mixed-race' artists - who I saw myself in and we all seemed to be moving forward.

But in June 2016 I heard conversations about fears of Brown skinned people migrating to the UK and USA that reminded me of 1970s, political discussions. And then the votes and the prospect of walls between USA and Mexico and how to reinstate a border between the European Union member of Ireland and the possible non-European Union member of the UK (which includes Northern Ireland). I saw the Brexit and



Trump votes pointing to possible outbreaks of infectious violence. Electoral events that are warnings to artists to inject the immune systems of our communities with art.

Freedom of Movement

Responding to the electoral mandate the 'Brexit' Referendum and USA election votes appear to have given policy makers, it is important that people in everyday communities have modes to create being heard. Alongside this, the surprise political analysts expressed at the ballot box results betrays the need to give attention to the narratives of individual lived-experiences. This pilot project, Movement, Narratives and Meanings(2), sought to use dance and film to acknowledge that the complexities of people's lives are beyond what can be expressed in just words.

Dance-based workshops were held with people living in Northern Ireland: in Enniskillen, Fivemiletown and Belfast.

I collaborated with London based film maker Anton Califano, Northern Ireland based dance-artists Dylan Quinn and Sheena Kelly and Robbie Breadon and Fi Gilmour of Common Ground NI. The project consisted of film and dance participatory workshops that facilitated members of the local communities in creating choreography around the topic of borders, boundaries and edges. Participants shared their movement-memories through site-specific dance and film, in places meaningful to the memory-narrative. This created little movement vignettes that (re)inhabit places of significance in personal histories. The project started a conversation about Place and Identity.

Anton Califano believes, "There is more to capturing movement through



Movement, Narratives and Meanings. Photos: Adesola Akinleye.

“Part of our mission is to nurture cultural change – in particular our individual and community relationships with nature and each other.

“Working with the body is important, if not essential, in both sensing negative influences and transforming their affects into positive, sustainable, embodied change.”

Through the dancing body

This pilot project was therefore born out of a belief in the importance of the use of physical-dance languages as part of the expression of everyday lived experiences and the idea that dance (and film) have a place of immunisation in the metaphor of the contagion of violence. Also, 2016 saw a call to collaborative action for artists. I believe this project has celebrated dancing for dance’s sake, but I also believe the importance of dance, as a language and within communities dancing together, is often undervalued.

He lay in the snow and embraced the ground – then he talked about his dance:

“I was... finding these physical limits... about how there are physical limits, but most of the boundaries and edges and borders that we actually recognise or relate to, are created by the way we interpret those limits... so when I was [dancing] on the wood floor, and then now when I was in the snow, once you’re in contact with it, it changes from being just a surface that stays under your feet, to being something you can interact with.”

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1. Ransford, C., Kane, C. & Slutkin, G. (2013) Cure violence: a disease control approach to reduce violence and change behaviour. In Waltermaurer, E & Akers, T.A. (eds.) Epidemiological criminology: theory to practice. London; New York: Routledge.
2. Project funded by Middlesex University Arts and Creative industries

the lens than the contrast of a black and white rendition or the limits even that high definition colour can provide.

“The lens offers up many more tones and hues in between, many choices, while the camera records not just where a body is in the frame, but also where it is not. Filming people creating movement together in a workshop environment feels like witnessing a microcosm of the ‘outside’ world... the weight of a movement, the personality of a stance, or the intention of a gesture is never missed by the camera”.

Sheena Kelly adds, “The project offered a unique way to open up conversation, helping us understand differing points of view and find a different language in which to express ourselves.

“Northern Ireland stands to lose the most from Brexit and with no united or visible voice in the discussions it can be easy to feel lost in it all. The project opened interesting conversations, wider than

I first imagined and gave a voice and narrative to the communities living here in Northern Ireland.”

We purposefully addressed the workshop participants as embodied, sensual beings who use physical (dance) and visual (film) languages to express their histories, hopes and opinions. By sharing and using practices that draw on physical and visual languages, the participants expressed the embodied detail that can be hidden within traditional Western policy debates.

Dylan Quinn suggests that engagement with outside artists who think in a critical way about the role arts can play in a post-conflict society is as important now, 20 years after the Northern Ireland Good Friday Agreement, as ever.

“The shifting of norms in a place such as Northern Ireland requires sustained and sustainable activities, when recent political developments seem to promote the direct opposite.”

Robbie Breadon suggests that,