

EPISODE 2 - Joining the disparate dots

CONTENT WARNING

Before this podcast begins, we wanted to give you a gentle warning - this podcast can be a hard listen at times and includes themes and discussions of trauma, racism, colonisation and more. It's something you might need to consider before listening.

INTRODUCTION

EA: Whilst storytelling can help us understand others and ourselves, we often have to navigate myths and memories that hold conflicts or truths overtaken by others. BUT...for many understanding their past, their families, their roots - it can be the one thing that brings real connection to ourselves and those around us.

In late 2022, Scottish-Zimbabwean artist and researcher Natasha Thembiso Ruwona programmed an event titled *Our Stories Between the Myths and Memories* in partnership with The Skinny. Hosted at David Livingstone Birthplace in Blantyre, Natasha brought together a wealth of creative practitioners from the Scottish African diaspora to celebrate their contributions to the creative sector.

Natasha's aim was to let the project speak to past, present and potential futures that examine Black Scottish history, culture and identity. And why the location? Well, it placed a spotlight on the work that David Livingstone Birthplace are doing as they consider the role of museums within truthful storytelling.

My name is Eilidh Akilade, I am the intersections editor at The Skinny and over this 4-part podcast series brought to you by the magazine in partnership with We Are Here Scotland, you will experience some of the conversations, questions, creativity and reflections that came out of that weekend.

Welcome to Our Stories...

In this, our second episode we explore the joining of disparate dots. And by disparate, that may mean displacement, disconnection from heritage and the stories of our lives but also, how to connect old lives to new, including moving from one continent to another for example.

This was a strong theme over the weekend programmed by Natasha and their creative community, but we also wanted to question what are these dots? Who and what do they represent? How might they join? Do they even join? And hopefully, some of these questions will be answered OR... give us more to think about.

Part 1: Tomiwa - Holding Her Whole

EA: We open with a reading from writer, presenter and creative Tomiwa Folorunso. Her work explores the experiences of marginalised voices and connecting people, ideas and stories. This piece called '*Holding Her Whole*' is taken from a publication edited by Natasha Ruwona called *Passions*. The book is an updated version of *Passions: Discourses on Black Women's Creativity*, edited by the late artist Maud Sulter but this new version is a curation of Scottish Black women and non-binary people artists.

Tomiwa: *I am not scared of heights because they have reached heights greater than the ones in my dreams. Anything is possible. I am scared of falling but not like leaves carried by the wind from the branches of a tree to silently rest on the ground. I am scared of falling and having no time to close my eyes or gasp for air or break my fall I am scared of falling and not being caught. I am scared of falling and I fell.*

It began with a heavy sigh that left my body as a weep, a weep that dislodged the pieces, pieces of me that had been carefully placed in the way only we know how learned through a lifetime of observing, understanding that we are hypervisible and invisible. That we are the ones who reached heights greater than the ones in my dreams are never completely seen, never completely felt, never able to be complete. Because otherwise we are too much or not enough.

I wept and I fell. I had only time to wonder, would anyone lift me up? Because I can't. I am too tired. I am tired of lifting myself. I need help. I need help. She whispers and they hear her and they come and they couldn't catch her because she fell so fast that they can lift her slowly but first they hold her. They feed her yam and eggs and Egusi and [inaudible] braid her hair with argan oil and aloe vera and tranquility they touch her with care. They know, their touch knows and they hold her. They hold her words and her thoughts and her fears and her dreams. They hold her prayers and her wishes. They hold her and her pain. They hold her all of her to be held whole for all the pieces to be held to be held by black women sprinkled with their magic to remember her own for their joy to become her joy and her joy to become theirs. Spinning the, uh, earth with their laughter and love and their care. Basking. Basking in joy like melanin in the sun radiating.

EA: Desire, wisdom, culture, love, fear and safety. These are several themes that may come through for you in this reading, and they are elements that provide a deep connection between people.

Part 2: (Adebusola & Tomiwa)

EA: And those themes also apply to other conversations in this episode including the next. If you have heard the first episode of this podcast series, you will have already met Adebusola Ramsay and Tomiwa already. They sat down for a very frank conversation looking at Adebusola's decolonisation work and navigating difficult histories.

For those of you who haven't met Adebusola yet, she is a visual artist, whose practice has developed over the last two decades.

This conversation explores Adebusola's research and its importance but it also raises a number of meaningful questions around how it can be difficult to connect the dots and how such difficulty shows us the importance of imagining otherwise.

Tomiwa: *Why did you decide to start researching chattel slavery and processes of racialisation and racism and that kind of research? Because obviously, you come from a*

biomedical background. Yes, you've been painting for 20 years, but some might think, okay, why do this research?

Adebusola: Yeah, no, I think it's a reasonable question to ask. So, I suppose, obviously, I'm Black, I'm from Nigeria, and luckily, I spent the first ten years of my life there before moving here. And so I had an understanding of my culture from a different perspective, from an African perspective, rather than from the perspective of white supremacy. And so, obviously, coming here so young and experiencing racism and trying to understand what that is all about but never really having tangible sources to be able to understand the processes of racism and why it exists. I think the research started in 2015. Sorry, I said five years there, but it's longer than that. And so it was because of my mental health. And so I had to know who started racism? What is it for? And what is racialisation, and who benefits from race and how does it make sense and what is Chattel Slavery and how is it connected to the current world order? How does it connect to how we understand the world today? The processes of the world, capitalism, patriarchy? Where did all these things start from? Because it's all affecting me, and so I need to understand it. And so, yeah, the research started because I needed to understand where I was, how did I get here. How did my people even know, to migrate here? Why would we migrate here? Why did your country colonize my country? How did this all start? And so that's where the research came from. And growing up in Nigeria, Lagos Island specifically, there are certain street names that are Scottish names and so that was always in the back of my mind. And my previous surname is King. And I always remember walking by a street in Glasgow called King Street and just wondering why? Why have my grandparents got English surnames? How did that happen? Why do we not have Yuroba names? And where is the connection between that place and this place? And, you know, there were some I knew about Scotland before I ever moved here. But nobody I went, when I first moved here, and I grew up in the East End, not far away from here. And, um, nobody had ever heard of Nigeria or knew where it was. But I knew where Scotland was. I knew where Glasgow was. Right. And, you know, in school in Lagos, there was this Scottish guy, Mungo Park. He's like the David Livingston of West Africa. So we heard about him in school, and it was just that understanding of why, you know, why colonisation? Why did we have to win our independence? Why Chattel Slavery? Why would you do that? How do you benefit from that? And why can't you talk about it? Why does nobody talk about it? Why does nobody want to talk about it? And so that's where the urge to find out more, because it's a difficult job trying to find out more. Well, it certainly was for me over the last 30 years, because the history and history writing and history-making and history, the assertion of history in white supremacy is so obfuscated, your reality is constantly being obfuscated by white supremacy that it's hard to get at the full story. Everything is written in piecemeal. And so you need to find a way to be able to think critically and think through the obfuscation. And so that's what I started doing seven years ago. And then that naturally led to the walking tours.

Tomiwa: Do you think if you had lived in Nigeria for your entire life, where you were living in Nigeria, you would still want to do that research? And, do you think you'd still have that, like, almost that urge, that hunger to go and look into it?

Adebusola: Knowing me? Yeah, probably. Yeah. Absolutely, I would have because the same question still applies. What's this colonisation thing all about? Like...

Tomiwa: *Why are we celebrating independence?*

Adebusola: *Yeah. Why are we celebrating independence? Why is my country 62 years old? Who drew these lines? Because these lines don't make any sense. Right? Because as a country, we're still in the project of making ourselves right. Because we were arbitrary. You know, there are 250 odd languages spoken in Nigeria, distinct languages, and, myriad of ethnicities that have been lumped together, and Nigeria is still trying to make itself in a colonial framing that was imposed upon it. Even the name Nigeria, it's like some random person came up with it, and it's, why are we going through this? My grandmother is from Sierra Leone. Specifically Freetown, right? And we all called her Yasaro. And Saro is a very specific Yuroba term for people who are descendants of enslaved people, Yuroba people that came through Sierra Leone. And you know that from clues. She was born in Freetown. She's not native indigenous Sierra Leon because of the language she speaks. She speaks Creole, and which is similar to Creoles across the Caribbean. And so, ah, these little clues it's like trying to piece them all together. Um, why is it called Freetown? Why did some random English person set up? Where did these people what do you mean? Black people came from Nova Scotia and were put there. Enslaved people who had fought on behalf of the British and then other people who the British Navy had taken off of enslaved ships, then dumped them there with no care or interest of where they'd been taken from. They were just dumped in Freetown and then created issues in that area, um, between the indigenous population and the enslaved population who are now free, but were being indoctrinated in Christianity because they weren't just allowed to be free. Um, there was a funny term that Zachary McCauley used, I can't remember it now, essentially, like, they had to be trained in freedom and civilization, and that included being indoctrinated into Christianity and baptised and all that kind of nonsense. Eventually, I would have asked these questions, because even the basic one why have you all got English surnames? And what's Freetown? What's a strange name for a place.*

Tomiwa: *Yeah. What is our family history? And eventually it's going to open up.*

Adebusola: *Yeah, exactly. And so I would have ended up in the same place anyway. Why the anti-blackness when we're all Black? Why the deference to white supremacy in an African country? Have the colonial powers actually left? You know, um, why are we paying debt to our former colonisers? Like, what's that all about? So eventually yeah, you would have got there.*

Tomiwa: *Yeah. I feel like part of what you're saying is that just because we're not just because we're maybe not I don't want to use the word Africa, but just because we're not in Nigeria doesn't mean we're not facing and we're here in Scotland, we're still not talking about the same issues or the same problems or the results or like you said that current word, world order. It's the same systems we're up against.*

Adebusola: *Yeah. It's the same it's a global system. Absolutely. Like, the British didn't colonise the majority of the world for no reason. And that power doesn't just dissipate because you decide to forget about it or pretend that you can't remember. We are still living in, as Christina Sharp says, we are still living in the wake of colonisation, Chattel Slavery, imperialism, and the extractive and violent processes that all of those systems require. We're still living in it. We're still in the wake of it.*

Tomiwa: *Back, um, more, I think, to the research. And so how did that begin? Or not how did that begin, but where did you start and what came from it?*

Adebusola: *Ah, right, okay. So it started because I work in public health. I've worked in public health for nearly two decades. And specifically that period in time, I was working in data standardisation and definitions, and basically just means I write clinical definitions and for how you collect data sets or define questions. And so a query came to me from a GP asking to expand the definition of sex and gender and to include intersex people. And something clicked in me because I remember learning about intersex in university and learning that sex was assigned at birth and a bunch of people need to decide how to sex you right and it's a spectrum, but somehow I managed to forget that information between university and, like, my working day to day. And I was so affronted and so disgusted in myself that I started doing the research. And obviously, at that point in time, the UN, made a declaration that basically said that, you know, what Western societies do, the medicalisation and the practice and the surgical intervention that intersex children were forced to go through was abhorrent and should stop. And the concept of bodily autonomy should be, was front and centre in respecting these children. And because essentially what was done is that if you did not fit neatly into any of the categories, the binary category of male or female, then the medical system could just choose for you. And then it was secret. Right. Your parents weren't allowed to tell you, and you weren't really allowed access to your medical... you can apply for your medical records at any point, but intersex children or adults weren't really allowed to, the parts of it would be sealed. And the parents were indoctrinated into this lie and the damage that it caused for decades for these people, the mental health toll, the physical toll in terms of the repeated surgeries that they had to go through because someone had decided, okay, I'm going to make you a man, or I'm going to make you female caused such destruction to their physiology that it was just so abhorrent. And then I'm reading and finding out that, oh, right, okay, this is purely a white supremacy thing. This is a colonial project. This is an extension of a colonial project, because not every single culture in the world does this, and other cultures are aware that maybe you just leave the kids alone and let their bodies figure it out. And what does it matter anyway? Sex in nature is not binary, right? From a scientific perspective, it's not binary, but because some societies decide that it should be, and that's the only parameters that's acceptable. that was my foray into white supremacy and, like, colonisation. That's how it started. So it started with research and intersex and the violence that's done towards those people, and the concept of binary sex or gender and realising just how much tied that was to, like, white supremacy and colonisation. Yeah, that's how it started. And then you automatically just find your way into race because, you know yeah.*

Tomiwa: *And then what did that research, I don't want to say look like, but what did you do next? And you're still always researching, right?*

Adebusola: *Yeah, I tried to appeal to my senior management that, okay, we need to do this. Obviously, we're the NHS, we have to. But there were objections that it was a bit too complicated to put it in. We did eventually put it into the code list, but it had to be put in. It couldn't have its own set-aside code. It just had to have a slightly different code. It had to be put in with an existing code. We had to use one of the existing codes for intersex people. Yeah, that was the kind of and I think that resistance to because I was a part of the LGBT staff network, and I'd ask them to include "I", you know LGBTI, and I had to give them this*

presentation and this justification as to why intersex people should be included and so, yeah, that's kind of how it started, me talking to people about how they should think about things and how to think otherwise from the way you're kind of, like, taught and just realising that most people think that had never even thought that. Oh, yeah, of course, the midwife of the obstetrician has to go, all right, okay, you're a boy, you're a girl. Do you know what I mean? Like, it's assigned. And that's how we in medical speak or in science terms, that's what they'll say to you, like, um, what sex were you assigned at birth? Someone assigned it. Someone gives it to you. It's not a divine thing. Not that divine exists or anything. If you don't believe in that, there isn't some apparition that's going, oh, you are... a human being says you are male, you're a female. And sometimes it's not obvious, and more times than you don't know, it's just not obvious.

Tomiwa: *Okay. And so it feels like you were just very critical, asking your questions, like, thinking about what else is missing. Why haven't we been taught this? Like, that seems like a huge theme in your work.*

Adebusola: *Yeah, absolutely. I mean, some people would say I'm cynical, some people I would say I'm precocious. But I just like to think about things. And I like to know the full story. And most of the time, we don't have the full story because, like, you know, people don't have all the time in the world to start from the actual beginning. And it's difficult to join dots. And I feel like that's a lot of what I do is finding those disparate dots and joining them together and showing the connections between things. And for that, you have to ask questions. You have to think critically. But we're not necessarily taught how to do that so it takes practice to think otherwise.*

Tomiwa: *Yeah, to think otherwise. And it's almost like imagine otherwise as well. To imagine that there could be another way. That this isn't all we know.*

EA: For many people, there's a number of barriers to researching their own Scottish African heritage Whether that be through trauma, lack of time and resources, accessibility and more. Having Adebusola open up the conversation and ironically clear up some of the obfuscation that she talks about is in itself a connection of dots for those within these communities. To have someone to identify with, who is visible and who innovatively approaches research is beyond invaluable.

We can often accept what we are told through fear of the system, not wanting to be regarded as problematic, limited resources and microcosmic communities.

People may accept information because it's consistent with their existing beliefs and knowledge, or because they lack the means to verify it. Social and cultural factors can also play a role, as people may be more likely to accept information that is consistent with the norms and values of their group. But also, people may accept something because it seems logical or because it is backed by evidence.

But what if those norms and values are not part of your group and what if the evidence is not legitimate? This is where what Adebusola calls "clues" are key and, especially, as she points out, because they often come from those closest to you.

Going back to global systems and their existence, this will be a theme that we will explore more in our next episode with Clementine Burnley where she explores the history of games and how they have progressed by the means in which control and consumption still dominates.

But back to this conversation, we haven't talked much about the role Scotland has played which is also highlighted here. In our final episode, we will hear more about Adebisola's walking tours and amongst other things, the role of street names.

Colonisation has had a profound and lasting impact on those people and cultures colonised. The forced displacement of indigenous peoples, the exploitation of resources, the suppression of local cultures and languages, the spread of disease, and the imposition of foreign systems of government and economy, the loss of historical and cultural artefacts, the exploitation of colonised peoples as a source of cheap labour, the list goes on.

The legacy of colonisation continues to affect the lives of people in colonised regions to this day including those who have migrated, seeking to distance themselves from that historic effect and its trauma. And Scotland isn't separate from those conversations. David Livingston was one of many that took part in this. So the reflection upon one's identity through this labyrinth is where the importance of storytelling, art and culture come in, especially when it's brought into these spaces to educate and by people such as Adebisola.

Part 3: Inga Dale - AFRICA RISE

EA: I want to introduce you to a new voice in this series and that's Inga Dale.

Inga Dale is a spoken word artist from Cape Town, South Africa. Inga's writing offers an insight into how she sees the world and the way she navigates through various societal challenges and barriers and her poetry focuses on themes surrounding the complexities of black identity and African pride.

In this poem titled Africa Rise, across the continent from north to south and east to west, it illustrates the connection of Africans to each other, both in Africa's beauty and in its violation by others.

Inga Dale: *Africa rise I hear you cry shackled by past oppression subjugated by current representation.*

Africa rise I see how they take your resources from you the diamonds encrusted in crowns, the cocoa beans gathered by the blistered hands of your children and then sold, the gold that is paraded in opulent ways and is praised for its beauty.

Africa rise even though they exploit your people, paint them as uneducated savages when the very people that stereotype Africa can't point you out on the map.

Africa rise as your leaders continue to be corrupt, sold for money and power while they watch your children starve.

Africa rise as your children are still at war fighting for power in a piece of the pie watching each other die in Africa. You hold so much beauty. From your pyramids in Egypt standing tall for thousands upon thousands of years to your great mud mosque of Djenné maintained with pride by Himalayans.

The vast Saharan deserts stretched across millions of square miles, connecting Africans to each other. Your rich history found in the walls of Ethiopia, proud and prevalent just like Victoria Falls. Your beautiful, lush, dense jungles and stretching Savannas housing animals rarely seen. Oh, you are truly a queen.

A queen who should be praised for not only her beauty, but her complexities, diversity and most importantly, her resilience. Oh, Africa, how you should rise and how you deserve more.

You have the power to bring this world and their knees to the floor.

[OUTRO]

EA: Next time, we look at the stories we tell each other and ourselves.

In the meantime, if you want to learn more about David Livingstone Birthplace and make up your own mind, they are located in Blantyre and we will provide more information in the show notes to accompany this episode.

CREDITS:

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