Original Article

Dramatherapy online: Here, there, and Black everywhere

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Abstract

This article highlights the necessary narratives and voice of a Black male dramatherapist working with unaccompanied/separated children and adolescents accessing dramatherapy online as a viable extension of dramatherapy practice. It explores the metaphor of a cyborg in relation to the dramatherapist, examining how feelings of distance may be magnified through the screen, yet offer the opportunity to co-create new connections and relationships. Holding dramatherapy sessions online challenges boundaries and space-holding, as online therapy does not include a shared physical room or container in the same way as traditional place-based dramatherapy. Remote access to therapy is enabled by technology when access to shared physical spaces is compromised. This research uses a phenomenological and naturalist retrospective analysis of voice, language and agency and aims to cultivate a philosophical repertoire to conceptualise and identify themes present in my experience of online dramatherapy.

Keywords

Cyborgs, dramatherapy and philosophy, dramatherapy online, identity, posthumanism and technology, remote dramatherapy, simulacrum

Introduction

I am a Black male dramatherapist working with displaced individuals, clients who do not share my first language where their agency has been compromised by their circumstances. During Covid-19, I experienced working online and creating a shared dramatherapy space. I am curious as to whether dramatherapy online can be a dehumanising experience. I will explore the concept of cyborgs and how they relate to me as a Black male. I will ask how working through technology might benefit some clients who find face-to-face work too overwhelming.

The service users I encountered at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic as a dramatherapy trainee included displaced children and unaccompanied adolescents separated

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from their families. There was often an interpreter present during these sessions. Currently, now qualified, I work with separated children seeking asylum.

I will evidence facilitating dramatherapy with clients whose voices and experiences are often misrepresented or underrepresented by the media through my experience as a Black male. I will present vignettes of my clinical work.

Dramatherapy in online spaces: Conceptual identity

The prerequisites for a traditional dramatherapy space include time and space for the session to occur (Bion, 1983). Therapeutic boundaries of space are challenged when accessing dramatherapy online, as there are arguably three spaces the therapy takes place in simultaneously: the dramatherapist's, client's and online space. The online space can disappear instantaneously, jeopardising the congruence of a therapist's presence. Dramatherapy online is abrupt; there is no time to walk to your chair in advance; with one click, your client is there. Media may directly impact dramatherapy online, as clients accessing a Zoom call on their phone may receive text or news updates during the session and may not know how to turn them off.

Accessing dramatherapy in this way can be likened to entering a TARDIS where the online therapy room is 'bigger on the inside' as it contains the dramatherapist's and client's physical spaces (MacRury and Rustin, 2018: 1) This shared online space is different from the physically inhabited spaces of the place-based client and dramatherapist. This creates a challenge in therapy as there is an element of unpredictability in knowing where the other will be located; clients become responsible for their part of the space; the client and dramatherapist can only see each other through a screen.

Dramatherapy online may prevent true expression, due to limitations and practicalities of how we respond to technology.

Humanism, posthumanism and identity

Humanism is one of the philosophical concepts that has informed my interpretation of self. Humanism is a branch of philosophy that places humans at its centre (Oxford English Dictionary (OED), 2021). Through humanism, the therapeutic process can explore the true nature of the self (Jones, 2008). Identity in a therapeutic setting can be expressed in terms of role-playing; manifesting this imaginary self is equally a creative and cognitive task. In this instance, the imagined and real self have the capacity to learn from one another (Landy, 1994, cited in Jones, 2007).

Identity processes reality by interacting with the world signalling the mind's functions to act (Bourne and Ekstrand, 1985, cited in Jones, 2007). 'Self-actualisation is the search for personal identity and the unique personal meaning of life' (Bourne and Ekstrand, 1985, cited in Jones, 2007). Intent becomes co-opted by the restrictions of technology compromising free will and self-actualisation. This results in the co-creation of images and sounds mimicked by the technology, representing the client and dramatherapist's individual selves.

Dramatherapy practice online is the combination of choice informed by technology and personal identity. I will introduce terminology used in posthumanism that has informed this research to demonstrate this.

Posthumanism is a reaction to humanism that focuses on humanity. Rejecting the idea of individuals being entirely autonomous, posthumanism sees individuality as fragmentary, and socially and historically conditioned (OED, 2021). This suggests that identity is socially and historically conditioned and that technology in online dramatherapy conditions the way we communicate.

Cyborg identity

A concept derived from posthumanism is the term cyborg. Unlike science fiction connotations of a cyborg where machines consume human thought, flesh and texture, the term cyborg in the context of posthumanism is the altered identity of people (Thweatt-Bates, 2012). Far removed from the characters Akira, Cyborg from DC comics and Robocop, a cyborg can function as a metaphor for the embodied connection between humans and non-humans (Thweatt-Bates, 2002). I am using this term to frame and navigate identity in dramatherapy online. Landy sees identity as multiple parts that are separate for each individual (Landy, 1994, cited in Jones, 2007).

There are many interpretations of the cyborg construct. Haraway (1991) uses the term to communicate the oppressive treatment of Black women.

Theorising people of colour as cyborgs helps to explain their unequal or oppressive treatment because cyborgs themselves are often dehumanised, treated as less than fully human or conceptualised as threats to established social order (Jones and Jones, 2017: 43).

I recognise parallels with my blackness. A government-commissioned report conducted in 2022 concluded institutional racism does not exist. The experience of Black Caribbean people invited to the United Kingdom during the Windrush era in 2022 being chartered for scheduled deportations details another reality. I use the term cyborg to identify the human and non-human combination of identity represented in online dramatherapy. Offering dramatherapy to clients who recognise me as African and as a dramatherapist who Western society labels as 'black' has demanded a lot of my clinical judgement regarding transference and self-disclosure.

In 2016 during the lead-up to the Brexit decision, there was a tsunami of negative press about refugees in British media. Refugees and individuals seeking asylum regardless of their legal rights to do so were portrayed negatively, often referred to as 'illegal immigrants' who were invading the United Kingdom. This rhetoric stems from the legacy of British colonialism as it is used to suggest that refugees and asylum seekers pose a cultural threat to White supremacist hegemony. The transference of this White guilt is not exclusively upheld by White bodies.

Whiteness is rarely identified in media, whereas non-White media representation identifies race first when depicting either crime or sudden inclusion, without emphasising the duality this shares with oppression and historic gatekeeping.

Space, role and identity

Dramatherapy online creates an in-between space. We can be seen as neither here nor there. I found using Bion's container as a metaphor helpful to communicate what contains the in-between space therapy online creates. Bion's (1983) container is reactive and informed by projective and introjective identifications; this result allows meaning

to be made from the experience. I find it useful to conceptualise the in-between space as a transitional or potential space. Viewing the dramatherapy space as intangible, with the potential to be or become anything, allows me to feel prepared as a dramatherapist to work with children who may not know what dramatherapy is or could be. Winnicott's potential space provides a neutral space to play with as it is recognised as a third or other space with co-created boundaries (Simmonds, 2018). I found when working with asylum-seeking children online that clients would mirror my gestures, body language and greeting rituals in English. I experienced this dynamic akin to an infant seeking blueprints of connection from their primary caregiver. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are separated from their primary caregivers and may not have this opportunity, and many displaced children grapple with acculturation, so as dramatherapists we can affirm children's individual expressions of culture, encouraging this when appropriate to do so.

To further explore my experience of feeling neither here nor there, I found Simmonds' (2018) article linking containment, potential space and bardo, enlightening as this connects the theme of in-betweenness. 'Transitional state' or 'between state' translates as bardo which is a Tibetan Buddhist concept that was previously thought to pertain to death (Trungpa, 1987). The word bardo later adopted a new meaning, of 'gap' or 'suspension'. This new meaning is not exclusive to death; this state of bardo can occur in life (Trungpa, 1975). There are many types of bardo, and 'dharmata' bardo has 'a quality of openness, spaciousness, and clarity, with the luminosity that of "true nature"' (Govinda, 1927, cited in Simmonds, 2018). The link between liminality present in a potential space and dharmata bardo is an expression of clarity and true nature (Simmonds, 2018: 257). Gaps of presence can frequently occur during dramatherapy online. Whether I am simultaneously audible and visually frozen online, my expression of identity is suspended to either my physical self or my clients. Online disconnection causes gaps that can disrupt the flow of liminality or bardo; one may conclude its emergence in place-based dramatherapy would remain intact. I posit a digital representation of us is born in a video call. When we have technical difficulties, this representation of self in-between being and not being is, like bardo, suspended. When we lose connection and we reconnect, this can be seen as the death of that digital representation and the rebirth of another. From this interpretation of bardo, liminality and potential space, the true nature of our human condition is realised when the camera stops and we are no longer being watched. As a dramatherapist, when clients freeze during a video call, I feel the absence of the three-dimensional physical person I am waiting to reconnect with. When the screen freezes or the client turns off their camera, there is a parallel process; without any visual or audible social cues to let me know whether the client is still there on the other side, suddenly I feel alone, calling a client's name without any response. This makes me think of the children separated from their families being without the reassurance of an attachment figure.

The cyborg is the hybrid of a human and technology. When this hybrid is unsynchronized, the cyborg is deconstructed and the cyborg's components become separate; the cyborg enters a state of bardo where true nature is expressed by technology and the human functioning separately.

I find technical difficulty disrupting the flow of dramatherapy online to be stressful, uncertainty due to unexpected changes, as a neurodivergent individual; this exacerbates

my feelings of helplessness. To counter this, when online I write down key words and phrases with my microphone muted to not draw focus to typing sounds. The practicalities of dramatherapy online enable me to have the time to take discreet notes, whereas while working in a place-based setting I am often more active and physical without the opportunity to take notes. My cyborg identity behaves differently to my physical self, based on our capabilities and needs.

Technology as a container

Dramatherapy online can be contained by the dramatherapist and technology. There is a potential advantage to inhabiting an in-between space to access therapy as dramatherapy can enable communication of an individual's 'true nature'. Creative elements in which the client can reflect through stories, embodiment and drawing activities can enable this process.

Vignette

Setting: Charity sector. Omar is a pseudonym. He was referred for anxiety, isolation, nightmares and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Omar had experienced complex/Big T Trauma. I have obtained written consent from the client to publish the following.

Session 2

To collaboratively create therapeutic aims, I invited Omar to play Winnicott's scribble game instead. I drew two parallel lines on a small whiteboard and asked Omar to copy this on the piece of paper. I asked Omar to finish off the drawing. Omar drew a house with a window in the middle. I asked whether there was anything to say about this drawing and Omar shared, 'I miss it because I'm not in it'. When I asked where Omar was, he said, 'I'm here in the real house'.

   Omar's expression of being homesick informed my therapeutic aim of constructing a safe place.

   This vignette is an example of how, between delivery and reception, true nature can be revealed. The art co-created with the client and dramatherapist enabled Omar to express his feelings. Instead of passing a physical sketch for the client to respond to, he had to copy my initial drawing which he would not have to do if we were together in a place-based setting. Although there is no way of knowing, I am curious whether drawing my lines enabled the client to have more agency over the completion of the drawing. As Omar copied my initial sketch and finished the drawing, the art was simultaneously entirely drawn by him and co-created. This also demonstrates some of the practical difficulties of dramatherapy online, when the dramatherapist does not share the same language as the client while inhabiting separate spaces. Interpreters are valuable as they communicate with the client and dramatherapist directly; however, the limitations of language mean that an interpreter's interpretation can also add to the lack of clarity between the dramatherapist and the client. As technology contains the physical dramatherapy space, I found

it important to explore the intangible relationship that technology and the therapeutic relationship share in dramatherapy online. A cyborg can be a human using technology. As a dramatherapist, my only connection with the client is through technology; we are not communicating directly with one another in a shared physical space.

Cyborgs are hybrids of organismal biology and machinic construction. This means that their machinic and biological components are inseparable, not capable of existing as it is without the other (Jones and Jones, 2017: 43).

Dramatherapy online can provide a potential space when access to place-based therapy is limited. The metaphor of a cyborg challenges conventions of traditional place-based dramatherapy and of humanism. The client and dramatherapist simultaneously inhabit a shared space as disembodied representations of themselves, with their human centricity inseparable from the technology enabling the therapeutic intervention.

The often-underrepresented voices of separated asylum-seeking children need to be heard, especially when access to their primary caregiver is not possible. It was not by witnessing but by responding to what Omar had drawn that he shared his feelings. Omar's true nature may have been expressed due to being in the comfort of what he previously described as a safe space. I would argue that there are two cyborgs in the session, myself and Omar interacting through technology. Furthermore, Omar's cyborg representation of self did not create image of the house; the cyborg identity copied the first two lines I had shown on my screen and Omar, the human, took time away from the screen to draw and finished this drawing. As I witnessed the digital representation of his completed art, Omar shared his reflections in his individual physical space. Our digital representations interacted with one another. I witnessed Omar's cyborg identity – his internal human introspection projected by his digital representation of self.

Transformation, misattunement and performance

Technology processes our identity online and the way we communicate our aspects of self; this results in the artificial recreation of something that is entirely human, the dramatherapist and client, and entirely technological, the representations of the two, simultaneously.

The Ship of Theseus is a metaphysical and philosophical thought puzzle, originally recounted by Plutarch and later discussed by Hobbes, which illustrates the duality of simultaneously being physically; at the same time, a digital representation of us is also projected:

> Over a period of years, during maintenance a ship has its planks replaced one by one – call this ship A. However, the old planks are retained and themselves reconstituted into a ship – call this ship B. At the end of this process there are two ships. Which is the original ship of Theseus? (Clark, 2012: 230)

If we equate each plank with a pixel representing and replacing reality, instead of ships A and B in online dramatherapy, we have the Offline and the Online. Offline is the individual physical spaces inhabited by client and therapist. Online represents the artificial screen representations of client and dramatherapist projected by communication

technologies. Dramatherapy online could not happen without individuals. Offline A and their representations Online, the two intrinsically link and are intangible.

Simulacrum is described in the OED (2021) as

> Something having merely the form or appearance of a certain thing, without possessing its substance or proper qualities . . . a mere image, a specious imitation or likeness, of something . . . a material image, made as a representation of some deity, person, or thing.

If the cyborg is the dramatherapist using technology, a digital representation of the dramatherapist is manifested by this union. The representation shares the appearance of the therapist, but as an imitation, it lacks the entirety of the dramatherapist. The simulacrum is the digital representation of self which the dramatherapist and client project using technology. The dramatherapist and client communicate as simulacrums:

> it is the reflection of a profound reality;

> it masks and denatures a profound reality;

> it masks the absence of a profound reality;

> it has no relation to any reality whatsoever;

> it is its own pure simulacrum. (Baudrillard, 1994: 6)

When using technology to communicate, I felt myself fragmented – my image processed into pixels and redistributed to make a digital representation of self. Humanism is not enough to explore the scope of the phenomena of online dramatherapy as it is not entirely the human at the centre of this connection; technology is the connection, forming a digital representation of identity, intangible from technology and humanity; the simulacrum is the result of a cyborg identity. Arguably, the human not being at the centre of this connection could be an example of dehumanisation.

Dokter and Jones recognise the relationship with self as embodied, with the potential to extend or to embody a self, projected through objects:

> The client's situation as described by Dokter connects with ideas that the self is embodied. The self is seen both in the physicality of the body, and through the objects, such as the rock, used in the session. (Jones, 2008: 228)

If the self is embodied, there is a question of what happens to the self, online. A disembodied representation of self is contained by technology, while an embodied self is witnessed by the dramatherapist's technology.

Connection and contact in dramatherapy change online. The mechanism of communication operates between dramatherapist, client and machine. As a dramatherapist, technology has had an impact on how I express myself and how my clients express themselves. The gap between our physical selves and our projected identities may express a true cyborg self but also have the potential to leave us misunderstood.

Vignette

Session 3. In this session, Omar disclosed his faith, mentioning he would wake up at 6 a.m. for morning prayer for Ramadan. This was significant as this is a religious period which includes fasting; I was mindful as to how this could physically impact Omar's already severe headaches as he would not drink fluids during this fasting period. In the previous session, we were unable to create a six-part story, so my intention was to start by focusing on a character. My rationale was to use drawing to create aesthetic distance in hopes of enabling projective identification to create a bridge to the six-part story.

Omar drew an image of a hero, a famous boxer who shared his religious identity.

When sharing his hero's catchphrase, Omar took the pose this hero makes. I invited Omar to find stillness in the motion and I invited him to breath into this shape before releasing and shaking off this role.

I invited Omar to stand and asked whether there were any moves from his hero he wanted to mimic. Omar accepted this invitation and threw some punches tensing his stance; I experienced disconnection as a dramatherapist, and I could tell by the quality of movement that he was uncomfortable. I was conscious that I had invited the client to do this. I asked Omar what he was feeling, and he said he did not like it and wanted to stop, physically returning to a neutral stance while speaking. I thanked Omar for expressing clear boundaries of what did and did not feel comfortable, reminding him that it is ok to say no at any time to any invitation.

This is a clear example of misattunement, and I question whether this would have occurred in a place-based setting where I may have instinctually stood on the same side as the client, mirroring these gestures, and explained the fight/flight trauma responses using the metaphor of martial arts and play. Online dramatherapy often means inhabiting an oppositional face-to-face stance as the practicalities of dramatherapy online are fixed. I usually felt attuned to Omar, but this time, it felt different. Despite being in separate spaces, there was an atmospheric shift, which I experienced as a misalignment in the reception of this invitation.

Sitting closely to a screen, the representation of the therapist is in close proximity to the client in remote therapy; however, the physical therapist is not. 'Deficit of a secure attachment in proximity could hinder the development and fulfilment of a person' (Holmes, 2014: 191). Online dramatherapy with displaced people is like a paradox, being present as a dramatherapist, not being physically close. Intersubjectivity and attachment can combine to attune. Synchronising physical movement and voice with affect, to respond to the dynamics of attachment, is a way of attuning (Stern, 1985, cited in Davis 2019: 150).

I took the opportunity to respond to Omar's boxer character using embodiment, projection and role (Jennings et al., 1994) as a tool to further explore strengths that Omar attributed to this hero. When Omar was uncomfortable, I was able to mirror and attune to affirm Omar's boundaries and empower him by encouraging to share his voice even if he thought I may not want to hear what he had to say.

In dramatherapy, the client can not only be the author but also become their character. The term third being, coined by Stanislavski, is described as a marriage of an actor's personality and the character an author has written. This marriage is enabled by the

actor's deep commitment to the character's objectives(Benedetti, 1998, cited in Scholte, 2015). This third being in a dramatherapy setting is an enactment of a true nature, discovering a projected character's objectives and recognising connections between the character and life beyond the dramatherapy sessions.

I am left with a profound respect for the client trusting us online and allowing us, as therapists, to see them as separate from the furniture they are surrounded by. We become visually two-dimensional. I asked myself whether this process of online dramatherapy online dehumanises the service users or the dramatherapist. I cannot give a definitive answer, but did I feel dehumanised delivering dramatherapy online to asylum-seeking children? In some ways, the answer is no, because as a Black male, offering dramatherapy to people who may share my blackness or experience of othering has allowed me to feel recognised as an individual regardless of whether I am seen as a cyborg.

In other ways, the answer is yes. I often felt as though I was received as an extension to British politics, a potential helper to fix things with case work. I felt at times I embodied a collective, acting as a figurehead for blackness, embodying memories of home. Non-Black colleagues and peers talk about how lucky my clients must be to have a therapist who may look like them; however, being the Black therapist, I am left with the pressure of sharing my blackness. Representing blackness with displaced children at times feels like I am being stereotyped, enrolled as an African man because of the colour of my skin. I doubt White therapists experience any scepticism if disclosing a British identity. I feel I am perceived with attributes projected from other Black people in the client's history; this is not a cultural or racial stereotype but an unconscious biased expectation. My experience is that clients quickly discard these expectations but only if and when my identity is performed by speaking, moving and being in contact with them.

Therapy can act a bubble away from society and function as a microcosm informed by it. Therefore, the individuals inside the bubbles present themselves with a systemic enactment of their social conditions. Clients may not be able to choose the aspects of self they bring to a therapy space but are hopefully able to choose which aspects they would like to explore.

Seeing myself as a cyborg, connecting with separated children allows me to feel a sense of power. One of the definitions of a cyborg posits the cyborg identity as a threat to established social order. Individuals seeking asylum often are placed towards the bottom of social hierarchies of power. Threatening the social order that dehumanises non-White people with my presence allows me to feel authentic in my role of dramatherapist. Seeing myself as a cyborg allows me to feel a sense of power; if I view the technology as a part of me, then I can control this extension of self.

Seeing myself as a cyborg also allows me to compartmentalise the more mundane parts of being a dramatherapist. Administrative tasks like ending a session on time can be difficult when a client starts to disclose sensitive information they may not share again. This decompartmentalisation has enabled me to fluidly shift along the empathetic spectrum. Separating myself from the screen, signing out of accounts and turning technology off allow me as a therapist to feel closure in ending workdays, leaving my devices connected or open or making me feeling unsettled. This comparison between things being on and off furthers illustrates this relationship of technologies' influence on my physical self.

Conclusion

In conclusion, my experience of conducting dramatherapy online as a Black male has challenged the way I see my identity as a dramatherapist. To make sense of this situation, I have used the term cyborg to communicate my relationship with technology that enables dramatherapy to be accessed online. When my identity is represented by technology, a simulacrum is born. This simulacrum may experience rebirth through technical difficulty, disconnect and reconnection. There can be more than one simulacrum at once representing my identity, that is, a computer screen's display and a mobile phone's speaker. If the call were to fail, my cyborg identity would inhabit a state of bardo being in between. As the dramatherapist, I am one of the containers of dramatherapy, and the frustration and loss of a projected self have the potential to disrupt the boundaries of therapy. As a Black male offering dramatherapy online, I not only communicate my identity to the client, but I am also met with the client's projective identifications, making me vulnerable to potential harmful assumptions based on my race. Barriers to my expression of identity in online dramatherapy result in me proactively presenting parts of myself that may resonate with the client. The inclusion of race is poignant to this topic of identity, as it is only during the session where a video call is made that race is disclosed and introjective projective identifications made. Dramatherapy is complicated; dramatherapy online is fragmentary and each individual fragment is uniquely complex.

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