



EMBODIED ABSENCE AND EVOKING THE ANCESTORS: A COLLABORATIVE ENCOUNTER

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Abstract: This paper argues that through participation, dialogue, co-action and the occurrence of immersive experiences, as suggested by Kester (2011), key elements of the research process, relationship, and friendship deepen and are enriched by engaging with absence and presence as part of a chosen activity and bodily experience. The following narrative explores how the production of visual artwork and co-created ritual experience in a chosen landscape weaves a gossamer safety net across the chasm of loss and raises questions of absence and presence, personal loss and the collaborative shared experience; the power of ritual, conversation, and object-making give attention to the presence of absence. My argument builds on the notion of presence, manifest absence and Otherness (Law, 2004, pp. 84-85) and extends the ideas that absence can be located in space and have materiality and agency (Meyer & Woodthorpe, 2008).

Keywords: presence; absence; grief; co-creation; walking; ritual; making; gifted objects

This paper chronicles how relationship and friendship deepens through participation, dialogue, co-action and the occurrence of immersive experiences (Kester, 2011), in the context of loss. “In other’s grief I hear and see my own, for mortality makes brothers and sisters of us all” (Harrison, 2003, p. 70). The stronger the connections, the deeper the experience of absence. Connection is enriched by engaging with absence and presence as part of a chosen activity and bodily experience. The paper presents absence-presence (Maddrell, 2013, p. 505) as “embodied, enacted, remembered, contested” (Meier et al, 2013, p. 425) and highlights that, in attending to absence-presence, we create opportunities to share the personal and particular and the consolation of self and others. Absence-presence is greater than the sum of each part (Maddrell, 2013, p. 505).

The following narrative explores ideas of finding a place to place grief, which relates not only to the relational aspect of placing the deceased relative to our continued life (Walter, 1999), but also to geographies of absence (Meier et al, 2013). I examine how visual artwork and co-created ritual experience in a chosen landscape raises questions of giving back power and control when dealing with absence and presence, personal loss and the collaborative shared experience. Also, I consider how the power of ritual, conversation, object making and gift giving give attention to presence of absence. My argument builds on the notion of presence, manifest absence and Otherness (Law, 2004, pp. 84-85) and extends the ideas that absence can be located in space, have materiality and agency (Meyer and Woodthorpe, 2008).¹ What follows is an examination of an “archaeology” of absence through practice as a means to bear witness to loss. This is informed by a definition of archaeology as “a hybrid and heterogeneous practice....an ecology of mobilizing resources, managing, organizing, persuading, of practices like collecting, walking and intervening in the land” (Pearson and Shanks, 2001, p. 50).

The warp and weft of practice, both personal and collaborative, and theory weave through this paper. One of those warp threads is the use of diary entries (italicised within the text), framed through the weft of narrative enquiry (Speedy, 2008), auto-ethnography (Ellis and Bochner, 2001), and collective biography writing, (Haug 1987; Davies and Gannon, 2006). These theoretical methods explore how theory rubs up against everyday life, how my co-collaborators and I were affected by events and our reflections upon them and as a way “of learning to read/write embodied social selves” (Davies and Gannon 2006, p. 7). I see a bridge between narrative enquiry/auto-ethnography and creative arts practice which prompts a confidence to speak in a variety of voices, revealing the constellation of selves/characters/self-positions (James, 1890, p. 291) that reside in me, and helps me to be less intimidated by academic discourse. The methods give a way into writing about knowledge gained and the sharing of personal experience. This provides a tension alongside the rational and logical, which feels particularly important in relation to grief, loss and consolation.

It began with conversations, possibilities and plans. It was the first conversation we ever had, sitting in the postgraduate room having gathered for the inaugural meeting of the

self-initiated postgraduate reading group. I was talking about an artwork I had created for a friend (glass cast from a tree) that contained within its fired layers a small amount of the cremated remains of my friend's husband and Rob's attention was caught.

This was early on in my own grief for my mother and so talking of death and grief and finding ways to explore it creatively were occupying my thoughts.

The use of visual and material metaphors to explore grief, loss and absence has a potent power that enables spending time with uncomfortable and contradictory feelings and emotions. Making becomes an intermediary, transitional space where playfulness allows a slip between emotional states and identities, giving relief, if only temporarily, from discomfort, promoting feelings of safety, peace and the assuaging of un-pleasure – all definitions ascribed to consolation. “Consolation implies a period of transition: a preparation for a time when the present suffering will have turned. Consolation promises that turning” (Frank, 2009, p. 2). My experience has been that the capacity to console requires not only “self-awareness, self-knowledge and experience” (Stein, 2004, p. 803) but also authenticity, openness and a non-judgmental attitude in communication with both myself and other people.

My fine art practice involves being playful with materials, exploring their potential to be repositories of metaphor. I am particularly fascinated with materials that have the potential to be transparent, translucent and opaque, allowing images to be visible, partially visible or concealed. I take pleasure in repetitive, often meditative, processes of making and printing. My art practice, however, is multi-faceted: There is interaction between individual explorations and responses and the collaborative co-created, which subverts notions of the “professional exclusivity of the artist ‘as artist’” (Biggs, 2010, p. 1) I enjoy the challenges and delights of working collaboratively and have explored this through theatre design, public art projects, socially engaged practice, and teaching.

Rob talked of still having some of his mum's cremated remains; we mused on ideas of creating something, together. Possibilities were explored – he talked of Hergest Ridge², a significant place to his mum, where he and his brother had scattered some of her ashes. The whetstone³ at the top seemed like a good candidate for casting. An intention started to form that took time to coalesce into a plan and then an action.

On an early winter morning we set off driving, talking, attentive listening. Stories of the present – mystery, magic and the trickster, (he had started his PhD on the performativity of legend landscapes) – stories linked to pasts, linked to futures all accompanied by the subtle soundtrack of Forties dance music. His memories of his mum and recollected stories told to him by her and other relatives of her life before and after marriage and children.

Conversation and “metalogue,” following Bateson (1972, p. 5), provides an indeterminate space where there is the possibility to not resolve a question, but open up discussion. “In examining how discourse and practice work upon us, we open ourselves and discourse to the possibility of change” (Davies and Gannon, 2006, p. 5). Words provide access points, moments of meeting between people, a sharing of experience. They challenge the cultural assumptions that constitute loss as strictly psychological.

Material evidence – the diary of 1943 – brings Dorsey’s (Rob’s mother) voice into the car with us. It has a very precise, polite cadence that tells of everyday bus journeys, life drawing at college and the excitement of dances and meetings, conversations and flirtations. I read out the entries first from the concurrent day in 1943 then backward and forward to help me get a sense of Dorsey’s life.

Dorsey’s delicate ragged doll with stockinet arms and legs and a disturbing hard mask-like face sits in my lap all the way. I rub the softness of its velvet nape, like I did satin labels as a child, the tactility of the surface providing a calming balm. The doll, the diary, one of Dorsey’s horse Robin’s shoes, and the photos of her and a younger version of the man beside me, face scrunched coke can in hand, accompany us. I search the female face for similarities to him and try to imagine Dorsey in Forties party frocks dancing to Glen Miller with the service men stationed upriver, riding Robin on Hergest Ridge, wind in her hair, riding as the crow flies to Aberystwyth. We are invoking her.

Our relationship to objects is complex and laden with the baggage of materialism and fetishism (Turkle, 2007). Yet I know, through my own grief process, that physical objects provide a location for a sensory memory that measures present absence against past



Figure 1. Snow scene © Rob Irving

presence. The use of objects is central to how people's grief and practices are presented, performed, and understood (Hallam and Hockey, 2001, p. 21). Objects and relationships can be viewed as integral and inseparable (Miller, 2008, p. 280) and there is a reflexive dance between people creating objects and the objects providing the particularities of human experience (Appadurai, 1986, p. 221). Additionally, the relationship between exchange, gift and commodity, especially the nuanced, "polythetic" argument espoused by Bourdieu (1977, p.171), adds another layer of interpolation that I want to acknowledge but not explore further here.

The car wheels slipping and sliding as we try to get near the ridge heightened the shock of arriving to a snow-covered scene (Figure 1). The physicality of walking in snow with bags, cameras, and 25kg of clay becomes about endurance, matching breath to footfall, letting the exertion move outwards as I become aware of the vast vista.

Walking as part of a ritual act, paying attention to the shared intention, the physicality – how we walk and breathe. I record the sound of our feet scrunching through snow and the wind blowing us from every angle. Once reaching the summit we divest ourselves of bags and quietly walk a circle round the whetstone.

There is the difference between an imagined act and the actuality of experience. It could be described as the best-laid plans disrupted or one could say it's funny how nature is as much an agent upon events that happen as we are. I am reminded how vulnerable humans are to the elements. How foolish I feel for not considering the effect of the elements upon intentions (Figures 2 & 3).



Figure 2. The walk to the whetstone. © Davina Kirkpatrick



Figure 3. Making an impression. © Rob Irving

“This is as much a *weatherworld* as a landscape, and it conspires to bring about affects” (Pearson, 2010, p. 29, emphasis in original).

So determined am I to complete the task all my attention is given to clearing the snow from the whetstone, unfurling the clay, thinking I need to endeavour that it makes really good contact with the stone as the surface will be moist and therefore may not collect all the indentations that are present; thus providing an inadequate record of the stone’s distinctive, surface texture.

I climb onto the stone, stand on the clay to really embed it into the surface, but it’s only when coming to remove it I realise my thinking was a bit skewed – the surface hasn’t moistened, it’s completely frozen to the stone.

I try to prise it off with ever-colder fingers and then tools, even trying the horseshoe, but it won’t come. Suddenly, becoming aware of how cold and shaky my body is and how I have lost all feeling in my fingers, a feeling of panic, thoughts of frostbite and hypothermia crowd into my mind. We both get warm with hot drinks and food and laugh at the outcome of our determination.

We depart leaving the clay firmly attached and after he has sprinkled some of Dorsey's ashes onto the clay and into the snow. A swifter return journey down the hill unencumbered by 25kgs of clay means we are more able to marvel at the sunset and the snow-capped scenery (Figures 4 & 5).



Figure 4. Frozen stone. © Rob Irving



Figure 5. Ash. © Rob Irving

Rob remarks to the vicar later on in the afternoon when they enter Kington church: “if anyone mentions any curious additions to a local landmark, rest assured vicar, that it’s not vandalism but art”⁴

Although our original intention had been thwarted, we travel back in good spirits, reviewing our rituals and the effect on us. It had been a day of invocation and adventure and we determine to return to try again.

The etymology of the word “experience” (Turner, 1982, pp. 17-18) highlights roots in Indo-European, Germanic, Greek and Latin that unfold a rich construction of meaning involving risk, fear, peril, passing through, that could all be applied to the experience that Rob and I had.

There are various aspects of the ritual process that we explored. We talked and planned, having both “the charge of a live connection and the insulation of a well-wrought structure...effective ritualising requires both” (Grimes, 2000, p. 319). We set the scene with music and material evidence, giving opportunity to invoke both Dorsey’s name and vocal cadence in script. The power of speaking someone’s name has roots back to early Hebrew and Egyptian ritual practices. We accessed rhythm and repetition in walking to, and circling the whetstone, and created a “symbolic element” (Radcliffe-Brown, 1939, p. 143). It was a



Figure 6. Shadow presences. © Rob Irving



Figure 7. Pink Whetstone. © Rob Irving

way of performing the everyday activities of walking but with a conscious purpose and intention and toward the specified destination of the ridge and the whetstone. This journey away from our everyday lives to a place of Rob's choosing, and our intent, contained key components within ritual - of separation, transition and re-incorporation (van Gennep, 1960, p. 39) or pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal (Turner, 1969). We also needed to respond spontaneously to the unknown and what was beyond our control, the extreme weather conditions and the effect they had upon the materials we were using and upon us, and the opportunity they provided for us to extend and develop our ritual process. Having a visiting lecturer present for our second visit meant she witnessed as well as participated in our rituals. "No rite is complete unless it is witnessed" (Grimes, 2000, p. 320). As a photographer, Rob's ability to step in and out of a witnessing role was skilfully accomplished; his photos bear witness to our actions.

Returning in the spring – another picnic, more clay and a visiting lecturer from The University of Minnesota, Christine Baeumler, who is interested in the project. We continue the process, the narrative becoming richer as a result of the first encounter having been disrupted. We pass the house Rob left at an early age and the current incumbents allow us to explore the interior; stirring vague early childhood, sensory memories for him (Figures 6 & 7).

The discovery upon reaching the whetstone is the effect the initial visit had upon the stone. The clay left behind had stained it, traces of pink remained in the crevices and lichen had grown over it. This leaving of a trace within the environment affected and kept turning in him upon our return. He was very interested in how our intentions had impacted the site,

changing the colour of the whetstone, and encouraging the new growth of lichen. These ideas continued into a further project.



Figure 8. Reveal & Figure 9. New Mould © Rob Irving

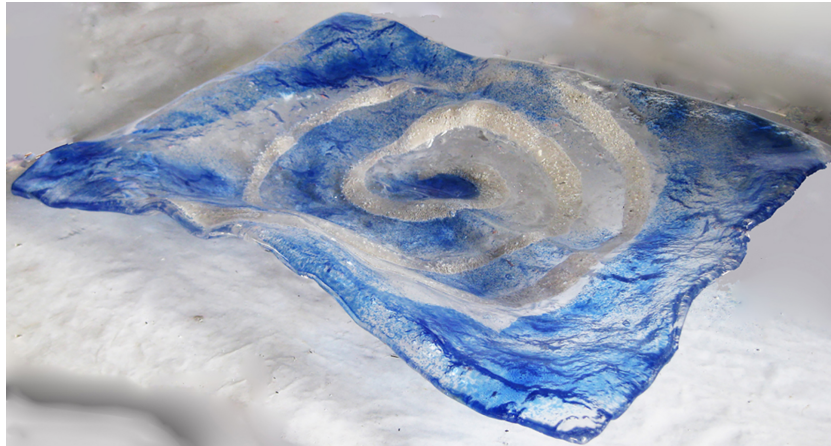


Figure 10. Cast dish. © Davina Kirkpatrick



Figure 11. Dorsey's dish/birdbath in Rob's Garden. © Rob Irving

With a nod to a familial history of horse riding on the ridge, Rob and Christine have tentative interaction with some inquisitive indigenous ponies, whilst I attend to the clay and the whetstone. The second cast went as I originally imagined, and we return with it intact ready to be cast in glass (Figures 8 & 9).

Back in my studio I create a gift of three glass casts shared, providing an opportunity for Rob and his brother to meet and exchange differently. (The illustrations show one of the dishes in my studio, one with an enamelled copper surround and stand in Rob's garden) (Figures 10 & 11).

My experience has been one of reciprocity, gifts of time, image and object – a physical manifestation of absence, a cast of a place containing some of the cremated remains of Dorsey.

Feeling is both an emotional and a physical phenomenon, so Rob and I chose to attend to both through a shared ritual/performance that gave attention to the haptic, visual, aural, olfactory and gustatory. Choice is an important aspect in the consolation-scape we made and inhabited. "The gift of memory allows us all to choose any place – hilltop cairn, rock, river, island – and declare it as a site of remembrance, without our carving the letters of any one person's name" (Finlay, 2013). Remembering, recalling, creating new memories, all unfolded in our actions.

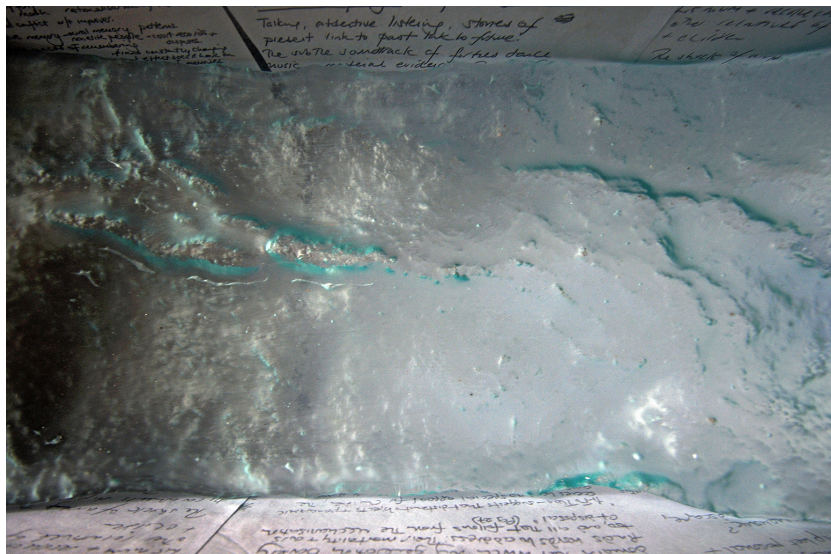
"To perceive the landscape is therefore to carry out an act of remembrance, and remembering is not so much a matter of calling up an internal image, stored in the mind, as of engaging perceptually with an environment that is itself pregnant with the past" (Ingold, 2000, p. 189).

We have also re-engaged with our experiences for the Museum Box Project for the Space Place Practice (SPP) Research Group, an opportunity to extend both the number of witnesses and the story beyond our selves. The brief was to show something of a special place within a nineteenth century museum box, originally from the Natural History Museum. Two sizes were available, and Rob and I chose the smaller rectilinear form for our interventions.

Within the box, I was aware of wanting to create a feeling of strata and substrata, layers of story – playing with the absence of Dorsey, the presence of Rob and me. The box includes, images, copies of diary entries, cast glass and sound (activated by a button on the front of the box). I had an imagined notion inside my head of Dorsey, as a young woman, hair streaming, riding wildly to Aberystwyth, though the picture is not Dorsey, as one does not exist. I wanted to invite the viewer access to this image, hence I included a peephole; audience members need to get up close and personal if they want to see inside and hear the sounds of wind, breath, and feet scrunching through snow (Figures 12 & 13).

The box needed to incorporate the material evidence of our visits and suggest the performative in order to imbue the box with both absence and presence. The interaction of glass cast from the Whetstone, shadows from the cast glass, my diary entries, the sound of being there together, and the horse and rider image, possibly suggest how this place has taken on significance for me through her, through him, and a new narrative has been created

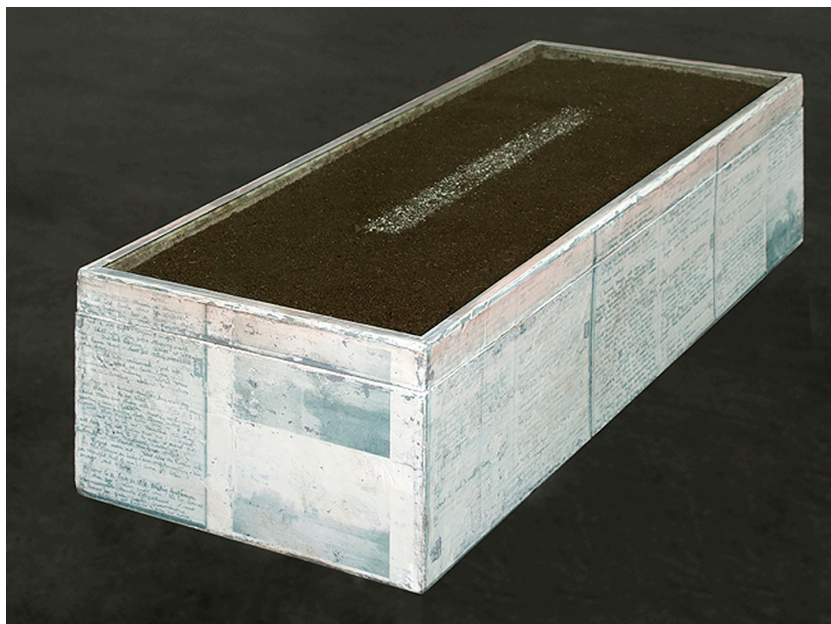
by our actions. Perhaps, this is a work of “auto-topography, a performance that folds or unfolds autobiography and place” (Pearson, 2010, p. 22).



Figures 12 &13. Davina Kirkpatrick's Box. © Rob Irving

The trace of the clay upon the stone formed the basis of Rob's box environment; we made another trip for him to dig up soil, which contained traces of clay and ash from around the whetstone. He sieved and re-sieved until the dust was uniform and then filled his box

placing a line of Dorsey's remains across the top and decorating the outside with transfers of photographs and Dorsey's diary entries (Figures 14 & 15).



Figures 14 & 15. Rob's box. © Rob Irving

There is a transformative nature to the process on the materials and on us. We laid some small trace, a connection back, a thread tied into a place that stretches both back and forward. “But as people search, as they make places, as they ritually return, they often encounter, even evoke ghosts” (Till, 2004, p. 79). I notice the effect on me of Rob’s history/heritage shared and how it impacts my experience of the place. We were following the same paths as his predecessors, taking that into ourselves, embodying their absence in “guided rediscovery”, creating “an original movement not a replica” (Ingold, 2001, pp. 152-153).

In setting out to explore relationships between grief and landscapes, I am not seeking to resolve grief by placing it in a landscape – rather I am concerned to explore a process that is both a letting go and a letting be. I want to explore the possibility of holding both remembering and forgetting and of co-creating new remembrance. “The autonomy of imagining is ‘thin’ that of remembering ‘thick’... In commemoration, body and place memory conspire with co-participating others in ritualized scenes of co-remembering” (Casey, 2000, p. xi).

Issues of powerlessness and the feeling that one has no choice in the loss connected to death, especially sudden and unexpected death, are key components in my own experience of grief and mourning. They contribute to making real the feelings of “vulnerability and the limitedness of the human condition” (Frommer, 2005, p. 497), and about “submitting” to an uncontrollable transformation (Butler, 2004, p. 20). I have certainly found comfort and a counter to the powerlessness in having choice about the locations I place my grief into. I wonder if in creating objects and rituals this could be part of the scaffolding one constructs afterwards to find ways back into life. Creating objects and rituals could assist in making conscious the tie to the loss and how the self is altered in relation to loss, because it requires a paying attention to the nature of the relationship. Objects and rituals also introduce the power of metaphor and story to bring both distance, a stepping away, to examine the “concrete particulars” (Adorno quoted in Wolff, 1995, p. 30) required to bring the essence of the relationship into a new form, and conversely, closeness as one engages with the loss through this new object/ritual. “The literal impossibility of reconnecting with the absent body is often exacerbated by cultural forces that deny the propriety of such desire...mourning always remains entangled with a missing body the inaccessibility of which shapes the contours of our grief” (Tanner, 2006, pp. 86-87).

This is not a conclusive healing, rather an accepting and an opening out to the wounding and viscosity of loss: a living with and alongside.

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ENDNOTES

¹ All of the above are explored more fully in my practice-based doctoral study – *Grief and Loss; Living with the Presence of Absence. A Practice Based Study of Personal Grief Narratives and Participatory Projects*.

² Hergest Ridge is an elongated hill about three miles by two miles. It is between the borders of England and Wales, the towns of Kington, in Herefordshire, and Gladestry, in Powys. It is 426 metres high and from the top there are tremendous views of the Radnorshire hills, the Beacons and Herefordshire. It is part of the Offa's Dyke path and was immortalised by Mike Oldfield in his album Ommadawn released in 1975.

³ The whetstone is a glacial erratic boulder. The name implies its use as a stone for sharpening metal tools. Welsh rocks were once widely used for this purpose. It was also purportedly where bets were placed when horses were raced and bet upon on the circular racetrack on the summit of the hill. According to legend the stone is supposed to go down to the nearby spring to drink at midnight, rather like the nearby Four Stones over the border in Radnorshire.

⁴ The lightness of tone of this remark does not indicate a lack of concern with leaving the clay frozen onto the whetstone. We were however aware that as clay is a natural material, being ostensibly mud, it would be washed from the stone when the thaw set in and there would not be many visitors in such inclement weather.