“What’s in the bag?”

Exploring the wounds of

Ancestral Baggage as a black-British

Mixed- race trainee Sesame therapist

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................. 3
Introduction ................................................................................................................................. 3
  Ancestral Baggage and the Sesame Approach ....................................................................... 5
Chapter One: Literature Review ............................................................................................... 7
  Research Methodology ........................................................................................................... 8
Chapter Two: Ancestral Baggage ............................................................................................. 9
  The Oppressed ....................................................................................................................... 10
  The Oppressor, My Shadow .................................................................................................. 11
  Ancestral Baggage: A Transpersonal Experience .................................................................. 13
Chapter Three: Recognition Trauma ....................................................................................... 15
  Splitting: The Two Divides Within my Self .......................................................................... 17
Conclusion ................................................................................................................................. 18
Bibliography .............................................................................................................................. 20
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Introduction

This dissertation explores the concept of Ancestral Baggage and the significance this concept holds for me, both as a black-British, mixed-race person and as a trainee Sesame therapist. Ancestral Baggage describes the internalised wounds of black oppression dating as far back to times of slavery and more recently colonisation. Dr Isha McKenzie-Mavinga conceived this concept to identify ‘the unconscious aspects of the ways history and social disposition have influenced black people.’ (Mackenzie-Mavinga 2009:75) As human beings we all have an ancestral past, therefore it can be said that Ancestral Baggage resides within the collective unconscious. However this concept of Ancestral Baggage for black-British people, manifests in anger, silence, frustration and confusion all linked to the wounds of black history. Unable to heal due to other socio-political factors such as migration, this inheritance of Ancestral Baggage has been passed down the black-British generations affecting present relationships with Self and other. McKenzie-Mavinga relates her concept to ‘the transpersonal to the unseen, immeasurable and sometimes unexplainable aspects of black issues in the therapeutic process.’ (McKenzie-Mavinga 2009:78) My journey on the Sesame training brought to the surface my repressed feelings associated with Ancestral Baggage, specifically those connected to my cultural and ethnic identity. The language of McKenzie-Mavinga and her concept of Ancestral Baggage have liberated my ability to articulate and understand these repressed feelings.

This paper examines how Ancestral Baggage has been a lens through which I have begun to understand and honour the different facets of my ethnic and cultural self. Within my Ancestral Baggage I identify key aspects that have affected my internal processes including, my transpersonal experience of my Ancestral Baggage, my Internal Oppressor and the effects of Recognition Trauma which has resulted in a cultural splitting. This affects my relations with others as well as my aspirations to become a good enough (Winnicott 2005) BME (Black Minority Ethnic) Sesame therapist.
Ancestral Baggage and the Sesame Approach

During her trips to South Africa, Marian ‘Billy’ Lindkvist, founder of Sesame Drama and Movement therapy, encountered the work of the traditional healers who called upon the ancestors to help the living with their internal conflicts and physical and mental well-being. Billy was able to draw on her experiences and to take the gift of the healing dances and apply this to the Sesame approach in the form of the ‘grounding’ technique of stamping. This physical exercise enabled the healer and her novices to be connected to the ancestors, and today this exercise is utilised within the Sesame approach to enable clients to be grounded, present, and connected with ‘Self’. It could be argued that this comes from being connected to the ancestors, which are our roots underneath the earth, keeping us grounded. As an emergent Sesame therapist, I do not have the traditional healers’ ability to call upon the ancestors. However I do intend to draw upon my understanding of the legacy of Ancestral Baggage to assist in the healing of others. As Billy explains the

    diviners [healers] are emphatic that is not the possession of certain articles in themselves which make for divination. It is their association with the Shades (sic) of the ancestors which is far weightier. (Lindkvist 1998:261)

I am conscious of the fact that the concept of Ancestral Baggage has a negative connotation; the word ‘baggage’ implies heaviness, a weight and a responsibility. I am in shock that slavery was a condition that my not too distant ancestors went through and this wound is still alive today in my experience; it is always present and lurking in the background and for me, affects my ability to articulate myself. I do not own the wound of slavery directly, but I do bare the ancestral scars.

During my training I have begun to understand the importance of exploring these ancestral wounds. Billy explains, ‘the African healers of whom I have written have suffered when they were “Thwasa”-called to be healers. So they understood the troubles of their novices.’ (Lindkvist 1998: 262) The process to becoming a traditional healer can be seen as being
similar to becoming a Sesame therapist. Exploring the knowledge of Ancestral Baggage will enable me to attend to the wounds of others especially those who bare the wounds of Ancestral Baggage. It is my intention to hold in mind that for clients the 'middle-passage place of unrequited love and grief, and inherited trauma and pain, a rootless place of ancestral baggage, may still have healing to do.' (Mckenzie-Mavinga 2009:89) This knowledge that I have required I hope will enable me to provide an effective practice for those clients.
Chapter One: Literature Review

Dr McKenzie-Mavinga is a transcultural psychotherapist, whose practice sits within the framework of intercultural therapy. Roland Littlewood, one of its founders, explains:

We need, not simply ‘therapy’ but a self-reflexive practice which examines its own prejudices, ideology and will to power, which is aware of the ironies and contradictions in its own formation. (Kareem and Littlewood 1992: 13)

Within this ethos McKenzie-Mavinga’s aim is to provide a space where there can be a sharing, a dialogue about ‘black issues’ which she defines as ‘any concern, problem dynamic, feeling of experience raised about black people, by themselves or by white people.’ (McKenzie-Mavinga 2009:3) Within the wider field of psychotherapy her work has been ground-breaking, in terms of encouraging black and white trainees and practitioners to discuss black issues in context of training and effective practice of psychotherapy with BME clients. Dr Aileen Alleyne, a psychodynamic psychotherapist has also written extensively on the BME experience, notably writing about the Internal Oppressor, the negative absorption of racism and black identity wounding. Discovering this research has encouraged me to look at myself in context of becoming part of a field where research on how to engage clients from different racial groups is an essential part of creating a holistic effective practice. According to McKenzie-Mavinga black people are overrepresented within the mental health system and ‘black people of African and Caribbean heritage are six times more likely to be sectioned under the United Kingdom’s Mental Health Act than White people.’ (Mckenzie-Mavinga 2009: 7) As a black-British Mixed-race trainee therapist these statistics are of concern.

In other areas of psychotherapy, Dr Anne Ancelin Schutzenberger, a Freudian Psychotherapist who works within the field of psychodrama, also discusses transgenerational psychotherapy which specifically attends to patterns of behaviour across past generations of the family and the affects this has on present and future generations. A part of the foundation of her work rests on Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy, a psychiatrist who...
developed contextual family therapy which is concerned with the loyalty, trust and fairness of relationships within the family unit and the impact of when these qualities are misplaced with family relations. Although it is important to have an awareness of contextual family therapy within the context of my study, I am aware of the limitations of this approach, as I am less interested in familial relationships in an external sense, in terms of self and other, and more interested in how these relationships and qualities internally affect relationship with self.

Research Methodology

I am placing my dissertation within the qualitative research method of autoethnography, which is concerned with personal narrative and the cultural and socio-political context in which the narrative takes place. Autoethnography as a research methodology connects to the practice of Sesame Dramatherapy as its emphasis on narrative and storytelling encompasses an interest into therapies that utilise this as part of their practise (McLeod 2011). Autoethnography utilises personal experience in the form of a creative medium to allow the reader to connect and interpret on an emotional level. Sesame as an oblique form of therapy utilises the creative medium to connect and express self in order to heal and grow. As a trainee therapist I recognise within myself that there is connection between my role as researcher and my role as a trainee Sesame therapist. Within this dissertation I have included poems and creative writing which has been part of my process within my Sesame journey.

I have researched my family history and have discovered that the main socio-political issue that affected my ancestors were that of slavery and war. In this dissertation I am concerned with how the unhealed wounds of my ancestors have been kept alive and passed down through generations. Unable to heal and infected by other socio-political issues such as hostile 1950’s Britain, this “baggage of wounds” has been passed down to me. I will explore
how Ancestral Baggage has been reawakened by my experience of being questioned about my ethnic difference on the course.

Chapter Two: Ancestral Baggage

I am a melting pot,

bubble bubble, toil and trouble,

outcast,

half-cast,

Mixed-race,

histories’ disgrace,

the joining and tearing apart,

the unexpected cause of Immigration, emigration, a new part of a nation, pollution? or a part of a dream?

The next chapter, the unforeseen,

She dead but she na lie down.

She live inside me deep deep down.

She smile but she still have a frown.

Her ethnicity is black and white

but she brown.

Like dirt,

like mud

it stick,

from it, she get sick

(Powell November 2013)

The concept of Ancestral Baggage has resonated with me in a number of ways. Upon reflection I can trace its impact as manifesting initially when my Jamaican Nan passed away the day before the course started. I felt like a part of myself had been cut off, a sense of being uprooted and detached from my cultural authenticity which was exacerbated by my experience of being ‘other’ on the Sesame training. I had lost part of myself that I was
desperately trying to find and reclaim. This loss made me question; "What in me comes from my Nan? What is her legacy that I carry within? What is my ancestral inheritance and what is its impact on my internal process?" These questions set me on the path to discovering my Ancestral Baggage. Mackenzie-Mavinga explains ‘a black client’s emotional situation may be affected by his or her upbringing and also by his or her ancestors’ modes of response.’ (Mckenzie-Mavinga 2009:78) My family are immigrants who came to Britain for a better life. From a very young age it was instilled in me that I would have to work harder than everyone else to prove that I could “keep up” with my white counterparts. I have absorbed this notion so deeply, and even today on my Masters course feel the need to prove myself, and honour my family’s work ethic. My paternal ancestors were a slave and a slave trader. One Great-great grandparent was the oppressor the other, oppressed. This has fuelled my internal conflict, and I can see that on the course my response to ‘emotional situations’ rests within the borderline between these two dynamics, The Oppressed and the Oppressor. [See Appendix A for further details of my family background and history].

The Oppressed

In context of my Sesame journey I can reflect on my feelings of being oppressed specifically in movement sessions. Movement is an integral part of the Sesame Drama and Movement therapy practice and I have learned, during this course, the value of movement as an expressive tool that has its own language. I have always felt most at ease by expressing myself through my body. However in the Laban movement sessions I felt constrained, internally oppressed, unable to move my body in its “natural” way because I feared that I would be judged and stereotyped for moving “too sexually” or to “aggressively.” Being from Afro-Caribbean heritage the majority of movement and expression is seen in the lower part of the body involving the hips and waist. Sam Thornton explains that ‘movement is the bridge between a person’s inner life and the external world.’ (Thornton in Pearson 1996:79) Perhaps my fear to move in a way that expresses my cultural experience shows my internal struggle, I was unable to effectively bridge the gap between my ‘inner life’ and the ‘external
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world’ that I shared on the course with my peers. I have endlessly expressed my need to 
“break through the glass barrier, as I can see and hear all my peers, but I can’t touch them.” 
Verbally I was unable to communicate my struggle, and perhaps unconsciously I hoped that 
through movement I would be able to reach my peers. However this internal conflict of 
wanting to stay true to myself and my cultural movement was overshadowed by my need to 
relate to my peers, and conform to an ‘appropriate’ westernised way of moving.

The Oppressor, My Shadow

The shadow is the negative part of the personality that we all try and repress. Jung explains 
‘the inferiorities constituting the shadow-reveals that they have an emotional nature, a kind of 
autonomy, and accordingly an obsessive or, better possessive quality.’ (Jung in Tacey 
2012:158). On the course, shadow has been a prominent theme within my process, as I 
have been obsessed with how others view me and have constantly been in a struggle to try 
and break any negative connotation. However in trying to do this I have become frustrated 
and angry.

I have found it difficult to articulate my feelings of anger on the course and any attempt to do 
so has led me to experience my feelings not being met. Jung explains that ‘emotion 
incidentally is not an activity of the individual but something that happens to him.’ (Jung in 
Tacey 2012:158) In turn I have repressed my anger and have silenced myself. I have been 
brought up with the notion of not “rocking the boat” in terms of race and culture. In terms of 
my Ancestral Baggage this notion of not “rocking the boat” has become a family mode of 
response (Mavinga-Mackenzie 2009) that has been passed down to the next generation. 
This became a vicious cycle of negative external experiences that I have found internally 
damaging as I have not been verbally able to name my anger. I have been in fear that if any 
anger were to be expressed, that I would be playing up to the stereotype of the “angry black 
person”. Therefore I found myself holding my silence as a coping mechanism to deal with 
my predicament. This did not dispel the anger and in a way contributed to a build-up of
tension but this tension helped me to see how this type of ancestral oppression had been internalised by me as anger. Fortunately through this training, a therapeutic way in which I have begun to process my anger is through embodiment in Myth sessions.

The Brothers Grimm story of *Little Red Riding Hood* was recently brought to Myth by one of my peers. During one part of the session we had the opportunity to physically embody a wolf or a little girl. The initial reason that I was drawn to embodying the wolf was to allow myself permission to express my anger in the safety of embodiment. Clarissa Pinkola Estes explains that the image of the wolf can be seen as the archetypal wild woman, as both ‘are relational by nature, inquiring, possessed of great endurance and strength.’ (Estes 1992: 2) I can also relate to what Estes explains about ‘the predation of wolves and women by those who misunderstand them are strikingly similar.’ (Estes 1992: 2) The image of the wolf also speaks to my internal conflict of wanting to give into my instinctual nature, but feeling that it would be misunderstood or misinterpret as uncontained wildness or aggression.

In the version brought to the session the wolf eats grandma and understandably this affected me emotionally, particularly the visual imagery of drinking and eating grandma’s flesh viscerally made me feel nauseous. The story led me back to my Jamaican grandmother and although being able to embody the wolf allowed me to express my wildness, it also brought up my emotional need to eat my grandmother; her food, her stories, her voice, and her identity. It made me reflect on my desperate need to be reconnected to her and my roots. In an elemental way by enacting the wolf I embodied being the animal of the next generation that reabsorbs grandma and all her ancestral inheritance by consuming her. In retrospect I can see that although I was able to process my anger through the embodiment of the wolf, the only person I was oppressing was myself. Like the wolf, through aggression I was creating a barrier around me in order to protect myself for fear of attack. This survival mechanism can be seen as my Internal Oppressor.
I can identify the scars which are the wounds of my Ancestral Baggage taking the form of my Internal Oppressor. Often this manifests as my inner voice that negatively comments on the way that I present myself to the external world and that holds me back from being my authentic self for fear of being stereotyped and judged negatively. Even writing this dissertation has caused me to encounter my Internal Oppressor; feelings of not being academically capable of articulating the authenticity of my experiences and being misunderstood haunts me. Dr Aileen Alleyne has discussed the Internal Oppressor in the relation to black identity wounding. She explains

> It is only when it is in contact with an external oppressive situation - real, perceived, or a mixture of both - that the historical memories are re-awakened, opening up old wounds that can lead to silent, invisible re-wounding of the self and identity. Prejudices, projections, intergenerational wounds and the vicissitudes of our historical past are all aspects of this inner tyrant – the internal oppressor (Alleyne, 2008:49)

When challenging experiences occur for the BME client, often internally there is a re-awakening of old wounds and this can trigger defence mechanisms manifested externally in behaviours and attitudes. Experiences can be amplified and externalised both in the way in which black people and other ethnic minorities groups are perceived and experience the world. The baggage holds the Internal Oppressor, the scars and negative stereotypes that is the result of external experiences of adversity, which have been internalised as certain attitudes and behaviours. In this way a trap is reinforced, but once awareness is made conscious reparative healing can begin to take place.

**Ancestral Baggage: A Transpersonal Experience**

> “How can finding out about your ancestral past and the effects of this lead to reparative healing? “

As an emergent therapist I am interested in how my internal processes could have been affected by my ancestral past. On the one hand, I do not want this concept to consume my attention, but I know I need to find a way to frame this knowledge. I believe that holding
these wounds with an open mind will allow me to move forward and create my own path.

Schutzenberger states that,

we are less free than we think we are. Yet we can regain our freedom and put an end to repetitions by understanding what happens, by grasping the threads in their context and in all their complexity. (Schutzenberger 1998:3)

In Myth sessions during the “Bridge-In” where we were invited to travel to an imaginative place, ‘The Land’ (Slade 1967) I have been able to grasp the threads of my Ancestral Baggage and I have encountered my ancestral tree:

“I see my life pattern as spiralling from an ancestral tree. At the moment my ancestors are the roots deep down in the earth, the rings, spirals of centuries, I am the branch baring leaves, when my time comes my leaves will fall into the ground which will absorb me, nourishing the earth and the roots, returning me back to my ancestors, I will become an ancestor, what is my legacy?” (Powell Journal September 2013)

By holding my family history along with my challenges that I faced on the course, the image of my ancestral tree was activated. I find Clarkson’s description of the transpersonal useful in framing my encounter. She describes the transpersonal as ‘the spiritual, the soul, the religious, the transcendent, the numinous, the scared the unknowing.’ (Clarkson 2003:188) Although Clarkson describes the transpersonal in context of the therapeutic relationship, for me the relationship aspect is not with a client, but the relationship that I have with my ancestors. Although I cannot see them, their energy is always present and they affect my internal world with every movement, touch and image and I know them through knowing myself. The image of the tree is significant to me as Molly Tuby explains, ‘art activates the symbols, transforming personal pain into a feeling of belonging to a long chain of human suffering’ (Tuby in Pearson 1996: 34). On the course I have felt lost within myself, the image of an old, solid, majestic tree became a foundation in which I could depend, and viscerally it allowed me to make sense of who I am and where I come from. This is a way in which I internally managed to make sense of my family history, and my cultural identity.
Chapter Three: Recognition Trauma

McKenzie-Mavinga's research discusses Recognition Trauma within the context of Ancestral Baggage and can be seen to be the lived experience of Ancestral Baggage. She defines the term as, ‘the process of pain and recovery that both black and white people go through when awareness of being a victim or perpetrator of racism occurs.’ (Mckenzie-Mavinga 2011: 1) I see this dissertation as part of my process in which I can voice and reflect on my experiences which I view as part of my recovery, and the next step to becoming the Sesame therapist that I aspire to be.

Through the Sesame course I have come to realise that there is value in looking at, and working through wounds. In relation to what Mckenzie-Mavinga explains about the awareness of being a victim or perpetrator, I can see how I have internally held these two dynamics because of my cultural fragmentation (Mckenzie-Mavinga 2009). Numerous times on the course I did not feel seen, neither as an individual nor as a person of ethnic difference. When the focus was put on me I felt that it had less to do with my Self and more to do with what I am seen as, in terms of my race and culture. I felt exposed when ethnicity and culture came into the room; for example, a peer of mine telling me it would be great if I could work with his previous client as we both share the same “colour”.

Although I believe that there is value in a client and therapist sharing the same ethnic and cultural backgrounds, within my own therapy I have had Caucasian therapists who have worked with me and supported my process of Recognition Trauma and black issues. At times it was a harrowing experience of trying to articulate my experiences with a Caucasian therapist. It can be a challenging and painful experience to try and put words to a wound that someone else may not recognise or be able to relate to. I had to work very hard in order to articulate myself so that my therapist could understand and support me effectively within my process. As Mackenzie-Mavinga explains ‘recovery and reflection away from the situation can help promote greater self-love and some understanding of how humans are impacted by
racist dynamics.’ (Mckenzie-Mavinga. 2011: 1) While working with my personal therapist I was able to reflect on my peers’ responses to me as a mixed-raced emergent therapist which was painful but useful, as I came to a point of understanding that both mine and my peers’ experience were intertwined, caught up in the matrix of race related issues.

Another experience that has taught me a lot about racial and cultural dynamics was when my peer and I went to a meeting to discuss a possible placement at a BME organisation. They were very welcoming but, explained that it would be more appropriate for me to run sessions with their BME clients and for my peer and I to run sessions at their sister organisation, which had multicultural clients. This, they explained would be more appropriate as their particular organisation only housed clients and staff that were of Afro-Caribbean descent. Their rationale was that clients had severe mental health issues and their aim was to establish trust within the local Afro-Caribbean community. I felt shocked by this; I was the minority who had become the majority. This led to ambivalent feelings; I have found that creative writing has enabled me to process on this experience affectively

“ It has shifted; that rock that I have been under, it has been removed, allowing me to be free and seen for what I am, but am I embraced because of my race or because I am me? My relief is short lived, as I can see the rock slowly falling onto my peer. I feel embarrassed, humiliated and ashamed. Why confine a group of people? Why not be open? why put someone else through this? As a minority group what are you promoting? Two wrongs don’t make a right; is this Ancestral Baggage? Your way of protecting the image of your cultural identity by keeping it closed? I can’t breathe, I am torn. As I look into my peers eyes filled with painful tears; she looks to me for the answers. I give answers that I believe are required in order to soothe the wound, but as I look and answer, I don’t believe that we are together in our suffering. We have not met each other at the bridge where her wound starts and mine ends, I feel this mirror is only reflecting one way; I am still disappearing, being swept up and sucked in by her whirlpool. I am worried how I will be perceived. As she implores me for the good enough answers, my trauma is triggered thinking of my Austrian grandmother who must have had experiences of this in her life, being white and married to a black man. My identity is contaminated, pulled and pushed; I am universal, able to feel experiences from both sides of the table.” (Powell Journal October 2013)
These experiences that I have encountered have enabled me to have a greater understanding of how racial issues can impact people from all cultural backgrounds. The discussion of race is a deeply fearful subject because racial issues affect all people and often arouse feelings of sadness, fear, anger, confusion, guilt and pain from both sides of “table”. As Mckenzie-Mavinga recognises Recognition Trauma affects both black and white people, but when there is an awareness of racial issues there can be a space for healing for both parties (Mckenzie-Mavinga 2011). These processes of Recognition Trauma have led to an internal cultural fragmentation, leaving two divides within myself.

**Splitting: The Two Divides Within my Self**

McKenzie-Mavinga believes that ‘cultural fragmentation and grieving is an essential part’ (McKenzie-Mavinga 2009:77) of Recognition Trauma. Upon reflection I can see how my experiences on the Sesame course enabled me to become more aware of how I embody an ethnic splitting. In discussing Melanie Klein’s principles on splitting, Michael Feldman describes the term as a way ‘to segregate the objects associated with good experience from those associated with bad, in order to protect and preserve the good objects on which survival depends.’ (Feldman in Anderson 1992:74) Although being from both black and white backgrounds, I identify myself as culturally black. On this course I encountered a lack of sensitivity and understanding of what the British-BME identity is and felt the overwhelming need to protect and preserve this aspect of myself in order to survive. I can now see how I split my “good experience” of being BME without paying enough attention to my white heritage. Chriso Andreou explains that ‘difference in cultures can be a good vehicle into which our split bad feelings and good feelings are projected.’ (Andreou in Kareem and Littlewood 1992:165) Finding a connection with the dominant white British group members was problematic for me. In contrast I seem to be able to bond with the International students as if being an outsider or ‘other’ crosses the cultural boundaries of our respective backgrounds and upbringings.
Conclusion

Through writing this paper I now have a better understanding of who I am and where I come from in context of my Ancestral Baggage. I also have an awareness of my process of black issues within a psychoanalytical framework. I have explored the significance of this concept for me, recognising that my experiences are subjective. However I recognise that this concept may not affect every BME person nor client and it is important to state that as human beings from all different races and cultures, we all have an ancestral past and Ancestral Baggage. Due to the limitation of this paper I was unable to comment on Ancestral Baggage as a universal experience, but as Billy explains ‘The River and Forest Ancestors did not only belong to the African people; they belonged to me too.’ (Lindkvist 1998:261)

In context of the research methodology of the ethnographic frame, as therapists I believe that we need to be aware of socio-political factors that affect our clients. There is a shift in black consciousness, a break of silence in different areas of society and from my experiences of Recognition Trauma I intend to make my practice inclusive where necessary taking this knowledge into my practice to facilitate the healing of my clients. This dissertation has been an important process within my development and will enable me to have a better awareness of specific issues to do with Ancestral Baggage.

The concept of Ancestral Baggage does have negative connotations, as if we keep looking to our past that is not really ours to own, it can negatively impact on the psyche. However by working through Recognition Trauma and embracing Ancestral Baggage the chains can be unlocked and a journey towards autonomy and individuation can happen. To end this dissertation I have chosen to include a quote from Nelson Mandela, and take inspiration when he says:
I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made a few missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that, after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can only rest for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk has not ended. (Mandela in Harrison 2004: 22)

For me, Nelson Mandela’s words capture my reflective thoughts of my journey ending as a trainee Sesame therapist, and my new journey, starting as a Sesame Drama and Movement therapist.
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Additional/Relevant Reading and Research


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