



Workshop Reporting 2:

Day 2 – Professor Alison Phipps’s address, including reflections on Day 1’s comment wall

Overview

Alison Phipps is Professor of Languages and Intercultural Studies at the University of Glasgow. Alison describes her research as follows, ‘My research interests focus on languages and intercultural studies, with a particular critical concern for the different ways in which people learn to live and communicate together by stepping outside comfortable or familiar contexts.’

This document is an accurate record of Alison’s presentation. Editing has been kept to a minimum. Headings and sub-headings have been added to highlight specific thoughts around the role and challenges that museums face in working with migration. Paragraphs have been structured to assist the flow of the text.



Professor Alison Phipps addresses the participants at Maryhill Integration Network

Audio of Alison's thoughts and the workshop participants' feedback comments are available.

Introduction by Chris Jamieson

So after that amazing food, and music and dance, we're going to gather ourselves in this new space. We've got an hour, an hour and a quarter, so we want to make sure we use that in the way that everyone feels to make the best use of this time.

So I'd like now to introduce Alison Phipps, and we're really happy to have another, another person joining our gathering. I'm not going to say, I think I've given up saying the person and anything to do with their job or anything, 'cause that does not represent, doesn't say anything about the person at all, so I'm just going to say very welcome Alison, and you'll find out more about her, I think it's more important what she does and what she's going to say, then what would be written on a paper about her job title.

I'm going to ask Alison to help us reflect on some of the things we wrote ourselves on the wall yesterday (see Workshop Reporting 1: Day 1 Comment wall analysis), and she will obviously weave that into some of her own thoughts, as well, personally, and part of the work she's involved in too. So Alison, thank you very much.

Reflections by Professor Alison Phipps

'Don't clap till I've said something! [laughter] I'm Alison, I steal people's diaries. I was actually thinking the things in the diary sounded more interesting than the things in mine, so maybe I can just steal someone's life as well. [laughter] And that might be what I do!

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[Note: Alison had found a participant's diary after the morning discussion]

Just to say to start with, what a privilege it is to be here at Maryhill Integration Network, hosted by Rema who just, it always feels like she just holds the world in her hands. [laughter] And has such a beautiful, gifted way of doing it. And as Tawona was saying earlier, just takes care of us all, and really knows how to attend to beauty, and to brokenness, in the same space. And as we were hearing Tawona read those broken words, as we were sitting watching the cloth swirl on women's bodies, and as we were feeding and sharing food and conversation, I was aware that we were in a place that is rare, and raw, and precious, and needed so strongly at this moment in the world today.

And it's the place that we make together, by being together, in the ways that we are together, at the moment. And it's a place you've been making for the last two days, and I know that many of you are tired, and weary, you've come a long way, I'm just looking at some of the people I know have travelled a very great distance. And you've travelled from places which are raw, and real, and beautiful. And hard to be in, on a day-to-day basis.'

Words in the 'middle range'

'And you are living in spaces that are held between what the philosopher Simone Weil called, "the words of the middle range". Words which are dying, words which will be with us no more, and words which we should be happy to see go, because they're not words that are strong enough to hold us in these days. Words like, on Rachel's amazing exhibition, the words "emigrant" or "immigrant". They're words of a different time and space. They do not capture the cruelty, the complexity, the complicity, the creativity, of the days that we are living in today. And there are other words that we use, all the time. We use them in our funding applications, we talk

about our 'strategic objectives', about 'attaining our goals', about 'meeting our targets' – they're words that dominate – and I can see you all nodding – they dominate the landscape of the work that we try and do in a museum space, in an art space, in an education space, or in the space that I inhabit, a research space.

Because my job and my privilege in society in the United Kingdom, but also in other parts of the world, is to be paid, by taxpayers, to think on behalf of society. That's the work that an academic teacher does, and it's a great privilege and I hold it often with a heaviness, but also with a joy, because it's an important place to be. And I think.. I think that's why Chris has asked me to just open up a space, with your words, to think back at them with some of the thoughts that I've been having too.

And the first thought I was having was about that "middle range" of language, and the way it doesn't help us. It doesn't serve us. Its language which is defunct, it's over, and it's difficult to work with. And yet it calls us back all the time, to work in a space that does not represent what it is that is the passion and place of this kind of grassroots, civic, resistant, complex, painful, shoestring, [and] rough working.'

Rough spaces

'The theatre maker Bertolt Brecht always said it was the rough theatre that was the one that would save the day. Not the one in the well-funded civic spaces, the Royal Court, not the one that's in the big town centres, not the one made by the award-winning architects, but the one that's made because somebody found a space that was dying, and turned it into a garden. Somebody found a room that needed to be painted purple. Somebody found some photographs, somewhere, under someone's bed, or they were brought to them as a gift, and they realized that these were things that needed to be made into something that could be shared, and given into a wider world. So that that life would keep going.

So there's words of the middle range, we need them, we need them for funding, we need them for the action, but we also need to know that they're over, they're consigned to a different point in history. And the words that Simone Weil says are the strong words, the words that can hold us, are words that have often been with us for a long time through history. They're the words that are spoken in poetry, they're

the words sometimes that are spoken in what some might call prayer, others might call mindfulness, some might call song, some might call incantation. They're words that have held much that draws a line between what it means when we speak of human beings as human beings, in their complexity and complicity, and human beings as human capital, where they are to be plugged in, and to serve the needs of a very different order.'

3 things to make place

'One of the thinkers that I read a lot as well as Simone Weil is somebody called Walter Brueggemann, and he says, and he thinks a lot about how, through history, people have been able to puncture the dominant orders that frame the way in which we live in the world. And one of the things that he says happens as a way of puncturing the dominant order is that three things need to happen and they've happened throughout history. The first one is there needs to be a place, a *gathering* place, be it in theatre, or museums, or art, or dance, or the public space of protest, for the public expression of pain. Then there needs to be a place for the *ridicule* of established power. And then there needs to be a place for the *song and dance* of women.

And to me when I've been watching and listening to, and hearing about your conversations over the last couple of days (neither Tawona nor I could be here yesterday because we were watching amazing song and music in Copenhagen, as part of a project we're both involved in at the moment) [and] listening to the presentations this morning, it struck me that some of the work you're engaged in is holding a space where the pain can be held, in all that it is, for all it's remarkable power, it's remarkable potential, it's remarkable depth, and all the paradoxes that come with the holding of the stories of pain that are part of migration. Because they're not simple stories.'

Migration - an epic and complicated story

'It's an epic story, the migration story. It's an old story. And we hear it around us, and we hear it and we tell it. But it's an epic story, and it's a deep story, and it's a story that has been told for generations, and it's easy for us to tune out and think that it's a story that is simple, and that we understand. But each time someone moves, and a

body moves, that space is made again, made aesthetically [?], made in the body, made in speech and language, made in all kinds of new ways of creating together. That epic story of migration, that is complicated. Because it's not that there are good migrants and bad migrants, as you all know in this room. It's that all of us are bound together in moments of history that move us and shake us, and make us, and change us, and take us to a different place of being.'

Tension

'The work that I do works across a network which is Glasgow Refugee Asylum and Migration Network (GRAMNet). It grew out of the University of Glasgow, really with the insight, because we had long been frustrated, as academics, that the ways in which we were being pushed in that middle range of words, were to see ourselves as 'experts' and everyone else as people to be 'mined' for their 'data', their information, for what they had, so that we could take it back into the academy, and turn it into something that could make our lives and careers better. And to me there was something deeply wrong with that approach; it's very much a modernist approach, it's like the approach we take to the earth, still, today. We go in, we mine it, we rape it, we take it, and we extract it, and we burn it to keep ourselves and our lives warm. But actually, at the end of the day, what it's doing for us is destroying us, and that understanding we bring into so many areas of life, and you'll recognize it in your own work, you'll recognize the way that you are turned into "extract this people" that have to go, and take, and make, for the purposes of people in power and privilege. And listening in to your conversations, I hear the pain and the tension across those.'

Words of solidarity

'And I also hear the need for this kind of a gathering space. This kind of a space that is where you can meet with others, like yourselves, who you didn't know until two days ago, even existed in this world. People who are doing your work, somewhere else. And that what you can do in this space, is bear witness to one another's work. And at a deep level, that's the work of solidarity, and that's the work where the alternative to the language of the "middle range" is already in play and being used. And those words are all there amongst you, and we've seen them and heard them today; the words of sharing, the words of breaking, the words of hope, the words of finding, the words of trusting, the words of listening, the words of respecting, the

words of trying to ‘upend’ the things that have been there in the world of your hopes and dreams for the future.’

The comment wall

‘And I was reading your poetry off the clouds, and it felt so appropriate that you’d written on clouds, I love Chris’ clouds – whenever Chris, Chris you’re becoming a cloud for me! But whenever Chris works she seems to bring clouds with her, and sometimes they’re welcome because they obscure the sun and they always will bring the rain that refreshes, and the sun that dries us out. But just reading the words that you were writing, these are not words of the “middle range”. These are words that can hold us. And you have them all within yourselves. And maybe I can just reflect these back to you.

“The museum should be faithful to what it believes in.”

(comment 2 – role)

“I love that the museum in Rotterdam is planning to pay participants as curators. ”

(comment 1 – connecting)

“How do we tell that potentially confused story? ” (comment 3 – good & bad)

“We are capable not only of speaking, but also of listening. ”

(comment 9 – connecting)

Museums that trace...

“Museums must trace...” (comment 14 – invisible visible) and I love that word, it’s a word that I use a lot in my own work, a tracing, something where you lay something over, a piece of tissue paper, over something, and you take your own etching, taking this trace, maybe not leave a heavy mark, a deep imprint, something permanent, but something gentle, soft, something like tissue paper that you can take away. Our approach is of an ecological principle.

Museums as gardens...

'And it felt to me when I read those words that we were talking about a way of gardening. The museum as a "garden". These spaces as gardens; spaces to learn about the earth that they grow in, learn about which seeds can and can't grow in that space, learn what might come from another place and find fertile ground. But also learn about ourselves as human beings within an ecology, within a pattern, that we're not somehow separate from that – we're not the miners, we're the gardeners.'

Museums for complicated debate...

'And that might be a different, and better metaphor for us to use. You spoke about the urgency of this moment, and cultural spaces (comment 16 – role) . To open up sites. And again that word you've used for complicated debate and discussion. The "urgency of cultural spaces", to open up sites for complicated debate and discussion. And it strikes me in that... that that's very like some of the spaces we try and hold with the work we do in GRAMNet. Which is that we understand that everyone through their experience of migration, whatever that might be, and we're all touched by it in one way or another, is an expert in the story. It isn't that just because you're called Doctor or Professor, and you teach in a university on a course on refugee studies or migration studies, that you know what you're talking about, and nobody else does. It's not an extracted model. It's just different ways of knowing, as part of an ecological model.

When we set up the network that we were working on, we went down to the [Scottish] Refugee Council and spoke to some people about what we wanted to do, and they said to us, it's really important that you stop sending us students to do dissertations on things we know about. What we want – and I'm sure you'll all recognize that – what we want are people who can do dissertations on the things we need to understand better. On the areas we know we need to press the pause button, and have space for complicated debate and discussion. And complicated debate and discussion needs time, and space. You can't just do it on a post-it note. That's of the "middle range". It needs space and time. It may need a year, it may need four years. It needs space and time. And those places in society where we hold space and time dear, are places like our universities, and like our museums. They're

the places where we give people space and time. Not just to come once but many times. To recognise it and see it again. Maybe across a lifetime.'

Museums that make visible...

'You said you wanted more visible, subversive work (comment 20 – invisible visible). That you loved the idea of co-producing, and co-curating (comment 22 – connecting). That we're in an age where it's not about the genius or the hero doing it, despite what we hear about heroic discourse in society, but actually, we need each other. We just need each other in this work. And sometimes that might be that paradoxically we need people who are a long way from us, but who have spoken of something to us today that is, that echoes inside us, and we recognize somebody who's doing fellow work. And it might be that they're in Rio, or it might be that they're in Beirut. Or it might be that they're in Glasgow. We don't know where they might be. But it is that there's a connection there that we need to hold on to, because that keeps us stronger.'

Museums and conflict...

'You said that you worry about the normative aspects of this work (comment 23 – role). The way in which you put things on for government agendas, for funders' agendas, that those agendas start to dominate, and that that complexity disappears, perhaps. It erases complexity, and it erases conflict. It tries to tidy it up, clean it up, and pretend it's all easy. When actually conflict is normal, it's part of our everyday lives. We live it, we *live* it, we ride it, we feel it all the time; conflict is where creativity comes from.'

Museums tell 'grievable' stories...

'You wondered about stories. You wondered about loss and void (comment 26 – good & bad). You wondered about how to deal with emotions (comment 31 – good & bad) as they arrive in response and maybe even, but that's just again a space for holding. You wondered about how to have confidence that these stories matter (comment 38 – invisible visible), in a world that is telling us, profoundly, that these are stories, and these are people, who are not "grievable". That these are lives that don't matter.'

The philosopher Judith Butler has spoken very powerfully, I think, about the way the world is drawing a line between the human being, and human capital. And creating a category of people who do not even have the right to have their lives grieved, let alone their stories told. And we've seen it right across the media in their debates about who has earned, or who deserves compassion. And that this work of making museums around questions of migration is work around asserting the right of all people to be equally "grievable", to be equally people who belong to somebody, somewhere. To be loved by somebody, somewhere. And for those stories to be part of how we hold the space.'

Museums question representation...

'You asked how you might, "nurture such stories with confidence" (comment 38 – invisible visible), and you asked about how you might, "invite audiences to disagree" (comment 39 – good & bad). And you asked about representation; who has the right to do it, and who doesn't (comments, 8, 11 & 37). And it strikes me that that's a question at the heart of much of what we're struggling to do.

It's a question that I ask myself all the time. I am, indeed, a white, middle class, English-speaking professor, at one of the top 100 universities in the world. That gives me extraordinary power and privilege. It is a daily task to ask the question of representation, which is a question – by what right do I speak into this space. And my right doesn't come from any of those things I've mentioned. And it's really important that at times I am punctuated and interrupted, and moved aside, and a different range of words and representations comes.

And one of the ways I've been doing that over the last few years is inviting artists – Tawona, Gamelie and [?] – are just three examples, and other artists at the moment in the Gaza Strip, working alongside us, to be the ones who punctuate words that I might use. To change them, move them, be other people who can be given the right to have the last word. Now those words of the middle range, they want us to have the last word. They want the funders to have the last word. The governments to have the last word. The dominant power to hold onto those words. They are killing people for those words of the "middle range". And yet, that space of punctuation, that co-

representation, the co-production, the desire for complexity, the interruption, the allowing of a different space, can change things.

It's very Brechtian, and Brecht theatre grew of an age that is very similar to this one; a time of war. And this is, I believe, a time of war. It's been waged in a post-modern way, in a way that is desired by many people in power. It's not that our words are going to stop what's happening, but it strikes me that in that space, the space of the museums, offers a way of allowing people to do what Brecht used to do with his theatre; allow a character to be there in their power and privilege, and then break that, and make them step outside, and say different words to the audience.'

Connections

'So when you're thinking about how to take this forward, perhaps just be aware of the connections between you, and of the different forms that you can use. The way that arts in particular punctuates, interrogates, interrupts and opens the space that can be more democratic. Because there is no right or wrong answer to what art, and music, and dance, and colour, and beauty, and vibrancy, and pain, and passion can give to you in that space.

And the forms we need for today are not the dominant forms of the middle range, we know that they're broken. They don't make us safe, and they certainly don't make us happy. That some of what our job is to de-script, to take away the script of therapeutic, technocratic consumer militarism that dominates us all, and inhabits us all. And that again, this work that you're doing is doing precisely that. It's taking that away and moving it aside. And inserting different words into the discourse. Those words that you've spoken, those words on the clouds, those words that are ephemeral and will dissolve like the clouds and reform in a different place of complexity, conflict, of creativity, of that questioning that's so important, are to me, in the work that you're doing, the words that will nourish and give you a space.'

Spaces to discuss

'But I'd also want to say to you that you need spaces like this. That without spaces to gather and meet, this work is too heavy, and it is too lonely, and it is too hard. That we can't do this on our own. But we are, we need one another, and we need the safe

spaces, however indulgent they may feel. And it will often feel like an indulgence when we know how hard the work is that we're doing. But it strikes me that we need space that's "bracketed". And at the moment one of the things I'm thinking with a lot is the need for "brackets". Brackets in speech do really interesting things, and your brackets were quite telling. The things you put in brackets were almost the things or the words you wanted to protect the most. They were around what is lost, what is "grievable", what is painful, what is hurting, what is lovely, what is beautiful, what is just. Those are the words in the brackets, they're the words that will nourish us and sustain us. They're often the things that tell us that something new is happening. But brackets are also things you nail into the wall, so that you can hang things onto them. And they're things that are strong and sustaining, and brought out of physics.'

Conclusion

'So perhaps just as a way of drawing my reflections on your reflections, perhaps on my reflections, to an end, I could give you some thoughts on brackets. Or brackets, and what it's like for me to feel a little as a migrant. And perhaps I should, before I do that, just say that as well as being those things I've said I am, I'm also a foster mother of a refugee child, who has taken the journeys of migration that many of you know about. Like many people here I too am touched by all that is not "grievable" in society, that which we have to hold in grief.

So these stories, your stories, are also my stories, lived intimately and within us. In this city of Glasgow, in this part of the town on the world that's tried to find a way in its own heart, to live with the complex dynamics, the difficult, conflictual dynamics, that are part of the story of migration.

I think it's the silence I miss most. In the press of words which are not friends, I dislike the bullets, the hierarchy, the numbering down from top to bottom, with closed brackets, and colon and dot. I dislike the Roman numerals that tell of imperial strength, decimated, shot. I fear snatch and grab raids on my shores, that demand that I kneel and speak this course and confident English tongue. The demand that I be sure, imperative, silencing my word martyred self. My fear of rape from the shrill and penetrating sounds. I fear the stone in the sling of my angry blood. I miss too the

ebb and flow, the ringing bell of punctuation, which opens brackets, and then closes them again. Brackets, I know, can be exciting. Can enclose a smile. A lover's kiss. The gentlest eyelids wink. Like this, and this, and this. That space at last for a crack to open in those words. A chink of light, of warmth, of welcome, of a resting house. Space to just be unsure. To breathe in, and out. Space to listen, full stop. And then, to speak. Space to break, bread. A nourishing table, heavy with good words. A square meal, squared off. Oh how I am drawn to the tide-line. There are bright beads, the seeds of prayer, waiting for me to sow them, to cast them arcing into the green air. To grow them in the tide again. I finger the sea stone. May silence lengthen. May hierarchy curve. May we seed-corn life, by pouring water over words. And may we undo what does not serve.'

[clapping]

[Tawona plays music.]

[clapping]

Chris Jamieson

'Okay, thank you. Thank you very much Alison and Tawona. So now we have – do you have the time there Eithne? [15:27] Okay, 15:27. Okay, we have now really thinking about time, we have about forty five minutes left together, so we want to, I suppose, open the space, to use that last forty five minutes.

I have a suggestion but I'm open to that being shifted. Because I think it is forty five minutes that belongs to everyone, so we need to make sure that everyone is happy with how we are going to use that. So Alison has reflected back some of the things that we wrote yesterday, in the feedback, but there may be other things that we want to hold onto, that we would like to take forward, from further conversations that we've had today. So we'd just like to, or I would like to suggest that we maybe in, kind of, four groups, so we split up the tables here, so that you have a smaller group of people to have these last reflections with.

So really to think about anything that you want to take forward, and actually that you would like to share with this group, to make that commitment to taking that forward so that everyone has heard that and everyone is part of that connection of supporting those ideas. Because we had some great big ideas, but I think the connection, the possibility of kind of network, might be useful or supportive to help people take those things forward. So that is a suggestion, that we think in smaller groups, of the kind of key things I guess that we want to take forward from this, or that we want to make a commitment to, to trying out, to sticking to those beliefs that we talked about, about what museums believe in, and not being kind of shifted, by that.

And then to come back as a final group, just to hear what those are. And those are the things we'll be taking away with us. Does that seem like a way that people are happy to use the forty five minutes? [Mhm] Okay, so if we have twenty minutes in the smaller groups, and then we come back together. So yeah I think if we just literally split the tables in the middle, and if the people who are sitting at the side come join whichever group.'

