

Centre for Transnational Studies, University of Southampton

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'MOVING STORIES': A workshop exploring transcultural storytelling in contexts of migration

Stories 'move' us emotionally and intellectually, crossing boundaries of teller and listener, private and public, biography and history. In their ability to transcend barriers between symbolic, physical and temporal realms and, indeed, academic disciplines, they are a particularly useful tool for scholars of migration or displacement. So how do we, as researchers, co-construct, harness or mediate the practice of storytelling in transcultural contexts and use it for analysis, reflection or forms of public engagement? Do we situate ourselves as translator, collaborator, mediator or political activist in transcultural story spaces? And to what extent is the style, form and materiality of the story instrumental in mediating the world it describes? While European immigration regimes often expect migrants and refugees to provide testimonies, we seek to explore how storytelling shapes the way in which cultural and social research is carried out.

ABSTRACTS

Divya Tolia-Kelly, Department of Geography, University of Durham

Heritage Futures: Co-curating an archive of lived lives and transnational heritage for Syrian FDPs in the UK

In June 2016 UNHCR reported that more than 65 million people are in situations of forced displacement, including global and internal displacement. This era of violent rupture between people and their territories of belonging, citizenship and ultimately their spaces of home has resulted in several global, urgent and competing challenges. Forced displacement exacerbates the potential for increased human rights violations, and a denial of futures for displaced peoples cultures and ethnic identities that are disrupted through war, poverty, and denial of human rights. Intrinsically embedded in the large-scale fracturing and erasure of stable societies is the 'systematic eradication of a group's cultural existence' (Nersessian, 2005), also considered by the UN as cultural genocide. A loss of connectedness, home, access to cultural space and identity is a human right issue, and can lead to a large scale problem of FDPs suffering anomie, alienation, and violent erasure of a possibility of a future for their cultural genealogies including heritage futures (Fazel et al, 2005). There is a lack of a coherent cultural archive for FDPs.

The value of heritage futures is to create an archive as a resource that enables connections for FDPs whilst in situations of precarious living and identity. The archive would also enable the recognition of the heterogeneity of Syrian FDPs which can be erased through naming practices and political epistemologies. This research aims to address this need for the preserving and archiving of biographies, narratives, material cultures, and visual cultures constitute Syrian cultural heritage living in the UK. An archive linked to material collections based

at DU would enable a dialogic, material space of heritage futures that is a depository and access point to collections of biographical narrative histories (including recording the routes and practices that enabled migration), cultural artefacts (imaged and material), and cultural practices of making 'home' (e.g. recipes, songs, rituals and poetry), post-displacement. The aim of this research is to co-curate an archive for Syrian FDPs living in Durham, in collaboration with Durham University Museums, for the benefit of Syrian FDPs. The archive will be formed as a dialogic and participatory process which can be defined, curated and designed in collaboration with DU Museums, FDPs and academic staff dealing with geographies and economies of migration (material, economic, visual and textual). It is important to enable the sustaining of Syrian Heritage, post-migration, that is produced in a participatory way, through collaboration with DU Museums, Geography and Syrian FDP's living in Durham. Conceptually this project aims to co-produce an archive which delimits the extent of erasure of migrant materialities and economies. An archive that can be used by Syrian FDPs internationally to connect with, deposit and define aspects of Syrian life; past, present and enabling heritage futures. Often post-migration, migrants are not part of the history of countries left behind, or, countries of re-settlement, and thus formal archival structures. This research project aims to deliver a co-produced archive for posterity for the Syrian FDPs that are in a process of cultural erasure in their home territory.

Annika Lems, Institute of Social Anthropology, University of Bern.

Radio as a Storytelling Tool with Unaccompanied Refugee Youth

In my presentation I will test the value of life storytelling as a means of shedding light on experiences of displacement. I will do so by focusing on the dynamics of a collaborative radio project with unaccompanied minors in Switzerland. Given that the young people I worked with were in the midst of their asylum procedures and felt extremely insecure about their prospects of staying in Switzerland, whilst still digesting experiences of war, flight and loss, it was of crucial importance to find means of conducting participatory observation that felt more “participatory” and less like “observation”. In order to respond to this need for sensitive research methodologies that would allow me to gain insights into my participants’ experiences without running the risk of re-traumatisation, I developed radio as a research tool. Within these dynamics, my interest did not lie in the gathering of biographical data, but in the social process of telling – a process that involves both the teller and the listener. Because of its intersubjective nature storytelling has the ability to shed light both on the teller’s hopes, imaginations and ambitions, and on the reality of being part of a wider world that often contradicts and shatters these hopes (Jackson 2002). In research with unaccompanied young asylum seekers acknowledging these dynamics is particularly important: In the asylum procedure, creating specific and accepted narratives of themselves is a survival strategy. Rather than attempting to undercut these strategic representations, the collaborative radio storytelling project allowed me to have a look into the ways the young people actively made sense of their situation and reworked their experiences.

The radio formed a crucial entry point into the lifeworlds of the seven young people from Eritrea, Somalia and Guinea who became my key participants. In my paper I will reflect on some of the stories the young people chose to tell through their radio shows. I will show how they used the radio project as a tool of expressing their hopes and dreams – for example their dreams of being a “normal” teenager, or their hopes of moving forward in their lives through education. Beyond these stories that were made for a wider radio audience, however, the project also propelled the sharing of stories and experiences that were aimed at the more intimate setting of the radio group. Building on Hannah Arendt’s work, I will reflect on the methodological importance of recognising and working with the boundary between public and private stories. I will conclude my paper by teasing out the importance of an approach to storytelling that pays attention to the interplay of life and words (see Das 2006). While current approaches to collaborative arts based storytelling projects often reproduce celebratory depictions of the power of words to describe reality, I will suggest a more complex understanding of storytelling as a research tool in the context of migratory phenomena. Rather than looking at refugees’ and migrants’ stories in an isolationist way, I will argue for the importance of an approach that links narratives to the lived, everyday context they grew out of. I will show that while the radio project offered a crucial entry point into the lifeworlds of the young refugees I worked with, taking part in their daily lives outside the storytelling setting allowed me to develop a deeper understanding for the everyday struggles these stories had grown out of.

Umut Erel, Faculty of Social Sciences, the Open University

Moving Stories, moving bodies: Participatory Theatre & Mobile Methods in social research with migrant families

This paper reflects on the uses of participatory theatre and walking methods to engender knowledge on the experiences of migrant families. It draws on a project ‘Participatory Arts and Social Action Research (PASAR)’, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council/ National Centre for Research Methods, with [Erene Kaptani](#) Open University, [Maggie O’Neill](#) University of York, [Tracey Reynolds](#) University of Greenwich (2016-2017 <https://www.ncrm.ac.uk/research/PASAR/>). This project explores participatory theatre and walking as methods to create a space for sharing and documenting phenomenological processes of belonging and place making that are crucial to understanding in ‘enacting citizenship’. Launched with a week long training programme in using participatory theatre with migrant groups for PhD students, art practitioners, public sector professionals and researchers, the research team has completed two phases of research with migrant mothers and girls in London and with families with no recourse to public funds. Our previous research shows that migrant groups and families’ cultural, linguistic and social marginalization can be reduced through participatory methods that bring into dialogue participants and policy, becoming a citizenship practice in its own right (Erel and Reynolds 2014; Erel 2011; O’Neill 2011; Kaptani 2008;). This presentation will particularly explore how the combination of walking and participatory theatre

methods translates individual into shared knowledges, connecting biographical, performative, spatial and visual material emerging from each method. It also show how walking and participatory theatre as embodied methods can mutually reinforce each other and can be used to create more textured and rich data.

Gabriele Budach, Faculty of Human Sciences, University of Luxemburg

Exploring objects in the 'contact zone': Transcultural Stories in the Making

Stories about transcultural encounters exist in many forms and shapes. In this talk, I propose to shed light on stories that emerged from the engagement with objects, digital technology and artistic practice. I suggest that creating digital stories around personally meaningful objects has a potential to refocus and deepen our understanding of the “contact zone” (Pratt 1998) and experience of transcultural encounters happening within them. Drawing benefit from the capacity of objects to serve different purposes and evoke different meanings for different people, digital stories that explore these human-object-relations can help bridging gaps and create understanding across languages and cultures, or the ideologies put in place to separate them.

I offer to share work developed by Master students from the University of Luxemburg during a Summer School entitled “Digital Creation: Multilingual and Multicultural Identities in the Making”. Guided by London filmmakers and digital artists Bo Chapman and Zoé Flynn, students explored digital art tools and re-designed their self-selected objects, using stop-frame-animation, to tell a very personal story of transcultural encounter. To highlight the potential of such an approach, I will focus on the ways in which relationships between humans and objects emerged during the creative process (Barad 2007) reflecting both the affordances of materiality and technology, and the individual choice and talent of the story’s maker. Participants of the workshop discovered the experience as a valuable learning tool and as generating “knowing in practice” (Schön 1983). To explore objects in this way helped crystallizing social meanings of cultural practice and identity and allowed students to articulate the bonding role of objects (Budach, Kell & Patrick 2015) and their own position in transcultural encounters more clearly.