

UNESCO RILA: The sounds of integration
Episode 48: Quilting for manifesting anti-colonial futures with Lisa and Mindy
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Dr Gameli Tordzro

welcome to the podcast series of the UNESCO Chair in Refugee Integration through Languages and the Arts. We bring you sounds to engage with you and invite you to think with us.

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Bella Hoogeveen

Hi, my name is Bella Hoogeveen and I'm the producer of this podcast. Today, we have two guests, Lisa Bradley and Mindy Ptolomey, who will be talking to us about their latest projects.

Lisa Bradley is a Lecturer in Creative and Interdisciplinary Studies in Education at the University of Glasgow and leads the MSc in Education for Sustainable Futures. Her work focuses on practices of knowledge, reality and meaning making across disciplines and topics guided by post-qualitative new materialists and socio-technical theories as well as auto-theoretical encounters that often exceed the academy, she draws on an ever-evolving constellation of performative and transformative methodologies to prize apart dominant knowledge practices towards realities unseen and towards more just and undisciplined modes of thinking and doing. She is just as at home re-imagining, unlearning, and restoring sustainable worlds through quilting, pottery, and crochet, connecting the head, the heart, the hand and the other.

Mindy Ptolomey is Lecturer in Sociology at Glasgow Caledonian University. Mindy devises interdisciplinary creative approaches to explore inequalities in everyday life and in our imagined futures. Mindy has contributed to Plan UK's State of Girls' Rights in the UK report and Scotland in Lockdown, as well as leading the project Researchers Don't Cry. Mindy is a member of the Gender and Education Association executive and her background is in community development and peace building.

So welcome Lisa and Mindy. Please tell us what is this project about?

Mindy Ptolomey

Thanks so much to the UNESCO RILA team and the Sounds of Integration podcast for inviting Lisa and I to share our insights, experiences and the directions forward from Quilting for Manifesting Anti-colonial Futures, our School of Education Quilting Project.

Lisa Bradley

Thank you from me too. It's really wonderful to talk about this project. Some of you might have come across it already, for others this will be the first time you hear about it. We'll do

our best to capture as much as we can about the project, but we'll also make sure that there are plenty of links for you to follow and the show notes as well to find out more about it. In a nutshell, Quilting for Manifesting Anti-colonial Futures is really a project that is about assembling and manifesting the diverse pasts, presents and futures of the School of Education. It's an arts based project that invites staff and students past and present of the School of Education to write themselves into the fabric of the school. We do this through a series of quilt making and storytelling workshops in which participants of the project will create a quilt square that to their mind speaks to the concerns of education, decolonisation and anti-colonial practices. Throughout the course of the project we will then invite the participants to bring their squares together with other quilt squares, make additional quilt blocks and at the end of it we will have a school of education quilt.

I think across all of the project the purpose really is to explore the radical potential of this collaborative process of quilt making, as well as the medium of quilt making and how that can perform alternative stories into being. And so it's really trying to do these two things, the project. One is to shift the decolonising focus from responsive to productive to actually put something else in place through practice, as well as to produce an end result that is perhaps not your traditional academic output but nonetheless tells those bigger stories about decolonising the curriculum that we really need to tell.

I guess our coming to this project comes from a number of different places. I'll talk a bit about my background, my influences, but Mindy, I wonder if you want to say a wee bit about where for you this project starts and where it's come from and where is going?

Mindy Ptolemey

Thanks so much Lisa. I'll also talk a little bit about, because I think this is a really important part of the project, how Lisa and I started working together and the threads of our unique research interests and practice and how those have woven together into the work that we do now.

So my own background, I worked in community development for a long time using, in particular, arts-based approaches to exploring issues with marginalised people and also celebrating difference in the community, including autistic people, older people, children and young people, exploring a whole different range of issues that matter to them in the community, and really noticing how much arts-based approaches got at issues that were difficult to explore through other means, but also that these are opportunities to explore and express things in fun and enjoyable ways that can bring people together, so that's something I've been passionate about for a long time.

And then I did a masters, part-time. And the thing that I really got into in the masters was exploring these contradictions that there often are in feminist research around about the importance of speech and the importance of text. And what I explored in my masters was how craft and making is a way to express, protest and resist beyond words and beyond speech.

So that then took me to my PhD. In my PhD I worked with disabled young women, really bringing all these things together and using what's traditionally been called DIY, or do it yourself, and is now thought of as do it together, to make zines about whatever interests and they wanted to explore. And then really that for me was about finding a way that was culturally responsive for people to express and explore the really the issues that matter to them in lots of different creative ways. And what I really found through the PhD that was so important about that approach was tactility, togetherness, care, and really building relationships through the research process. And how objects and materials can work to have agency in our everyday lives. So what I mean by that is that objects can have histories, they can evoke memories, they can generate different feelings and thoughts in us and that we can bring that into our research encounters to center different ways of being and knowing and that's really important for me.

And then Lisa and I came together. First of all, we worked together on a project called Researchers Don't Cry. Researchers Don't Cry is a project which looks at exploring emotions and the importance of their role in the research encounter and we used the making on that project. And that brought together Lisa and myself and also our wonderful colleague, Nughmana Mirza. That was a really interesting project also because while togetherness, tactility and materiality were really important, it took place during the COVID-19 pandemic when we were all not able to be in a room together. So we used engagement boxes, which we sent to our participants in the post with all the materials that they needed to participate. And we came together online and Zoom.

So that was an interesting experience because it really heightened what we were both able to make present in the research encounter online, but also what was missing. That was where our work really started to bind together in terms of the things that we think are important and centering excluded and underprivileged forms of knowing and finding creative ways for people to express those things. And since then, we've been working together on a variety of different projects. We've come together on this project really bringing together some of those things from my own research but also many common threads from Lisa's work and practice but also our distinct and unique ways that we bring those things together in our work. So Lisa it would be great to hear a little bit more about how you came to this.

Lisa Bradley

Thank you Mindy, it's always great to hear about all of the different threads that you bring to the work because it really helps me reflect on the things that I bring as well. And one of the things I was thinking when you were talking there was just all of the different points there are that kind of come to converge on this particular project. It's a project about quilt making, it's a project that uses quilt making, and if I think about my own trajectory to this point it is one of quilting if you like, in more ways than one. I've long been a quilt maker and a maker beyond that as well. I use a lot of different crafts and craft processes in order to really know the world. So that's always been a part of my own biography if you like.

But if I think about my kinds of my academic roots into this, that as well is a bit like a patchwork quilt. I've never really had a disciplinary home, I've worked across different backgrounds such as philosophy, public policy, sociology, criminology and of course the

School of Education and I ran an interior design business for five years as well before I came back to university to do my PhD.

So I think if someone was to look at my academic CV it probably would read about like a patchwork quilt and I think that's something that I've actually grown really comfortable with over the years. It's one of the things that I think defines my own academic practice as one of anti-disciplinarity and I think when I didn't know that at the time that really was the thing that I was exploring through my own PhD work.

In my PhD I was really focusing on the ways in which time is and isn't present within traditional disciplinary ways of knowing within academic practice and I had a particular focus on the discipline of urban studies. Urban studies as a discipline tends to focus on place as being the primary category or the primary imagination through which the city can be understood and explored. And my PhD was really asking the question, well, what about time? If space is privileged in terms of how we imagine the city, what happens to our temporal imagination? So the PhD was really an exploration of this.

And as I continued through that work, two things happened for me. One is that I came to realize that the traditional ways of representing knowledge in academic work, it's self-perpetuated, a very fixed and problematic view of time. So the mediums that we tend to use, the academic journal article, the academic text are themselves linear ways of writing and reading the world. If you think about the journal article, it's got a beginning, a middle, and an end. The academic thesis itself is written in a very kind of rational, black and white, boundary way. So it works to kind of fix a particular way of knowing time within the mind of the reader as well. And I think the second thing that I realised through that work was that I could make the argument in text within my thesis for a more heterogeneous, diverse reality of time, but I could never do that enough to kind of break beyond those kinds of those things that the text would hold in place. It would never come close to kind of capturing the kind of the varied non-linear, the felt versions of time that I was experiencing. And that's really where I came back to my own kind of craft background, if you like.

I had this moment doing my PhD quite early on when I realized that the spaces that I was writing my PhD that I was coming to know the work weren't happening in the library, they weren't happening when I sat in front of my computer and typed, but they were actually happening at night when I sat in crowshades. And so that was the point where my hands were busy and that my mind was free enough to kind of reign over the work and make the connections that were having to be made.

And so what I became interested in was two things. One was representing the work in a way that was more true to these diverse realities of time that I was exploring in the work. And then the other motivation was to represent the work in a way that captured that embodied nature of making. Which is how I came to then represent my thesis in two forms. One was an academic text or traditional thesis document and the other was a hand embroidered patchwork quilt which tells the story of the thesis in a very different way from a very different audience drawing in very different influences that are possible to share within the traditional thesis text. We will include a link to that work for listeners to have a look at.

So one of the things that the project's responding to is the Understanding Racism Report produced by the University of Glasgow which looks at both the experiences of staff and students and relation to racism and discrimination within the institution but but also acknowledges the legacy of slavery and how the university has benefited from the proceeds of that, as well as calling for actions and responses to make the university anti-colonial and decolonised space, both in terms of our curricula, but also in terms of how we relate to one another within the institution.

Yeah, that's certainly what brought this larger group of us together, although Mindy and myself had done a lot of work in the past on the latest issues. It was this report that got us talking with Srabani [Maitra] and Julie [McAdam] and of course with our wider advisory group with Abambola, Pritin, Ihaya, Chau, Sundas, Brittany, Natalie and Puneera around ways in which we could respond. And for us one of the really exciting things that happened in those conversations as we started to think of more creative ways that we could make a difference.

And for this we really drew on the work of people like Katherine McKittrick and Sylvia Winter in thinking not necessarily in terms of decolonizing the curriculum but in moving towards anti-colonial practices, ways of knowing and doing the being that really try to unsettle the hierarchy of who knows and who is learning and which give permission for other forms of knowing be activated.

And in the project to date, having this as the framing of the work has really allowed for different languages, for example, to come into people's quilt squares. I don't know if you want to say a little bit about that Mindy?

Mindy Ptolemey

Yes, so as part of the work with the advisory group for the project, we have created a prototype quilt and that's really to start to manifest and bring to life the things that the project is about and also really to try things out and find out what works, what things need to change and what we found, as Lisa's mentioned, through this process is that the project's modes of creation are allowing people to bring in fabrics from their home countries, for example, also embroidery techniques that have been passed down to them, but also to, as Lisa mentioned, bring in different languages.

And something that we talked about in the advisory group is the way that for international staff and students, trans-languaging is a form of labour that sometimes is quite invisibilised and quite hidden in academia, translating interviews and translating your own writing into English for use within the institution and that this has been a way for physicalising and taking up space with the many different languages that exist within the institution and we're really excited about that.

Lisa Bradley

Yeah it's been really wonderful to see that unfold in the advisory group I think and I think just two points to add to that. One is to I suppose recognise, become excited about the richness of what we're actually going to get out of this process. As Mindy says, we have had fabrics, languages, stories from all different cultures and contexts already come to the fore in

a way that it just wouldn't be a topic of conversation if, for example, we were just to run a focus group around this topic. And that has really led us to develop a story template to go alongside this process so that people feel that their stories, their experiences are a really important part of this work. So as well as making a quilt, square participants will also complete a story template that tells the story of their fabric, of their code, of their practices that contribute to the quilt.

And so what we have seen from the advisory group so far is the potential of this method to bring new stories into being and to put them alongside each other and to really build up this diversity, this plurality of voices that really does sit at the heart of education and which absolutely has to be championed not just within the School of Education but the University of Glasgow and education far more broadly as well.

Mindy Ptolemey

And one of the wonderful things about the project: we recently held an event under the banner of clippings in the School of Education, and that as well as sharing ideas and sharing stories through words and through listening, manifesting a quilt means actually creating a tangible artefact and object that takes up real space in the world and something that people can engage with.

At the clippings event I had brought along a quote that's meaningful to me that I have at home. And somebody who was there at the event, we were passing around the quilts, part of Lisa and I introducing ourselves, somebody wrapped the quilt right round themselves and really had this very special encounter with it. A couple of people also commented on the smell of the quilt. So it activates all these other senses beyond just kind of listening and speaking and writing and reading, which are the traditional ways that we interact and academic spaces to bring in all these other things.

And what we are excited about as part of that is that we know that engaging these different senses and ways of knowing activate different things from our memories, different emotions, and also our imaginations that can make us think differently about what might be possible in the future. And that's something that's really important to us about anti-colonial methods.

Lisa Bradley

Yeah, I totally agree Mindy. And I think one last thing to add to that, that we have seen a little bit through the advisory group and through the session that you're talking about there. But something I would really like to explore more in the project is how people who perhaps don't necessarily see themselves as filmmakers or as creatives or as someone who this project is for, how people like that engage with it.

And I think this is really important because I think quite often we see students and staff come to the University of Glasgow from lots of different cultures and they are in this space of learning not only their subject but also learning the cultural norms and the rules and the languages and they're in this space of not knowing and of potential and for many of us that can be a really uncomfortable space and it's in that discomfort that I think that the potential for learning, the potential for transformation is activated.

So I always have a smile to myself when I think about the potential for other people who maybe don't associate this project as for them, holding a needle and thread and knowing what that feels like and feeling a bit uncomfortable by that feeling or trying to move the thread and the needle through fabric encountering places where it gets stuck, where it doesn't quite go and not quite knowing how to respond to that, but nonetheless finding a way through that. I think these are really the spaces that we do to explore in decolonizing the curriculum and anti-colonial work. It can't just be done in relation to groups who are already demarginalized, but actually we have to bring that experience of perhaps being the other, the outsider, the marginalized person to a wider group who perhaps have never had that experience before.

Mindy Ptolemy

I think that's such an important point, Lisa, and, you know, really shifting around how people are participating and who gets to feel comfortable and whose knowledges are valued in different spaces as part of what this project's about.

And something we've also found so far is that there might be parts of people that are quite hidden or not appreciated, usually within the university space, like your family heritage, like craft skills that you already have, that just are not always given a forum to be discussed or shared within the university.

So it's also a space for doing that and recognising that, you know, people's heritage and ancestry, but also their sense of place, their sense of community and family. Sometimes academia can be quite an individualistic space, but it can be quite a competitive space. That by engaging in something that's more about relationships and community, it creates a really important environment where sometimes these kind of minority world, neoliberal politics of the individual of competition really dominate in the university. This project create an additional kind of space where we're having cups of tea and conversations and doing quite slow work together and that's not only I think a fun and exciting thing and perhaps an uncomfortable thing for some people in the institution but also a quietly radical way of changing the way that we're doing times here.

Lisa Bradley

Yep and I think you can see that through the prototype quilt that we have created with our advisory group. This prototype quilt is a full quilt, it is only nine squares. Five of those squares have quotes embroidered on them. Out of those five squares, three of them are in a language other than English. So it already forces the person who looks upon that quilt to recognize not only what they know but what they don't know. The other squares in that quilt do exactly the work that Mindy was talking about there of recognizing community, of recognizing collaboration and they are made through the bringing together of different fabrics into patchwork squares. So the quilt itself really is the eventual manifestation of that work and I think that's a really nice thing to realise even just from the prototype quilt. What we will produce at the end of this work is something that does justice to the work.

Mindy Ptolemy

And even the process of making the prototype quilt is just a small sample of what will happen when we're putting the bigger quilt together in future stages. I've done quite a bit of sewing, hand sewing, but I've never made a quilt before and in the process of putting together the prototype quilt, Lisa shared with me the practical skills of how to do that in a very hands-on embodied way. It wasn't about me going away and reading a book, it wasn't about me going to lectures about quilting or not even watching YouTube videos about it and learning myself, but actually spending and sitting side by side with somebody at a sewing machine, at an ironing board, learning all the different processes of cutting and stitching together. And those are the ways that this project will continue forward, sharing skills and these very hands-on relational kinds of ways.

Lisa Bradley

That's a really nice point Mindy and just to go back to what I was saying about the person who maybe hasn't held a needle before or who hasn't felt a needle and thread get stuck in a piece of fabric. There's something about that experience which really is beyond words. It's like you know the needle has got stuck because it's got stuck and you can't necessarily Google how to get it unstuck or to read a textbook or to find a way to actually move past that. It's the moving past that it's the doing of it which often takes community participation and working with one another.

And I think that does really relate to the broader influences of this project and ideas around quilts and quilting as forms of community and community making. We won't go into great detail in the podcast but just to say they were really influenced not just by the work of the UNESCO RILA team that they have been doing in this but also the wonderful people like Bell Hooks, Alice Walker, Faith Ringold who have explored the dimensions that exist between quilting and between writing and between language as well as more contemporary quilt makers people like Jeff Bailey, Grace Rother, Zak Foster. If you don't know these names, look them up because their projects are wonderful and what they really do in this contemporary space is take quilting from a space that we maybe imagine the traditional ideas of quilts to a space where quilting really is a form of radical action of activism, of deep nourishing of both ourselves and those that we work with.

And it's in this particular space of quilts as activism or quilts as radical ways of being that we try to challenge the status quo of what counts in academia. And there are so many parallels between what we're doing here and the way in which quilts that are in relation to traditional art world as well. Quilts, craft have often been seen as very much an inferior art form compared to fine art or photography for the likes of that and it's a similar thing that I think we're trying to bring into the academic sphere here but we also really love the potential of quilts as storytelling practices. And in doing that, being quilts is a way of studying and restoring the worlds that we move with them. Quilts really are in that sense, a really different way of knowing and the literacy that it takes to both make a quilt, but also to be the quilt afterwards as well.

Mindy Ptolemey

Yeah, so many exciting influences that we're still adding to all the time. We're always finding out about new projects that are engaging with quilt making. Something I'm really interested in at the moment is debates in the quilting world around accessibility and inclusion, but also

parallel, some of the debates that are going on in academia. So we're really excited to think about and bring those things along with the project.

We also, as you'll find in the show notes, created a small zine when we were launching the project. And that's got some links to some of the references that Lisa's been talking about that have influenced the project and also some others that you can follow up with.

Lisa Bradley

And we're hoping to create another small zine as well related to the project to bring together a lot of these references, because it feels like there is a bounty of information and an exciting project out there.

I was really lucky to visit the Smithsonian Institution last month when I spent a couple of weeks at the Renwick Gallery, which is a museum of craft. And I was visiting their exhibition, which unfortunately has ended now, but was called This Present Moment, Crafting a Better World. And this exhibition was looking at American craft, as it exists in America today. It was also trying to highlight the role that crafts people and makers play in sparking what they call essential conversations, stories of resilience and methods of activism.

And I love that exhibition because it really brought to life, I think what Mindy and I have been trying to get close to in this project, which is showing us the ways in which craft and making can enact a more relational and empathetic world through the process of making. We'll also include a link to the website, which curates that exhibition in the show notes.

Mindy Ptolemey

One of the things that's been so exciting about Lisa's engagement with the Smithsonian that really relates to our project is collapsing these boundaries between past, present and future. You know what the legacy of colonialism has been to the institution but also individuals who are here studying as students and communities that have been excluded who has been included where we are now in the university but also where we're going as an institution in relation to antiquarian futures.

So we're also going to talk a little bit about how to take part in the project. We don't have a Twitter account for the project but we do have a hashtag which you can follow which is #SOEQUILT as in School of Education Quilt and if you look at that hashtag you'll see some things about the project that have already taken place and you'll be able to find a link to a page where you can sign up to participate in the project.

As we mentioned at the start, that's for people with an affiliation to the School of Education at the University of Glasgow, either in the past or the present, or you might be joining the School of Education in the coming academic year. And we ask about those things on the form, we ask for your email address. We have two different ways that people can participate. You can either come to an in-person workshop where we will sit together and tell stories and make your quilts square together for your quote and your storytelling that you want to engage in. Or we have a way where you can participate remotely. So perhaps you're not living in Scotland or you're not living in Glasgow anymore or maybe you've never lived here and you'd like to take part in the project, we can send you an engagement box

that will include all the materials that you need to make your quilt square and some instructions. And you can also come together with us online if you need some more support to be able to do that.

So all of that information is available on the form where you can sign up to take part.

Lisa Bradley

So it's been wonderful to talk with you about this project. We hope that some of those who are listening are eligible to take part and are willing to take part because it would be really wonderful to get many people involved with this with the project as possible. There's far more information online by the little beam that you can download as well, just to see that Mindy and I could talk about this all day and are always up for conversation.

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Dr Gameli Tordzro

Thank you for listening to the podcast of the UNESCO Chair in Refugee Integration through Languages and Arts, a podcast series to make you think. More information about our work can be found on the website of the University of Glasgow www.gla.ac.uk.

Thank you very much.

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