

Notes from Cambridge – Migrant Knowledge

15-17th September

from Marina Warner



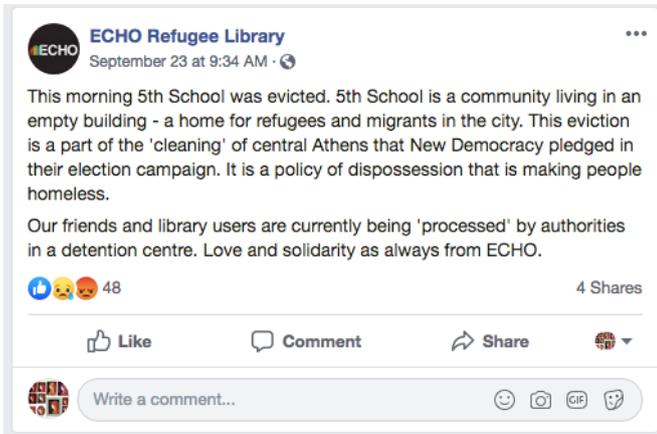
Subha Mukherji opened the conference with exciting provocations/prompts, personal anecdotes of things she has noticed in her own travels: she went to Venice to see Barca Nostra, the [ship](#) in which several hundred forced migrants drowned, which is on exhibition at the Biennale till November. She visited and they approached it at first skeptically, but found it very moving. SM called it a ‘fossil of experience’. She brought in the Genio di Palermo, which she had encountered in Palermo during the Stories in Transit performances, and her own ‘sound crossings’, a phrase later developed poetically by Angela Leighton. Alicia Stallings also gave a memorable reading of her poems, many of them inspired by the refugees and their situation in Athens, where she lives and works with [The Melissa Network](#), writing poetry and other creative work. SM then played a video of a singer getting caught in his emotional relationship to his country

during the recent upheavals in Kashmir, as he sang a traditional song about home. SM argued that his emotion, which communicated itself to the audience, was larger than nationalism.

The first full day was packed with [varied papers](#) and discussions – hugely lively and informative, with the mix, so unusual at an academic conference, adding many surprises and raising promising lines of further inquiry and activity. The historical talks provided rich context for present day approaches: for example, Rosita D'Amora on the significance of sumptuary laws for turbans under the Ottomans; Supriya Chaudhuri on an early modern ‘trickster-traveller’ and his observations; and Jonathan Gil Harris on disjunctions between perception and preconception in ‘timeless time’. It was very inspiring to hear Yousif M. Qasmiyeh read some of his poems and comment on them; and really invigorating to listen to the two Joes from [Good Chance Theatre](#) talk about the making of their play, [The Jungle](#), and about their further plans – the Walk with a giant puppet, called after the little girl Amal from the Calais camp, which is yet to be published online...

There were other organisations and groups it would be good to connect with/learn from, including the [Migration Museum \(currently based in Southwark, although nomadic\)](#) and [The Melissa Network](#).

The Melissa Network is based in Athens and is a centre for women and children run by and for migrant women. These spaces are all the more important now – see below...



"For three and a half years, Alicia E Stallings and the other stalwart volunteers who called themselves Central Athens Irregulars, regularly visited the refugees at the 5th high school in Exarheia. They brought clothes, games, toys, musical instruments, taught the children to read and speak in English and did fun and educational activities with them. They helped prepare them for school enrolment with bags, stationery and books. They engaged donors (who wish to remain anonymous) to help feed the 200-odd mostly women and children in the squat. There was no suspicious activity. The squat was self-managed, and its doormen made sure no criminal elements entered. Over the years the donors invested in the building, mending windows and lights, and installing ceiling fans. A completely dysfunctional plumbing system was fixed (the apparent cause of the school's closure in the first place), allowing lavatories, showers and a kitchen to operate. Although police were patient and there was no violence in the refugees' eviction this morning, one wonders what the practical benefit to the Greek state is of this action. These refugees will be documented and then sent to camps, where living conditions are worse. Why was the documentation not done in situ, and people gradually moved out to subsidised apartments? the children were excited to be enrolled in Greek school, and this disruption reopens the trauma of their upheaval. Volunteers and refugees bade each other a tearful farewell from either side of coach windows, for a political point to be made."



The workshops run at Melissa are there to help with the shift from aid to integration, the vulnerability into hope and intention.

‘Poetry arrives and picks up threads in moments of collective failure’

Alicia Stallings’ poetry workshops include these writing techniques:

- lists
- acrostics of one’s name
- braided poem
- sensory response in all the writing
- translation-wise – google translate – translate one’s own writing/each other
- brings in objects – chess pieces, spices, chocolate, coffee, perfume, flowers, as prompts

Stories in Transit - Our session

Starting a little late (10.15 instead of 9.50) had an effect on timings and yet the structure of the session befitted the conference really well. The workshop was open to all and allowed people to drift off and grab coffee if they wanted to.

- Marina Warner introduce the session with a brief account of the main pillars of the project: the concept of a sanctuary made by literature, a country of words (Mahmoud Darwish) for those who have lost their homes; the importance of imagination, play, improvisation to making stories; the use of traditional, non-verbal media (puppets, masks, drawings, gestures), and the helpfulness of personal maps and itineraries in establishing belonging.
- Dine Diallo and Valentina Castagna spoke for about half an hour, very eloquently and - as characteristic of the whole conference – attentive to how personal experiences/anecdotes are relevant to the discussion (not outside of Academia). They reinforced how life changing the projects represented can be: Dine spoke about his encounter with a student who was part of a Giocherenda workshop, whom he encouraged to see her own potential to change her future and how this convinced her to continue with her education. They showed [this](#) video. Valentina translated for Dine, at one point defining their collaborative games as ones ‘in which nobody loses’.
- Phil Terry spoke about his involvement in the project, and the roots of the games in Oulipian perspective on creativity. He drew attention to the potential power of playing with words!
- Joan gave her presentation, about the animation workshops, which involve storytelling with images above all and some very concise words. These reflections tied in well with Phil.
- Roger Malbert spoke briefly about his experience with drawing during the workshops, mentioning the gathering of images on walks, which informs the animation.
- Stevie Wishart, with her violin, demonstrated the way she involves people with the instrument, encouraging them to make sounds via mimicry and play.
- Wafa Tarnowksa spoke about her role as a storyteller in several languages, including Arabic, and her contributions to every workshop so far in Palermo and elsewhere.

[Film screening](#) of the September 2018 workshop in Palermo, including the unfinished animation sequences. 10 minutes long - it gives a rich, atmospheric, very lively sense of the process and the achievements. Congratulations and thanks to Metabolic Studio for the footage and to Joseph Bradley Hill for the edit, as well as the ERC via the Crossroads project for funding the film edit.

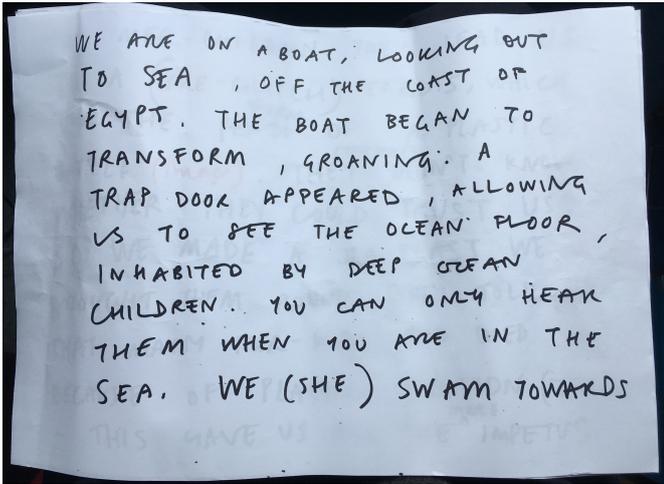
(Coffee Break)

Set-up for workshop led by Dine, to explore Giocherenda games.

There was only time for [The Wheel of Wishes](#) (Il Rondo dei Desideri).

We organized ourselves into four big groups, each with at least one person who knew how to play the game. Hannah started with Joan’s group, whose wish was to put out the fires in the Amazon! Two groups chose

this as their collective wish, and every wish ended up having an environmental theme. Hannah moved to join Phil's team and the story was written boldly on paper (instead of a notebook) so it could be seen by all, to further illustrate moments/ objects with drawings. See here:



Phil sent his rendition of the group's story:

Once there was a **woman** from **Egypt** who lived in a **boat** and who dreamed of **removing all the plastic from the ocean**. One day she noticed a small hatch in the bottom of her boat, which she had not seen before, and she opened it and dived down to the ocean bed. Here she met **merchildren** swimming among the strands of kelp and abandoned yoghurt pots, who were very pleased to meet her for they were very lonely on the bottom of the ocean and had nobody to look after them. When she told them about her wish to remove all the plastic from the ocean they were very excited and offered to help her and told her many stories about the damage that had been caused in the ocean by plastic.

At once they set off, getting back into the boat immediately. But once they were all in the boat it started to sink under their weight, though instead of going down into the water it rose up into the air transforming itself into a kind of **tardis**, which not only flew but was bigger inside than out according to laws of physics that the woman from Egypt did not understand precisely but for which she was very grateful. They flew around for days on end as the children gathered the plastic from the surface of the ocean and from the beaches and from the ocean bed and because the flying boat was now much bigger on the inside than it was on the outside they could carry all the plastic along with them.

All of the stories have been filmed by Joe, and another camera filmed Wafa' performing the story that emerged from the group she was in with Marina. These will all be online shortly.

We had to stop for lunch but the entire group was involved and excited about the possible twists and turns to the story, making sure all the talents, allies, objects etc were included in shaping the tale.

Marina: *The only disappointment was our failure to make contact with agencies working with displaced individuals, asylum seekers, forced migrants and homeless in Cambridge, in spite of efforts to do so during the summer holidays. We were given some references but none bore fruit in the time. This needs to be followed up with eg. [Cambridge City of Sanctuary](#), [Refugees at Home](#), [Cambridge Refugee Resettlement Campaign](#), [Cambridge Migration Society](#) - who only work during term times and on a voluntary basis.*

Valentina: *I am also glad that Dine could say what he felt was right to say on migration and also during the round table. I am sorry I missed a few bits in the translation, but I am not a trained interpreter and am not used to long speeches. I think I was also moved at some points and had a lump in my throat. I regret we did not have time to play with the Storycloak. This is something that I was extremely sorry about, but I am sure that we can continue testing it on other occasions and set the rules. It would be great fun, I think, to use it with children.*

Please do add any other comments here and send any photos to Hannah at storiesintransitpalermo@gmail.com