

## GLOBAL GRACE

### *Creating Cultures of Equality: Pathways from the Periphery*

#### Creating Cultures of Equality: Pathways from the Periphery

Suzanne Clisby

Mark Johnson

At the beginning of May, 2019 academics, activists, artists, and NGO professionals from territories across the world met together in Rio de Janeiro to share, discuss and debate the possibilities and challenges of creating pathways towards cultures of equality (Percursos Criativos para Culturas de Equidade, 7 - 9 May). The event was co-organised by teams from across Brazil and Mexico - Promundo - Brasil, Instituto Maria e JoãoAleixo - UNiperipheries, Observatório de Favelas, and Instituto de Relações Internacionais PUC-Rio, Voces Mesoamericanas and National Autonomous University of Chiapas - and was held across two sites, Galpão Bela Maré and PUC-Rio. The conversations and exchanges, about art and politics, memory practices and the resistance and re-existence of the periphery in the midst of state violence, produced critical insights and engendered new relations. The culmination of the event was the launch of the above mural by Alfred 'Libre' Gutierrez, commissioned by the organizers and inspired by and painted in collaboration with the women and men, children and young people in Bela Maré.

The Percursos Criativos event was one outcome and iteration of a network of collaborative partnerships established by the **Global Gender and Cultures of Equality** project. GlobalGRACE is a four-year programme of research and capacity strengthening funded by the UKRI's Global Challenge Research Fund (GCRF) delivered through the Arts and Humanities Research Council. GlobalGRACE employs artistic interventions, curatorial research practice and public exhibitions to enable gender positive approaches to wellbeing internationally, addressing two key UN global Sustainable Development Goals, Gender Equality (SDG5) and Health and Wellbeing (SDG3). The project brings together research partners from Bangladesh, Brazil, Mexico, the Philippines, South Africa and the United Kingdom, as well as other experts from Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America. Together, we investigate the variety of ways that people's creative practices challenge systems of

privilege and engender new possibilities for more equitable ways of living together.

The research teams are working collaboratively on interlinked projects in six countries around the world, as follows:



● **theatre and performance in South Africa**, including the establishment of an independent **Sex Workers Theatre Group in Cape Town**, to challenge systems that perpetuate sexual violence and to raise aspirations and self-confidence of people who undertake sex work as a means to sustain themselves and others;

● **participatory film making in Bangladesh** to investigate the obstacles faced by women in conventionally gendered masculine occupations and the way that women's occupation of those positions challenges existing gender regimes;

● **relational mapping and artistic fellowships in Brazil** to document and enable different ways of 'thinking' and 'doing' masculinities in the context of urban fragility and trauma;



Mural produced by Brazil project team working under the direction of Libre Gutierrez and in collaboration with young people at Bela Mare.

● **creative writing workshops in the Philippines** to disclose forms of discrimination faced by LGBTQ young people and create new opportunities to enable a shift from public cultures of tolerance to that of rights and recognition;

● **an itinerant Migrant Museum (MuMi)** in Los Altos de Chiapas, Mexico that includes participatory art and film, to investigate the lives of indigenous young women and men, the problems they face and possibilities for "Good Living" (BuenVivir) and "Good Migration" (BuenMigrar) in the face of disappearance, detention and the violation of labour rights;

● **qualitative and participatory research in the UK and South Africa** to investigate how **gender and race intersect** in the organizational spaces and curatorial practices of **museums and galleries**. Further details about all of the projects and our project partners may be found on the [GlobalGRACE website](#).

Underpinning each of our projects are three basic organizing ideas and sets of questions.

The first is that equality is a cultural artefact. We investigate the variety of ways that equalities are made and contested in different parts of the world. We ask, what does equality and well-being look and feel like to differently positioned groups of people who

experience multiple and intersecting forms of inequality?

The second is that cultures might best be understood as the practices through which people create the worlds they inhabit. We investigate how people's creative practices challenge inequality and engender new possibilities for more equitable ways of living together. We ask, in what ways do arts-based praxis enable people to become more reflexive and agentic knowers and build and imagine alternative futures, as well as engender well-being?

The third is that equality is a hard-won achievement and ongoing struggle: we are committed to finding ways to work together to highlight and advance equalities globally. We ask, how do we create new pathways and effective platforms to translate our shared commitment to creating cultures of equality in our locales into effective and equitable transnational partnerships that challenge and transfigure the various social, political and economic, professional and territorial divides within and across which we work.

Since its inception project partners have been especially attentive to questions about hierarchies of knowledge that shape and constrain our partnerships and collaborations. These questions are pertinent both to the way we organise ourselves as a transnational network and to the ways we negotiate the hierarchies of knowledge between academics and non-academics, researchers and participants, within and across each of our projects. We see these as productive questions and tensions that are central to the project aims and methodology rather than issues that can be resolved and set aside.



Loving Oneself, Living With Others: The first GlobalGRACE - YMCA San Pablo LGBTQI & Allies Creative Writing and Performance Workshop, Calamba, Philippines, December, 2018. Photo by Michael Sison.

Our methodological approach can be distilled into four core positions: first we apply a feminist methodology characterised by interdisciplinarity, reflexivity and an ethical practice which explicates and addresses the inequalities embedded within the research process. Second, we adopt a multi-sited and comparative methodology that foregrounds the cultural contingency of 'gender' and 'equality' by tracing the various sources of and for cultures of equality, as well as possible routes through which these ideas and practices coalesce, intersect and diverge both historically and contemporaneously. Third, we foreground a performative and multi-sensory methodology that describes the sites, events and processes through which concepts of gender equality are made and materialized in practice. Our multisensory approach helps us to investigate how our practices can desensitize and de-jeopardise gender inequality in research by our use of theatre, literature, etc. which can serve to elicit experiences in ways that decrease topic risk by enabling participants to



express their experiences in different ways. Fourth, we draw on a participatory and curatorial methodology that views research as a creative and collaborative activity involving a continual process of negotiation among people, spaces, objects, images and activities in which dissemination and public engagement is embedded within its own making. We see exhibition making as a creative process that brings forth ideas and inspires conversation, and hence produces 'new' sites and events of and about cultures of equality.

That participatory and curatorial methodology is a central strand or thread that links together the recent Percursos Criativos / Creative Pathways event in Rio de Janeiro with the conversations begun at the launch conference and exhibition in London in 2018 organized around the theme of Exchanging Cultures of Equality (culturesofequality.com).



The exhibition, co-curated by Siobhán McGuirk and Nirmal Puwar, invited reflection on what it means to create, and to communicate “cultures of equality” transnationally and foregrounds the multiple ways that communication is both contingent on technologies of translation and inevitably involves crossed wires and mis-communication that can be both productive and destabilizing. These conversations and creative curatorial practices are ongoing and will travel to Manila in April 2020 for our next major international event organized by the Bangladesh and Philippine Teams around the theme of Translating Cultures of Equality. The final major event will be in Cape Town where we will formally launch the ‘Global Museum of Equalities’ and an accompanying open access online course that GlobalGRACE teams are producing and curating together.



In summary, GlobalGRACE treats gender equality as a contingent cultural product and that methodologically brings together interdisciplinary work to investigate the production and meanings of cultures of equality

across a range of sites, events, practices and objects. Moreover, we adopt a critical decolonial and postcolonial perspective that challenges the assumption that cultures of equality originate in and flow from countries in the Global North. Investigating gender and cultures of equality also requires us to examine the relations of inequality that are its corollary: this includes attending especially to how authorized versions of equality and inclusivity may produce new divisions and/or reproduce and reinforce existing inequalities. Our emphasis, however, is on how new and alternative cultures of equality emerge from the periphery and out of situations of marginality. Finally, we are crafting new ways of working more equitably together. As our hosts for the Percursos Criativos event demonstrated, this not only requires critical dialogues but also, and just as importantly, learning to live well together; to walk, talk, work, eat, drink and dance together.

**Suzanne Clisby and Mark Johnson, Co-Directors of  
GlobalGRACE, Goldsmiths, University of London**