

## **Subversities and Permaculture: When Close Up and Critical are Cut.** **Alison Phipps, University of Glasgow**

### **Abundance.**

What a day it was – International Women’s Day 2021. We all gathered – hundreds of us – including the cultural ministers for the countries in which our work was beginning and where the projects were launching. Young people sang and danced and told stories, older folk dreamed dreams. Translators made worlds so distant come alive that we had goosebumps at what lay ahead. A future. A set of carefully laid out possibilities for the transformation of persistent and enduring conflict into episodes of peace and the healing of festering wounds of trauma and neglect. Cultural justice no less beginning to take her steps after such a long struggle. The website went live, the grant application forms were painstakingly checked and double-checked, support workshops for capacitating safe-guarding, ethics, financial due diligence and fiduciary risk were finalised and our wonderful VIP guest – Debra Kayembe Rector of Edinburgh University – no stranger to conflict and persecution herself – declared the project launched.

It was a real time of celebration. The hard work had paid off, the careful years of painstaking research which meant that contexts for cultural work and peace work were understood and truths had been won for co-design, participatory work to be eminently fundable in contexts of protracted conflict, forced migration and violence. A dream come true for researchers in our partnerships and also for myself. To be able to make grant awards to partners in Low to Middle Income Countries, and work with partners as far as possible as equals not aid recipients on research in country which they would lead and understand far better than our own meagre research has ever been able to do. A dream come true. Abundance.

### **Broken Promises**

Imagine. Just imagine that those tiny clauses in research contracts, the ones where you laugh out loud and say – well that will never happen – just imagine that it happens. You have a portfolio of funding which has been through seven levels of peer review, contracting and due diligence and you have grant making powers yourself, as a result of this latest award, to distribute, according to research which you have been engaged in for over 25 years, to the most deprived and vulnerable members of society in the world. Just imagine that not only this but the areas you are focusing on for this particular group are in the areas which have been most systematically neglected by research over the years.

Then, one day you are launching a multi-million pound U.K. Government proclaimed flagship project, at the height of your academic career with a world-wide reputation for excellence in your field. And twenty Four hours later the funders place a notice on their website saying that all grants in progress are now paused until further notice; that 70-80% of funds will be cut and we must now petition our Vice Chancellors for funds to keep going, or cut the project with immediate effect.

Imagine that some of those institutions employing them drop them like hot bricks from a great height. My own has been exceptionally kind, but many have had no such luck. Hung

out to dry. Through no fault of their own. Your research dreams and hopes and those of your partners now shattered into thousands of pieces.

## **Cuts**

On March 11<sup>th</sup> 2021 UKRI, 2 days after our launch – the Government funder of research in the UK, UKRI, post a notice on its website announcing 70% cuts to its flag ship Global Challenge Research Fund.

Scarcity. Cuts. Fear. Disbelief.

How to respond? Those of us affected began to gather in furtive phone calls and angry social media groups, some of us mobilising a campaign, others too numb to even think, to take in something that is unprecedented in higher education. “We’ve only just appointed all our staff” says one “we’ve researchers actually in the middle of one of the largest ever surveys in the history of the field, world-wide, and they are enumerating on the ground, right now.”; “we are in the middle of human clinical trials – there are no ethics on the planet that allow us to stop at this point.”; “We’ve just finished the dress rehearsal for the production”; “we’ve just managed to get the UN to take our initial research findings into their committee structures for action”.

On and on and on it runs, the list of the immediate and then the global ramifications. Every night for months now my head has spun taking it in. I’ve responded correctly, physiological manifesting the trauma, grief and stress – no sleep, loss of appetite, deep anxiety, angry tears, insatiable action, often trying to chair meetings of those I will be cutting in situations of such precarity it means I can barely breathe, let alone live with myself if I don’t try and fight cuts with every means possible. Most people treat me like the body in transition I am – giving me a wide berth, not knowing what to say.

Now imagine breaking the news to those really affected in life and death ways by the cuts; the calls and messages from partners on your grant in the areas where the work was building something positive, putting hope in place for the first time in a long, long time. Imagine you are, for instance, a young girl in one of the world’s poorest countries, where serial abuse and impregnation are common place under the pandemic conditions. Imagine the research has established this and begun to create safe houses and forms of advocacy and networks of support and overnight this is not only destroyed, but you are now punished for having had and lost an income, and those who are your elders and mentors are threatened with imprisonment because ‘they were the one’s to take money from the British.’ The words are spat out, and even though this is over zoom, I wipe my face, British that I am, receiving this as proxy, and knowing it to be a proportionate response to the violence just meted out.

“This is violent news” says our colleague.

## **Critical Action**

Imagine this is how research funding is weaponised against the world's most deprived communities in 2021, in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Now imagine a successful campaign to reverse these cuts. Oh the hope! One led by a few academics who did not previously know one another. One which joined up with lawyers, journalists, NGOs and MPs of all parties. Imagine that the number of elected representatives opposing the cut to the 0.7% Overseas Development Assistance is enough to reverse the decision and restore what has been lost. Imagine you know, under democracy that you have won a campaign against a mighty adversary. Imagine hearing your work and your letters read out on the floor of The Commons as evidence of good work, well done. Imagine that the Speaker announces a debate with a binding vote but the Prime Minister refuses this. And as a result all is lost. All is lost. At the time of writing our research reports are being put through a secret 'worthwhileness indicator' devised in Government and applied to our final scores, describing the 30% left of our projects as 'underinvested'. UKRI now gaslighting research leaders those it underinvests for being recipients of underinvestment. The language alone.....

Close up research just got a lot closer up. Critical research just met its nemesis in the form of the bureaucrats pen, powerful, and painfully creative.

In all of the campaigning since March 2021 my work has deployed critical frameworks. I have worked with the close up, participatory, relational approaches which brought abundance after many years developing intercultural education for conflict transformation, and creative work with refugee communities worldwide. We've submitted research on critical metaphor analysis determining how higher education researchers have responded in public to the cuts. Just as we had been moving to a place of engaged practice-led research with actions and reflection cycles we were thrown back on to the frameworks Santos (2018) writes of whereby we invest wholeheartedly in the task of critique but interpellated by the aggressor into a position of either subdued subjugation or incisive, careful, close up critique.

## **Abundance**

As the dust settles on the brave new world of 'worthwhileness indicators demonstrating underinvestment' – a discourse to be the subject of critical discourse analysis in good measure, no doubt – I have started to return to my idiom of paradox and possibility and away from the the critical insistence on the reversal of the cuts, and of cuts as zero sum game for myself and those affected in far greater measure by them.

Close up, critical research is giving way to distanciation; to humour – gallows humour but still with some genial comedy; to a different critical lens which has retreated as to what will be possible now that a sub-versity of creative critical scholars, artists and peacemakers have made common cause on the level of their common project and then in the face of the attacks. The possible, liveable future for close up, critical research will not be UKRI grants or portfolios of funding to enable the work, but underground passages, hiding places, and researchers following the maxim 'be like water' to pool and rush, and pour and respond when drought gives way to rain. There is a conviviality in this new sub-versity, of the kind

Nymanjoh (2019) speaks of, a lot of rowdy laughter and a strange joy in the counterproof (Andrade 1970) that we have survived this unthinkable catastrophe and we still know how to make peace, and survive. There is an ontological closeness created with our colleagues who have know this all their lives and are no strangers to the begging we've had to of late.

Brueggemann (1999) writes of the myth of scarcity. The belief there is not enough to go round. Principles of permaculture – Earth Care; People Care; Fair Share – might offer our nascent subversity a way of going on that offers enough – Dayenu as Brueggemann calls it – and a way of framing other kinds of abundance which are present beyond a frame of cuts and scarcity only. It's early days for think-piecing this but Arts and Humanities scholars in the academy have long enjoyed an abundance of life and words to think with and maybe, just maybe, the days of great investment in the grant infrastructure of competition in universities will give way to different kinds of close up, maybe like the ones of lichens or mosses, pioneer survivors on rocks and trees.

In my work in Aotearoa New Zealand my māori friends have repeatedly reminded me “that no matter what the fungus will fix everything.” As I watch the rot set in in so many places including in the plans and dreams that are dying away, this is where the thinking falls... the fungus will fix everything, including universities made of cuts or awards.

No matter how poisoned the land

No matter how poisoned the land  
the fungus will fix everything.

Everything.

The promise of yeast  
in unleavened bread  
is only for days  
when all is to be  
destroyed.

Or when all has been lost.

Everything,  
We need the taste of fungus  
on our tongues.

Open your mouth and let  
the yeast rise upon it.

Present the words  
that bubble and breathe  
with a possibility of more.

And excess.

A doubling in size.

Rot this casino,  
this shopping mall world  
rotten to its core.

Let the fungus moulder all.

Decay comes  
from the poet's words  
Finding a way,  
clean as a surgeon's knife  
to cut to the quick  
and expose all  
to the air.

The air, the air,  
the germs on the air  
the fixers of all.  
Of everything.

Where there is decay  
is where the new life  
draws forth.

Energy, sucks at the old host  
and strengthens its hold.

Be bright toadstool,  
small microbe,  
Be dun coloured mushroom  
or just be the fermentation  
that gives us our  
sourdough,  
our wine.

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