

Whose Power?

Series 2 – Episode 5

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Participatory research, young curators, museum exhibitions, podcasting, safe spaces, amplifying voices, preservative party, collaborative research, goth culture Leeds, research methods, accessibility, museum sector change, youth engagement, participatory action research.

SPEAKERS

Eden, Rowan, Esme, Lauren, Abigail Harrison Moore

Abigail Harrison Moore 00:04

Welcome to series two of the Whose Power? podcast from members of the Preservative Party, together with me, Abigail Harrison Moore. Based at Leeds City Museum, the Preservative Party is a group of young curators who break down traditional barriers and influence the way exhibitions and events are curated and presented. And I'm a professor at Leeds University who's been learning with the Preservative Party about how we research together, exploring participatory action research methods. When we recorded and listened to our first series of Whose Power? we realised that podcasting brought something special to our collaborative research. It was both a method and allowed us to tell others about what we've been doing together. So, in the second series of Whose Power? we dig deeper into the way participatory research changes the lives of young people and explore how podcasting helps us to do this. We're talking about how we create and maintain safe spaces for real collaboration, and how we amplify the voices of those least listened to.

Rowan 00:59

Even if young people are asked what they think of something, even that can make a difference. It is okay to share your voice, to amplify your voice. It kind of has to be done as a whole, and I think it's a societal effort to uplift and amplify the voices of young people.

Abigail Harrison Moore 01:16

In episode five, we're discussing the power to change. Lauren and I are joined by the newest members of the Preservative Party, Rowan, Eden and Esme, and I'll be reflecting on their conversation and what I think it means for researchers like me who are interested in the power of participatory research.

Lauren 01:38

Thanks, Abigail, and thank you so much to Eden, Rowan and Esme for joining us. I know it can be a bit daunting as the newest members of the Preservative Party to get really stuck in with this project that you're coming into quite late on in the day. I thought that we'd kind of start our discussion and our conversation off with kind of a really easy question for us all to answer, maybe, and have a little chat about. And that question is, why did you want to join the Preservative Party. Go on Eden?

Eden 02:09

I think because it's so unusual, and it's such an opportunity that you don't see anywhere else. It's something, museums are, something that so many people feel alienated from, you don't see how things work. So, it's a chance to really dive into that and actually join it and see what's going on and experience it.

Lauren 02:26

But how did you find us?

Eden 02:27

God, I can't remember.

Lauren 02:28

Did you go on our website?

Eden 02:30

I think so. Because I applied about a year or two before I actually got accepted for it.

Lauren 02:36

Oh, you got wait listed, because we're that popular. Fabulous. How about you Rowan?

Rowan 02:42

It was kind of like a couple experiences I had in like the museum. I went to a talk hosted by a person who was used to be in the Preservative Party that was really interesting. And then I also saw the overlooked exhibition, which was obviously made by the Preservative Party. And by this point, my mum was already volunteering in the museums industry and had met a few of the people that were involved in the Preservative Party, or in the managing of the Preservative Party. And so, it was just all of these things that really motivated me to get involved. And I'd seen the display you put up in the overlooked exhibition of you know, who are we? How can you get involved? And I applied, and then forgot to send the follow up email for like, ages, and then finally did, and then got waitlisted for a bit, and then got accepted.

Esme 03:32

Oh gosh, my answer isn't as profound or museumy as that. I joined because I basically wasn't talking to anyone. I've been ill for the past four years, I had to stop going to school, I had to stop going outside, basically. And it got to a point where I was like, okay, so I need to join a club, I need to see people. I joined a few, but they're mostly kind of old women. And I thought, well, I want to have some people my age to speak to. So, my mum was really scouring the internet. Bless her, she really, really wanted to look for something good, and she found the Preservative Party. And about a week later, I went and met Jordan, and he said yes.

Lauren 04:11

How have you found it coming into the group at the stage that it is now? Because when I joined the group, it was maybe two or three years old, whereas you guys are coming into it, and it's, we're about 13 years in at this point. What's your experience? Like, how do you find participating and kind of meeting everybody? Because it can be quite daunting when you come into a room of 20 people that you don't know, and we all know, Pres Party, it's quite a loud, crazy environment. Like, how was that for you?

Esme 04:40

I was pretty nervous, but when I stepped in, it was pretty obvious to me, like, it's a well-oiled machine. Like, everyone seemed pretty comfortable with each other, so that made me comfortable.

Eden 04:51

It's such an easy space, like, as you said, I was also quite anxious when I joined and I was really scared I wouldn't go into the room to meet people, but I think because everyone's so like-minded, and even if they don't share interests like that, there's one just common factor there, so everyone can gravitate towards each other, and it's just so welcoming. And even if, like you said, you've been there for years, Jordan has, some other people haven't, yet everyone just fits so well regardless of time.

Lauren 05:19

Yeah, Jordan and I like part of the furniture now we've been there that long.

Rowan 05:24

I just felt immediately at home when I when I just came into the group. Apart from Jordan, I'd not met anyone before hand, but there was just something about the sentimentality and the vibe. I can't think of a better way to articulate it. Like what you were saying Eden, everyone was so like-minded, everyone seemed to not necessarily have the same goal, but everyone felt so on the same page, so on the same again wavelength. Don't know how best to articulate it, but it was just from day one or second one. You might even say was like, I feel at home here.

Abigail Harrison Moore 05:59

Eden, I'm really struck by the fact that you started by talking about museums being alienating spaces to some people, and yet, what's been absolutely lovely hearing you all talk about your different routes into the group is how you didn't feel alienated when you came into that space. What do you think made the difference? Because today we're thinking about the power to change and yet to feel confident, to be in a space where you want to make change happens, means that you have to not feel alienated in a way. So it's a difficult question, but what do you think made the difference you not feeling it? We were in a museum, so in a space that sometimes can feel alienating, why wasn't it that way?

Esme 06:41

Because there is other young people there. Yeah, I've been to my local museum volunteering there before, but it's just kind of sat in a cold room, like a really, really cold room with the museum staff writing on a computer, and that was it. But having other people there who probably talk about the same things as you, like the same things as you that was really helpful.

Eden 07:03

As well, because it's such a fresh take on it I think that usually there's a stereotype about museums and that it will be like Esme said, a lot of old people in a dusty room on computers all day, and that's it. So, for such a different perspective, I think really changed it. And that's the most important thing. It's like, its younger people, and even if it wasn't, it's new ways of looking at how museums work and how to build things within that environment.

Rowan 07:28

Yeah, kind of on that similar vein. There's something about it felt so disruptive, and I use that word in a positive sense, it felt kind of revolutionary. Is probably a bit hyperbolic, but like something about it felt fresh, and even though we were working within the pre-existing organisation, it felt like we were really doing something new. And I know when I was just told that I was going to be able to have a little box in which I could put things that I was interested in and had not seen ever particularly displayed or talked about before, that felt so powerful, but also so new and fresh and disruptive.

Abigail Harrison Moore 08:06

See, the funny thing is, I'm one of those old women that have been around. I'm a professor of museum studies, so I was one of those people that's almost feel like I'm dusty in the space, but being with you all helps me feel disruptive. So I really like that idea, and in some ways, I guess I felt alienated in multiple ways around the world I lived in for multiple different reasons, and coming to work with you all helped me feel I had a different sort of power. And I think that's something that we really should think about today together.

Lauren 08:38

Usually because people are so, they're separated from the exhibitions like you're looking at what other people have decided to show you and say what they think about it as objective as they'll try to make it and that's it. So to be able to have a voice and be able to choose what you want to show people and what you want to tell them about in a museum space, I think, is really powerful.

Rowan 08:59

Yeah, and something about it just felt so free in that same way you were just saying, when you go to museum, you are effectively and this can't be helped, **well** I suppose it might be, but I would argue, generally can't be helped in that, you are seeing the objects that are being displayed through the lens of the displayer. But when I came to Preservative Party, it felt like there was no pressure for me to display anything or talk about anything through a certain lens. It could just be my lens or whatever lens or perspective I could choose, which felt very exciting.

Lauren 09:36

We've kind of discussed there that you've really actually enjoyed, kind of coming into the museum space and actually just getting involved and getting stuck in and creating exhibitions that mean something to you that display a view that you want the world to see, or a bit of information that you want the world to see, whether it's how we experience our day to day lives, or just something that's kind of one of our niche interests. Would you now call yourselves researchers and what you're doing in the museum as research? I really struggle sometimes I think to classify it as research, but I should be getting better at that, I've been here for 11 years, like pull yourself together Lauren. What do you guys think about calling yourself researchers because you're so new in that kind of world. Rowan, you've been with us maybe six months, I want to say, and Eden's been with us maybe a year, and Esme is, like, really fresh into the groove. Like, how are you settling into research?

Esme 10:35

For me, I have to say, I don't want to be self-deprecating, but I have been there for like, three weeks, so I wouldn't call myself a researcher but I would definitely call what everyone else's doing research, and that they're researchers. Or how I see that I was sat with Rowan the last time I was here, and I was seeing them right on the computer, doing the research and writing everything up. And I thought, like, how are you just sat there doing that? How are you, know, like, having to focus so hard and like, tune everything out, because that's what I would have to do. But just being in that space and being able to do that was crazy. Yeah, it was really weird.

Rowan 11:10

Yeah, I guess I would perhaps consider what we do research but would not consider myself a researcher. I know that's silly, because if you do research, then that means you are a researcher. But I would never have considered myself a researcher in any sense of the word, until you sort of brought it up just now. But if you came to me in that session that you just mentioned, for example, and asked, what are you doing Rowan? I'd be like, oh, I'm just doing some research. I would have probably just said that without even thinking about it. But if you came to me and said, oh, Rowan, are you a researcher? I would probably say, no.

Lauren 11:49

Do you think that comes from what we kind of view as traditional researchers or traditional workers in museums, and then we kind of talk ourselves down off kind of thinking, oh yeah, we do that on a week-by-week basis. That's what we're constantly doing. Do you think that's maybe part of it?

Rowan 12:07

Oh, certainly, yes. And it's odd, because I'm all very aware of that. You know, that was the first thing that came into my head when you said that was, I immediately was like, no I'm not a researcher. And I thought, but aren't I? Because I'm doing the research. So, it's odd, because I'm very aware of the fact that, you know, we shouldn't downplay ourselves just because we don't fit into traditional parameters of I do this thing, get given the money and have gone to university to do it. But despite knowing that, I still, my conclusion was still, I'm not a researcher somehow.

Lauren 12:37

Okay, you totally are. You all are.

Eden 12:40

I think what Rowan said summed up really well is that it's seen as so academic and so highly regarded that it's almost impossible to break into but even just being there and researching things that we want to look at, it's so strange to think of ourselves as researchers now because it's sitting on little laptop looking on TMS, which I love. TMS is great.

Lauren 13:01

I hate TMS. I was told if you press a button on it and delete it, you'll be in trouble. So, I've not been on it on my own in like 10 years. I don't trust myself. TMS, just for everybody else, is the museum system. It's essentially the massive database that stores all of the records of every single object that Leeds Museums and Galleries have in their collections.

Eden 13:24

You would think it's from the 90s, and it's only from the last few years, which I think fascinating. But especially using that, and just picking an idea and using other tools research from anywhere at all, is so easy to just slip into and start getting so engrossed in that. I think that the change in which you get to choose what you're looking at, rather than just what someone else decided here do this and look into this and only this is really what can envelope people in it, born for a better word.

Lauren 13:55

I mean, I think that's maybe why we tried to rebrand a bit, because we were just like a youth engagement group where it was just like young people, and it was like, actually, no, we need to put the word curators in there, because what we're doing is actually what professionals are doing as a job, and just calling ourselves young people in our own kind of definition of what the Preservative Party is, we're doing ourselves down there a little bit.

Abigail Harrison Moore 14:21

So thinking about yourselves as researchers, even if you only just now in this podcast studio are thinking about yourself as a researcher. How does that give us power to change things? Why does research matter when we're talking about making change in our world?

Rowan 14:37

Well, I feel like it's an often-used phrase, which is, you know, those who don't study the past are doomed to repeat it. You know, currently we see a lot of people who haven't, maybe in positions of power, haven't, maybe

gone to the effort of actually studying the past, and thus seem to be repeating it. And so I think that's probably why research is so powerful, because it is that act of studying the past, which we can use to inform our decisions for the future, and us as curators or as researchers have the privilege of taking that context, taking that important information, and presenting it to the public so they aren't doomed to repeat the past as well.

Esme 15:17

I think it's about we can change it because of who we are as researchers. We're not just like some old men with monocles going, hmm, I wonder what King Henry was eating for breakfast. I feel like having different perspectives and wanting to research different things and share things that maybe the general public wouldn't really know about, like what these two are doing in their exhibition about goth culture in Leeds. I don't think most people would know about that, but having that perspective and wanting to share that, I think, is really important.

Abigail Harrison Moore 15:50

Do you want to tell us a bit about your research on goth culture in Leeds.

Eden 15:54

So we decided on this project because goth culture started in Leeds basically, and it's so massive now worldwide, that is just, I think, such a cool little fact, a local history that's got such a rich culture, like all the sort of clubs and the place that would go and like original acts would perform there, that loads people remember now, but you don't know that they came from here. And it's seen as something, I think a lot of things now are seen as, like, very American or very foreign, and there's not really a chance that something so influential could have come from here. So it's really important to connect people to the idea.

Abigail Harrison Moore 16:27

And working on that together, and realising the place where you live, the region that you live within, has had such a substantial history and made a real difference to something that you believe in. Where does power come in terms of doing that work together? I mean, we talk about participation, and participation is about being together, doing together. How does that make a difference?

Eden 16:52

So I don't know if this all makes sense, but it's almost like research within itself, because you can discuss it with others, and then you get to see how other people perceive it and how it's impacted them, and it's still got that last thing, like impression on people now that you only discover when you start digging into it or asking them, or showing them what do you think about this? Did you know this?

Rowan 17:11

Yeah. And if, for example, I would never, but if I was just doing that, this project on gothic culture in the 80s on my own, or if Eden was doing on their own, then there wouldn't be nearly as much breadth of information and understanding and different perspectives or similar perspectives that have been confirmed by other people. And I just think the fact that there is the power of the group working on it, you know, allows for those different perspectives. It's like a mirror ball of different views and perspectives.

Lauren 17:43

I just want to kind of pick up on that, because actually, what you're highlighting, it's a problem that I think quite a lot of academics fall into, myself included, we just tend to work alone, and working as a solitary individual is not ever going to kind of really help. I think collaborating is the way to go and working together, participation, it is the way to go, getting those multiple voices, kind of thinking things through with people and talking through your ideas. I mean, I regularly use Abigail as a sounding board for different things that I'm thinking about. The same

with Abigail probably bounces ideas off me quite often. Then still thinking about participation and collaboration. Why did you want to be involved in the podcast? And why do you think that it's a useful tool, let's say, to kind of continue with this goal of collaboration and participation?

Esme 18:37

I don't really like writing stuff down. I mean, I do. It's okay, but I'd much rather have a conversation about something. I think it's easier to express myself that way. And also, I wanted to have a podcast to send my grandma. That was the main reason, but writing is the other reason yes.

Eden 18:54

Like, as Esme said, it's so much easier, I think, to be able to just connect those ideas straight from the brain to mouth and word vomit at people, and they're connected because it's seen. Like I think it's more informal than how a lot of research is shown particular and a lot of subjects such as this, where you might get papers on it, but that will be seen as something higher access that people might not understand or engage in as often. So, something as common as a podcast will reach people easier, and they'll understand and they'll feel connected to it.

Rowan 19:23

Yeah, and I think there's an art of it to me is like about accessibility and options. Speaking as someone who lives kind of on the outskirts of Leeds, I know how much of a hassle it can be to get to the museum, or really anywhere where there's a big concentration of information. So, I think for me, there's a lot of value to be said that this will be accessible to people in their own homes. You know, if they struggle with public transport, or have some kind of physical disability or just can't be bothered, they don't have to go out of their way to go to anywhere in particular, do anything in particular, they can just access in their own home. And so that's to me that's quite important.

Esme 20:04

I actually tried to do a tiny bit of schoolwork via podcasts, you know, having them read to me instead of having to watch a online class, which there was barely any of, I just feel like it's so much easier to sit and listen to something in bed as I was, than having to take myself all the way to school, which I couldn't do.

Abigail Harrison Moore 20:24

And of course, sitting here listening to you talk about podcasts, and it's interesting, everybody talking about podcasts being accessible, because when I first started this project, I'd never listened to a podcast. And I think there's something you know you're talking about museums and academics sort of seeming out of touch at all. And I think, yeah, actually, I am, because podcasting wasn't something that I'd encountered before. But one of the things we've been thinking about in this second series of Whose Power? is how research happens in this space. So you've just come in new into this room today, this is the first time we've done a podcast together. But how do you think research is happening in this space now, as we're talking.

Eden 21:06

It's making people think, it's making us think, certainly, especially on subjects of researching and what we would consider, actually something you don't tend to consider, as well as podcasting. Here right now, for me personally, this is bizarre, and I haven't done it before, I don't really know what's going on. So, it's researching something new and hearing other people's perspectives on like Pres Party and the projects we've done. It's still research, otherwise I wouldn't be able to get those outside perspectives. And people listening to this, likewise, are now included in this research because they've chosen to listen to this. They're learning more, even if they don't realise it.

Esme 21:44

Yeah, definitely this is quite lame, but not having talked to anyone, I feel like so much smarter each time I come here and just have a conversation. So, listening to your perspectives now, it does feel like I'm getting a bit of research for myself. Like, oh yes.

Abigail Harrison Moore 21:58

But do you know what? I feel so much smarter every time I have conversations with the Pres Party. I think, you know, that is the absolute joy, and what's at the heart of participatory research is, I think there's a perception somehow, especially, you know, with this weird title professor, that I kind of know stuff. I know some stuff, but I know so little about what it's like to be you and what it's like to for you in Leeds, to encounter museums and to encounter history and historical ideas. And so, one of the reasons I think the podcast is a really amazing research space is we're not only researching together, but also capturing that. Because one of the most difficult things about participatory research is that moment you've got to go, oh, can I just for a moment, can I just photograph the fact that we've just done this? Because it's fantastic, and we're doing that live at the same time. So that's it's absolutely brilliant.

Lauren 22:52

So let's go back then to the overarching theme of today's episode, the power to change. Do you think what we are doing is going to change kind of the museum sector? Are we changing research? Are we changing the way that we do things?

Eden 23:08

From what the press parties achieved even before Esme Rowan and I have been here, the things you've done, the commendations you've been awarded for it, I think there's a real possibility that, yes, we have, and there is an impact that's certainly been made. I don't know what it is, I don't know, you'll have better idea than I will because you've been here for so long.

Lauren 23:30

I think sometimes it's almost intangible, like you just can't I can't write it down either. But like, I'm really excited to see what you guys as the next generation do with change and what kind of difference you're going to make and add upon what Press Party have done.

Rowan 23:47

I mean, certainly, my perspective on how museums can work has been changed, and I find that happening to me all the time in so many different areas. I've lots of friends who I've spoken to about my experiences and lots of friends who I haven't even spoken to about my experiences. But I, but I can feel a general, glacial shift, perhaps, in the kind of culture and general perspective on what museums can be from, it's moving further away from like the British Museum and the Smithsonian, you know, big buildings with big columns outside and tall staircases with objects we've stolen from countries in glass boxes. I feel like it's moving away from that, perhaps slowly, perhaps only in the groups that I'm in, but I think it is moving away from that.

Esme 24:35

I'm happy that you say glacial pace, because it definitely feels like that. But I think that when, even though something like this feels like a very small, small thing, when you look at it from the biggest scale, hopefully in like, a couple of years, we'll be able to look back and be like, oh yeah now everyone's doing a podcast because of this. When I came to the museum and saw how it was different from my local museum, I was like, wow, they really have changed how this museum is run. That's really cool. I don't know how it will happen, how long it will take to happen, but I'm just sure that the stuff that is being done here will eventually be implemented elsewhere. It

Eden 25:13

It isn't Pres Party, I'd like to add, I think that the general idea of how the museums are choosing to display their objects and what they are choosing to display like the influence we have on our exhibitions, and even large scale ones outside of Pres Party like Miffy is such a subject that I wouldn't expect, and it's bringing a lot more people in and changing their perceptions too. So, it's ultimately got this wider outreach I think is great.

Lauren 25:35

If I ever do leave Pres Party, I'm so glad that I'm leaving it in your guys hands, because I know that you're you just have the ethos of the group, even when you're so new to the group, you guys are going to change the world I like fully believe it. Thank you, Eden, Rowan and Esme for joining us, and I know that it was probably a bit daunting when we posted this as an idea for you guys to join in, but I'm really, really glad that you did. I'm going to hand over to Abigail now, and Abigail is going to give us her reflections.

Abigail Harrison Moore 26:08

Thanks so much to Lauren, Rowan, Eden and Esme for sharing their thoughts and insights on the power to change. So, what did we learn from that? Well, it was fascinating for me, because these are three of our newest members, as you've heard. And so, in some ways, it was incredibly difficult to ask them the question about, how did they have the power to change because they're only just coming into this research project, only just coming into a space where they can participate. And as we heard from Esme, for some of them, it's been a long time since they've been within a group of people and given the opportunity to make change, but in their conversation, we heard these really important, actually really simple ways that we do this. We create opportunities, we offer a very warm welcome. And all these young people talked about the fact that they had a perception of what researchers were like, of what research is, you know, dry and dusty, all these ideas. And we created these ourselves. Academia created this. So, we have to go above and beyond to get out into the world and to show young people, our future researchers, our current researchers, about who we are and that we're prepared to listen, because listening has been the key theme that's run across the whole of this series, listening and learning. And that brings me to the space of the podcast as a space of participatory research, action research. We've heard research in action, in asking these difficult questions around the podcast table of some very amazing but young people. We've heard them thinking, researching in this space. One of our hardest jobs when we're working with participatory action research is how do you capture your learning? How do you capture that moment? The absolute joy of the podcast studio is that we capture it live, we listen, we respond, we discuss, we explore, and we hope, across this whole series, you've had a chance to listen and to explore, and you will take some of our learning from this series and bring it into your own research. But the other joy participatory action research is it keeps changing. We have to be prepared to move with it. Thank you for joining us on this episode of the Whose Power? podcast. Music is by Tae. Funding comes from The Research England Policy Support Fund, which the University of Leeds this year is using to support participatory research. If you've got a question or a comment about what you've heard in this episode, then you can find the Preservative Party on LinkedIn and BlueSky. We'd really love to hear from you. This is a Research Podcast production.