

# Whose Power?

## Episode 2 – Bobby and Rahesa

### SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Project, preservative, museum, feel, Pres Party, participatory research, researcher, group, power, museums, learned, people, conversations, work, homelessness, podcast, participation, academic

### SPEAKERS

Abigail Harrison Moore, Group members, Bobby and Rahesa

#### **Abigail Harrison Moore** 00:01

Welcome to Whose Power? a podcast exploring the power of participation in amplifying the voices of young people to create new knowledge and understanding. I'm Professor Abigail Harrison Moore from the University of Leeds. And together with the Preservative Party, an inspiring group of young curators based at Leeds City Museum, we've been exploring how best to empower young people to break down traditional barriers to influence and drive the way museum exhibitions are curated and presented.

#### **Group members** 00:29

Give everyone a voice, give everyone a chance to pick up the slack of other people work in their own way. If we ask them their opinions and give them power to make these decisions from an early age, it gives them more responsibility, because they will be leading the charge going forward. Talk to them and listen to what they say.

#### **Abigail Harrison Moore** 00:49

In this episode, we're joined by group members, Bobby and Rahesa. Hello. My first question, which I think is an obvious one, but it's a really good one, is, why did you want to be involved in this project? So the project that we're working on Whose Power? Bobby.

#### **Bobby** 01:08

I think at first, I wasn't overly sure that it would be for me, because the kind of history that I'm most interested in tends to be mediaeval and early modern history, which doesn't surprisingly, involve a lot of electricity. So I was a bit uncertain. And then you attended the group the first time. And I remember straightaway, having a conversation about soup, and about how something that I really love, and I'm very dedicated to, would have changed, like really changed with the advent of electricity and the developments that have been made, and how actually, things as little as that interest could have much wider ramifications in the project. And talking as well about how electricity and art interacted and that kind of thing. And just from that meeting, I went, Okay, this is going to be something really cool. And so I was very onboard from that moment on.

#### **Abigail Harrison Moore** 02:10

Brilliant. So probably wasn't soup, Rahesa. But what was it for you? Why did you want to be involved?

**Rahesa** 02:16

So I think similarly to Bobby, I wasn't entirely sure about whether or not it would be for me, not that I had anything against it. It just didn't feel like something that I would gel well with. I can't even tell you why. Because it's not even like history from that era doesn't fascinate me. I do like 20th century history. But, we were having conversations with the group, the turning point for me was when we were just sat down talking, just eating, having tea, you know, having a lot of really honest, really vulnerable conversations about a lot of things: power, being a woman, being a young person being young creators.

**Abigail Harrison Moore** 02:56

I remember for you and I there was that really important moment when we had talked about the word power itself, and its meaning and that was a moment, where I think for both of us, we decided - would you would you be happy to talk about that?

**Rahesa** 03:10

So I think it was you that mentioned you learned a piece of information about how the word power is different in every single language except for the English language. The etymology of that word, was something that really like, just the history behind it really fascinated me. So with every other language, power, whether it's financial power, whether it's power as in electricity, or who rules the country, or physical strength, all of those words, like all the context of the word power is a different word in every single language, but the word power is the same in English for every one of those different meanings. And that really, when I learned about that...

**Abigail Harrison Moore** 03:51

That was a really important moment for us. And that's why we had it at the centre of our exhibition. Because it was something, it surprised us all thinking about how this word power is translated in multiple different ways. And that's why we've decided to do this podcast about using the word power to think about participation. And I want to think about a little bit more about the power of participation with you both because obviously, you've not both been in the Preservative Party for 13 years, because 13 years ago, you would have both been very, very young. Could you tell me a little bit about your experience with the Preservative Party? You've curated a lot of projects yourselves that you've been involved with, from your experience of those projects. Is there a particular way that you do them? Or does that change with each project? And how does the Preservative Party do projects?

**Bobby** 04:43

Anarchy. I think it's very hard to nail down a Pres Party approach to something, because it depends who's in the room during that session, how they want to do things, how the conversations we had last week might actually have changed our entire perspective on what we thought we were coming into. I came in to Pres Party at a bit of a weird point, because I started midway through a project. So this is the first time for me that I'd seen the initial conversations and the full fruition of a project. I've not seen something all the way through before. But even then, we've sat down and we've gone, oh, we're going to do a podcast. And our wonderful producers have said, well, this is how we do a podcast. And we've

gone oh, well, that's not how we do a podcast, I'm afraid to say, we're going to approach it a little bit differently. So it's definitely about not keeping things in a rigid structure. It's, it's going with the flow and seeing where that takes us.

**Abigail Harrison Moore** 05:43

And in terms of your experience, Rahesa with the Preservative Party, is there anything from the projects that you've done, that you think is a theme? Or does it keep changing, depending on the project?

**Rahesa** 05:55

I think it does keep changing, even if for me, personally, I work one way. If there's anything I've learned working within a group dynamic is that those methods of how we navigate the chemistry of the group, the actual project within itself always changes, because the personalities are so different.

**Abigail Harrison Moore** 06:12

And I think that's what I've learned from you all, and particularly, Rahesa in our conversations, the way that we as individuals have to be very aware of ourselves in those spaces, and what makes us feel comfortable, what motivates us. And I've seen you really thinking about it. And you've really helped me understand that. That's something that we talked about in the first episode of the podcast with Esther and with Jordan, who facilitate the group that each of us are individuals in that space, there is no set rules. We're learning from each other all the time. That helps me think about my next question, because you and I've talked a lot Rahesa about us being researchers. And you starting to think about yourself as a researcher through these projects, because researcher was a word that we quite often use in academia, but don't use in other ways life and yet research is what we do all the time. How do you think of yourself as a researcher now? Do you think it's changed through this project?

**Rahesa** 07:11

No, absolutely. Like you said, typically, when I think of research, I think of it in an academic way. When I think of like a researcher in an academic way, I think of someone who's looking through a pile of papers, and someone who like sits at a desk and does a lot of like decoding jargon stuff that I wouldn't understand. But the research that we did was among people, it was talking to people, I didn't think that I could be called a researcher, because I didn't think that that would count, like actually, but you know, speaking to people is a very vital part about getting to the facts of any historical subject. So yeah, I'm definitely I would consider myself a researcher now, now that I'm able to redefine that word researcher, that role.

**Abigail Harrison Moore** 07:55

Yeah, fantastic. And Bobby, do you see yourself as researcher and how?

**Bobby** 08:00

I agree with Rahesa, that, I think I came to this with a preconception of what a researcher was, and it wasn't me, it was somebody who had maybe a few more qualifications than I have. And I feel that way about a lot of words about curator and about historian, that kind of thing. I feel that I can't really call myself that, because I'm 18. And I haven't done much like, academic study and that kind of thing. But

definitely through this project, it's been quite eye opening as to what counts as research. When I think about objects and the role that I play in Pres Party, I often see myself less as a researcher of those objects, and more as an interpreter of what those mean to other people, what those mean to me and how we're going to communicate our understanding of things to the public, and encourage their own personal understandings as well.

**Abigail Harrison Moore** 09:00

I want to pick up on that really key idea about bringing yourself to the process and bringing yourself to objects. And I wondered if either of you would be willing to talk a little bit more about how you came to the Preservative Party and your experience, your story before the Preservative Party and how you think your story has fed into the work you do with objects in the museum?

**Bobby** 09:24

Before I came to Pres Party, I'd done quite a lot of museum stuff independently and in a different group. I started interacting with museums properly during lockdown with a cool video project called Museum from Home. And then with the Ancient House Teenage History Club in Norfolk via zoom. So I had a bit of experience. But when I came to Pres Party, I think it was so different to anything that I'd ever done. But it just felt completely correct. I love Pres Party. Pres Party is the place in the world where I feel the happiest and where I feel the safest. It's really, really cool. And I think there's no way for me now to do a project where I don't have the same level of passion that I do for things I do in Pres Party, and feel as excited and as happy to do it. I think Pres Party teaches you that you bring your whole self to a project. And on the day, your whole self might not be what it is the week after, you might have had a bit of a rough day, and you aren't contributing what you thought you might contribute. But it doesn't matter. Because at the end of the day, you're still gonna get that brilliant project because everybody in there cares so much about what you're doing. And you care so much about what you're doing, that it just generates amazing things.

**Abigail Harrison Moore** 10:49

I've learnt a lot from both of you. But Rahesa we've spent, because you're a mentor on this project, and this is the first time that you've been a paid mentor as part of the Preservative Party, although you do freelance work elsewhere. And we've talked a lot about your background, what you bring to that, could you tell us a little bit more about how you ended up doing this sort of work and having this amazing experience at the moment where you're doing lots of interesting projects that are around art and identity and museums.

**Rahesa** 11:21

Just a little bit of background on me, the area that I grew up in didn't have a museum, didn't have a gallery, it was quite small, pretty working class, and very conservative. I didn't think that I had any right to be in a museum group. Similarly to what Bobby said earlier about how not having enough qualifications or not coming from the right places or not looking a certain way, I always felt like I wouldn't be welcomed. Even when I would go to a museum and I would see something that should resonate with me, for example, seeing something that was LGBT or seeing something that was South Asian, I could tell that it wasn't coming from people who were being displayed on these exhibitions.

**Abigail Harrison Moore** 12:03

So we're thinking about your background, and how you came to this. As you said, you hadn't seen yourself represented. How did you find yours? How did you find how did you access any of this? How did you find the Preservative Party?

**Rahesa** 12:20

So, Okay, in 2021, I did a project called, it was still like very much in the midst of lockdown. The first part of it was started on Zoom. But then we actually ended up meeting in person but we had to keep distance and we had to wear masks and there was like, like a hand sanitiser booth at every table. And I did a project called The My House Project. And that was with Harewood House, an organisation called The Geraldine Connor Foundation. And they're a charity and they help young people get access into arts that wouldn't usually, that they usually wouldn't have access to and specifically when people from disadvantaged areas and I qualified. So I participated in this project and the project was very vague because it was a creative project. And we were given a bursary to kind of do what we wanted. And from there I went, I had access to the people at Harewood House and I had access to the people at The Geraldine Connor Foundation, they looked around for other museum gallery groups, and the main one that they could find in Leeds was a group called the Preservative Party at Leeds City Museum.

**Abigail Harrison Moore** 13:31

So working with the Preservative Party, we talk quite a lot as a group about the barriers to participation, what might have stopped us in the past doing this, but what enables you to feel able to participate. And it's not just about museums, it's about all sorts of institutions more broadly, we've talked a lot together about universities, as spaces that feel non accessible to you and to other members of the group. Have you encountered any barriers to your participation, either actively or passively and how you think we can minimise the impact of these?

**Rahesa** 14:10

So, I'd probably say lack of qualifications is a big thing. I didn't think I could get a job or even volunteering position in a museum without having a degree, which I don't have. Unfortunately, I did. I was really anxious to come to University of Leeds for the first time to even come to Helix for the first time. I was quite terrified. I was afraid, it sounds almost kind of big headed, because like I'm afraid people are looking at me, but then I realised that it's not about, it's not about me, but it is about me at the same time, that kind of fear of judgement. And you know, a lot of that was in my head. Some of it might have been real. You know, at the age of 18 when a lot of people in this country go to university and have the time of their lives or at least act like they're having the time of their lives, I went through umm, I experienced a period of homelessness. I didn't have a place to go, I didn't have a place to sleep, no water, no food, all that stuff that you hear about, when you hear about what people who have experienced homelessness go through. And when you're, when you're in that position, you kind of I was gonna say when you're in that position in society, but in that moment, I didn't feel like I was a part of society, I felt very like on the outskirts, I felt like surplus. I felt very, I didn't feel like a like a human being anymore. When you don't feel like a person anymore, that that drive that you have, that sort of like dreams and goals and aspirations kind of goes out the window, when you're that hungry, or when you're that thirsty, or when you haven't slept for God knows how long, you're not really thinking about museums and galleries and all that kind of stuff. Even though I had a passion for it when I was younger,

I was constantly in survival mode. When I got out of that homelessness situation, when I was able to pull myself out of that it didn't stop there, the problems got a little bit worse. So that was a bit of a barrier. Well it was quite a significant barrier. Because I think I just convinced myself that if I'd told people about the experiences that I'd been through, or like what I was doing, when other people were going to university during that time, they'd laugh at me or they'd make judgments about me, or they'd assume things about me that weren't real. So that was that was a really big thing. I didn't have my GCSEs either, I'd left college, I couldn't stay. There was the academic side of it all, but then there was also just the psychological aftermath of experiencing something as severe and as dehumanising as homelessness. That was a big one for me, but I know that's very specific. It's not necessarily a thing that a lot of people go through. But it's part of my story. And I did want to mention that, just in case there's someone listening that may have experienced something similar and may have similar interests, but think that they don't have a role in sort of the humanitarian museum world.

**Abigail Harrison Moore 17:15**

How do you think projects that start with the ambition to enable participation from people who haven't seen themselves, as you say, reflected, given opportunities, how for you has this sort of project just started to help you find a way to your future and what you want to do and supported you to get there?

**Rahesa 17:39**

I think first and foremost, not judging, that was a good, that was a good place to start, not making those assumptions, assumptions about me. And obviously just listening to my story. And also enabling a safe space enough for me to want to share those stories, I never once felt like I'd be mocked or laughed out in Preservative Party. And Jordan, Esther and all of the other members, including Bobby have kind of made me feel safe. I never have, you know, once felt like, for example, there's a person in our group who has a PhD, and I've never once felt like I couldn't speak to her just because I did not have a PhD. So that initial sort of the creating of the safe space, that was a huge part for me. And then also, after that, just the connections, being able to speak to people from other galleries and other museums and other young people who work in similar spaces. That opened up a lot for me as well.

**Abigail Harrison Moore 18:36**

I'm going to pick upon on that, because I think with Esther and Jordan in our first episode, we talked a lot about the power of trust, and how important trust is to the work of the Preservative Party to but more broadly to projects that are encouraging you to feel that you can participate. Bobby could you, would you be happy to talk a little bit more about trust and how you see that operates within the Preservative Party and within your work?

**Bobby 19:03**

I think trust in Pres Party kind of operates in the idea that nothing's expected from us when we get there. I've had very, very different experience to Rahesa of kind of life thus far, in that I feel like my life has been very rigidly defined by my academic achievement. And I remember the first time I came to Pres Party, I didn't finish something in the session, I said to Jordan, oh, I'll just I'll get that done for next week, I'll bring that back to you. And I remember him stopping me and going, you don't have homework from an extracurricular group, that's not what this is. And it was trusting that in that time period, we'd manage to get it done. Like there's never been any, Oh, this isn't going to happen because you've not

worked hard enough. We've always pulled it off, because they have complete trust that we're all going to be able to do it. No matter how we operate, because we all work in different ways. But they know that there's going to be a blend, and they know it's going to all come together. They never go, that's a stupid suggestion. And they never go, that's not going to work as a project, everything is taken exactly as seriously as the person suggesting it feels it should be taken. And I think it's so important in making people feel included, that there's no expectation that they should be coming up with the next world changing idea. And there's also no expectation that they need to be coming up with, like the tiny thing that's going to make everything perfect. It's what you want to contribute, when you want to contribute. And what needs to be said, is said and done.

**Abigail Harrison Moore 20:49**

I'm very aware that I came into the group as this sort of strange being, this professor who'd suggested this project to Esther years ago. And then you were the lucky group that I came to meet on January the 1st last year and came and worked with you. And we've had to think, and you've taught me a huge amount about how we do participatory research, how trust matters, how our stories are important. I wondered if you could talk a little bit about how researchers can learn from this and how we should learn from you, about how we do these sorts of projects? Because participatory research is everywhere at the moment, everybody's talking about it. And yet, what you've taught me is it's hard. It's brilliant. It takes an awful lot. What would you know, if you were talking to me again, if you've met me again, what would be your advice to me as researcher coming into the space, coming into your space and working with you about how we do this sort of research together?

**Bobby 21:58**

Please don't think that it's going to look like the way you think it should look, or the way that you've seen it look for other people, because the brilliance of participatory research is that it's different for everybody. Because everybody's style of participation, and everybody's contribution is something completely different. I think one of the things I've said about Pres Party is I love it, because nobody at Pres Party expects me to be really clever all the time. And I'd like to say to academics and academic researchers, I know it feels like your job. But you don't have to be clever all the time. You can have a day where you're just not that bothered. That's the great thing about participatory action research. We'll pick it up for you. We can help. It doesn't all have to be you. Lots of brains are sometimes better than one very tired, overworked brain.

**Rahesa 22:55**

Yeah I think for a lot of people participatory research everyone's talking about it's like the new fad, I guess you could say in the museum and gallery world, or the curator exhibition world. A lot of people are trying to tick off a box that because they've seen it happen before they want to be part of the movement. So they desperately want to tick off a box. However, they're not trusting enough in the people around them to make to make those decisions, to do the thing that that participatory research does, which is give everyone a voice, give everyone a chance to pick up the slack of other people, work in their own way. You've got this one person who just wants to put the label of participatory research but doesn't actually want to do it. So I think that would be like my main, I'm not even sure if that's advice or just a bit of commentary on what I've observed. But yeah, do it if you if you want to do it not because you've seen it.

**Abigail Harrison Moore 23:51**

This episode was called the Preservative Party and Me and I want to say a massive thank you to you both because we've got a real keen sense of of you, but also of the learning process that we've gone through and you both have taught me so much, and I hope I will never be a researcher who ever goes anywhere and tries to be clever, because actually it's just brilliant just being with you and learning with you. And that's certainly been my learning from working with the Preservative Party, but also from today's episode. So thank you very much. Thanks for joining us on this episode of the Whose Power? podcast which was presented by me Abigail Harrison Moore in collaboration with Leeds City Museum and the Preservative Party. Music is by Tae, and production and editing is by Chris Garrington and Krissie Brighty-Glover at Research Podcasts. Funding comes from the Arts and Humanities Research Council Fellowship Scheme. If you've got a question, or a comment about what you've heard in this episode, you can find the Preservative Party on X @presparty. We'd love to hear from you.