Comments from Laurence Publicover on *Rethinking Migration*

Book Launch, Wills Memorial Building, March 2025

My research frequently involves thinking about the relations between humans and oceans, including the history of seafaring, and Bridget has long insisted that I am, for this reason, someone who works on migration and mobility; but contributing towards this book felt like the proving ground for that claim. In writing a chapter for the section of the book entitled 'Multiple Mobilities', I drew on my existing interest both in voyages and shipboard cultures and in scholarship that thinks about human agency in the context of nonhuman agencies: a body of work that had fed into my work in other academic fields, in particular work on Shakespearean tragedy.

In *Rethinking Migration*, I was, along with the two other authors in the section, thinking about nonhuman agency in a different context. To quote Bridget's introduction to the book: a tendency in academic and policy circles to treat separately the movement of humans and nonhumans 'means our understanding […] is often highly partial and distorted, and we misread patterns and miss crucial interconnections'.

Our three chapters sought to understand such connections. Lucy Donkin, an art historian, wrote about what she calls 'portable places': specifically, the movement, across a broad European network, during the late medieval and early modern period, of soil from a particular cemetery in Rome.

María Paula Escobar Tello, a human geographer who works in Bristol's Vet School, wrote about cow passports, examining (to quote her directly) 'two policies that seek to control the movement of animals and what their bodies give movement to, such as disease and bacteria'.

Drawing on research I'd undertaken towards a new play staged in Bristol and London in 2022 about the possible performance of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* off the coast of Sierra Leone in 1607, I wrote a piece on the early years of the English East India Company, looking at the effects of ocean currents, spices, dogs, rats, shipworm, and storms on its early voyages, and asking how attending to these nonhuman agents might mean revising our understanding of the early history of English activity in the Indian Ocean.

I've just returned, a little bleary-eyed and broken-voiced, from a Shakespeare conference, and I don't want to downplay the huge pleasure I take in being around scholars with similar passions and knowledge bases: there is value in the intensity with which specialists in my field can discuss, in painstaking detail, the significance of a single metaphor in *Measure for Measure*. I am very happy to spend half an hour debating whether Edgar comes up through a trapdoor in *King Lear*'s second storm scene, and I would want to defend the value of this kind of scholarship.

But working with MMB over the past few years has also opened my eyes to the value of looking left and right, of drawing back and asking how my specialised knowledge, or theoretical interests, can be brought to bear on the present, or put into dialogue with other

approaches and fields of knowledge. In our section introduction, Lucy, María Paula and I had around 1500 words to answer the question: How is human mobility shaped by nonhuman mobility? What, we needed to decide, were the broad brushstrokes we needed to work with? What were the overlaps between the theories and structures of thought that the three of us had been working with across our distinct areas of expertise?

It was difficult, but also immensely rewarding as an opportunity to take stock of what I'd been thinking about for the past few years and to consider why it might matter not only to specialists in my two fields, Shakespeare studies and oceanic studies, but also to geographers, historians, migration scholars – and to learn from my co-authors, who were asking themselves the same questions. The academic independence often associated with the humanities – the idea that we're all our own little research centres – is a wonderful thing, but I've also found myself, in recent years, relishing the opportunity to write towards particular topics – as in this volume – and to co-author with collaborators whose vocabularies and intellectual frameworks differ from mine. It keeps me learning; and that, I think, makes me a better scholar, but also – or especially – a better teacher, as it puts me back into the position of the student: eager, curious, and just a little bit terrified at how much I have yet to learn. This feels like a good place to be.

I also found that working on the book prepared me for a new role I took on this academic year: coordinating the dissertation for the MA in Environmental Humanities, based at a Centre within the Faculty of Arts with which MMB continues to work closely. The students on this programme want to grapple with urgent issues, and to move across disciplines to gain purchase on those issues. They are anything but parochial.

Thanks to working on this book, I feel better placed to support those students: to help them navigate across disciplines and methodologies, and to think about how scholarly pursuits and disputes resonate with the world beyond the academy; but also to make the case for the value of historical research in thinking through our present predicament. This is the direction in which the academy appears to be heading, owing to the priorities of our students, and also those of funding bodies, and it's enormously helpful to have research institutes like MMB that help cultivate this style of thinking and doing.