



How can we Engage in Conditions of Precarity?

**SPECIAL COLLECTION:
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EASTERN EUROPEAN
LANGUAGES**

MARIA BROCK



ABSTRACT

I want to encourage academics to conceptualize our work as a series of social relationships. This involves envisioning a model that goes beyond the idea of academic “impact” as a series of mutually beneficial and, crucially, measurable transactions and towards a new definition of the term as the transformative effect of personal encounters. This is a good time to ask these questions: the role of scholarly work is changing and there is renewed interest in the meanings of impact beyond citation indices, but the pressure to publish is still growing and more temporary forms of employment and fragmented relationships with institutions remain a widespread reality. In the words of Mohira Suyarkulova: “How can we engage in a more responsible intellectual labour under the conditions of permanent crises and precarity?”

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Maria Brock

brock.maria@gmail.com

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As a psychosocial scholar, I initially felt that I should be theoretically equipped to think about “subjects, subjectivities, and intersubjectivities” (one of the prompts for discussion at the *Slavic Studies Goes Public* workshop at the University of St Andrews). While my theoretical toolbox has made me aware of the impossibilities of fully “knowing thyself” or one’s entanglements, I nonetheless want to encourage academics to conceptualize our work as a series of social relationships. This involves envisioning a model that goes beyond the idea of academic “impact” as a series of mutually beneficial and, crucially, measurable transactions and towards a new definition of the term as the transformative effect of personal encounters. This is a good time to ask these questions: the role of scholarly work is changing and there is renewed interest in the meanings of impact beyond citation indices, but the pressure to publish is still growing and temporary forms of employment and fragmented relationships with institutions remain a widespread reality. In the words of *Mohira Suyarkulova*: “How can we engage in a more responsible intellectual labour under the conditions of permanent crises and precarity?”

All academic work is collaborative, informed by previous thoughts, conversations, and feedback given in public or private; even our fears and hopes about what we can or should do in our work are modelled on the experiences of others. I have traditionally felt most comfortable working in collaboration *with* other researchers on broadly the same career trajectory, probably because these were the most horizontal relationships I had. But perhaps I should be more suspicious of that which makes me too comfortable? After all, if I look closer, I see that even this imagined quasi-utopia of all-collaboration-no-exploitation is still based on differential access to materials, funding, and even language. It also does not resolve the issue of what happens when making others the subject of our research. While postgraduate students in the social sciences and the humanities are usually aware of the value of reflexivity, much less attention is paid to encouraging more dialogic forms of research.

Some recent fieldwork I conducted on representations of non-heteronormative sexualities in Russia involved focus groups with Russians from a variety of backgrounds as well as conversations with local LGBTQ+ activists. The focus group participants expressed their pleasure after the sessions—not only in response to having been remunerated for their time, but also because the discussions were light-hearted and centred on audience perceptions of pop culture. One of the activists I spoke to, however, started our conversation by asking why they should be talking to me, a researcher based at a western institution. They had clearly asked the question many times before and had resigned themselves to the unidirectional nature of this type of relationship, using such an introduction mostly as a way of making me aware of recurrent tensions. In fact, this question was followed by a very lengthy and intellectually generous discussion. Yet, while I offered some assurances at the time, the activist’s question has haunted me since.



A courtyard in Saint Petersburg.
Photo by the author.

There is always the danger that what may have been a “useful” or valuable encounter for the researcher might represent, at best, a time commitment and, at worst, a retraumatizing experience for the research subject. Precarious working conditions can further inhibit the ability to retain and deepen just-established relationships, as for many of us project-based work means a fast turnover from one role to another, research agendas set by others, and general preoccupation with the immediate challenges of securing a livelihood. For those scholars who find themselves in the dual role of researcher and activist, the weight of managing two different professional personas and pursuing at times conflicting aims can lead to alienation, if not burnout. An added difficulty is the specific (dis)orientation of communicating research about the old “second” or “third” worlds in western contexts, where old dichotomies are never far away even as we try to transcend them and think of borders as porous and moving.

Perhaps one way to go on is to insist on the value of stories, and of giving a platform to those who would perhaps not have access to one otherwise. Insisting that storytelling can be a political act, *Jeanette Winterson* has written: “Everything starts as a story we tell ourselves about ourselves.” It is particularly those narratives that run counter to hegemonic ideas and understandings, she argues, that can trigger political change. As long as we stay capable of telling different stories about our own and other lives, utopian imaginings remain alive.

For another project, I wrote about memories of East Germany, inviting interview participants to bring objects that held a connection to their lives in the GDR, and to use those objects as anchors for their narratives. I was in no financial position to provide payment and simply offered the participants a lot of freedom over where their narratives might take them. One of the interviewees wrote me a long message afterwards saying she felt validated and gratified that her story was of value to someone, while another said she finally felt heard. This is not, however, meant to be an account of a researcher finding the key to more horizontal forms of research. Much of the trust established between myself and the participants was due to my own East German origins and the fact that, while there was sadness and a sense of loss, none of these narratives could qualify as traumatic.

And yet I believe there must be ways of pursuing the ambitions of researchers while affording subjects the opportunity to give accounts of themselves. Can the recounting of stories be empowering, even if these stories contain elements of trauma, or if participants are still experiencing difficult circumstances? As a possible resolution to the dilemma I faced in St Petersburg, I recently produced a pro bono translation of a long text by the activist in order to help them find a readership in an English-language publication. However, on reflection I feel this too presents a very literal understanding of the researcher–researched relationship, whereby I merely hoped to repay a debt. So here I am, back to the questions I asked at the beginning. But perhaps there is no need for a story told to end well. Maybe a story told does not need to end at all, but can serve as a starting point for other stories to be recounted in the future.

AUTHOR AFFILIATION

Maria Brock

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