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Motion. Stop.: Responding to Crises Compounded

Siobhán McGuirk

Abstract

Over the course of the Global Gender and Cultures of Equality project (GlobalGRACE, 2017-2021), researchers around the world exchanged postcards, sharing glimpses of their work. As the Coronavirus pandemic and an abrupt funding cut transformed the form and scope of the project, the postcards took on new meaning. *Motion. Stop.* was made as the team awaited news about the future of the project. It is a video poem about the connecting threads that form through transnational collaboration.

[Please see HTML version for accompanying video content](#)

Crisis mode

In April 2018, I joined the four-year research project Global Gender and Cultures of Equality (GlobalGRACE, 2017-2021) as a postdoctoral Early Career Researcher. GlobalGRACE comprises six teams in six countries, using creative methods to research and respond to gender and intersecting inequalities (GlobalGRACE, 2018). The focus of my work has been curatorial, working collaboratively with colleagues in Bangladesh, Brazil, Mexico, the Philippines and South Africa to create materials for a series of exhibitions, starting with a launch event in London 2018 ([Exchanging Cultures of Equality](#), 2018) and scheduled to close in 2021 with a final exhibition travelling between partner sites.

Like so many plans made for 2020/2021, ours were transformed by the global Coronavirus pandemic. As we continued working not as usual, our local contexts became more perilous, painful and taxing, particularly for our interlocutors. The nature of our academic work, and the way we approached it, shifted accordingly: data collection secondary, at best, to supporting the communities with and in which we worked; supporting each other through loss, grief, isolation, new demands on our time.

GlobalGRACE was funded by UK Research and Innovation's Global Challenge Research Fund under the rubric of "doing development differently". The pandemic forced a serious reconsideration of what the term, an erstwhile NGO buzzphrase (cf. Honig and Gulrajani, 2018), might really mean. With "differently" a circumstantial given, I wondered against what "metrics" funders would now measure our "outputs" and "impact". Redistribution of resources in

response to local needs? The urgency and more deeply political hues of our writing, performances, poetry, and art? That we diligently published even while so many perished?

In the end, the only metric that counted was money. As the UK government's Foreign Aid cuts (Merrick, 2020) trickled down to UKRI grant withdrawals (Baker, 2021), our funding was abruptly cut. One enraged colleague rightly said the move was a betrayal. Yet it fit the capitalist, colonial structures in which we work—now flexing anew with vaccine nationalism, patent protectionism and crisis corruption. "Differently" meant more of the same.

Curation mode

How could we respond to such crises, compounded? My colleagues and I have been doing so in suitably creative, generous, ways, collectively determined to bridge gaping deficits, to see promises through. Making sacrifices, personal and professional, where we can. We are yet to conclude—to monitor, evaluate and report—what the consequences will be.

While we awaited confirmation of our precise fate—between "termination" and the euphemistic "reprofiling"—I have continued to work curatorially, fulfilling a request that I had also asked of GlobalGRACE colleagues earlier this year: to create and send postcards to each other—an intimate expression in material culture of the distances that separate, and the exchanges that connect us.

We have used postcards, objects only ostensibly mundane, since the project began (McGuirk, 2020). They have become a curatorial device and provided framing for communiqués from the field (GlobalGRACE, 2018), used both as an exhibition motif and a research method. Postcards make visible the processes of transnational interpersonal communication that are central to our work. They show the value of glimpses: insights incomplete, limited by time and space. As Gugganig and Schor explain, they are "popular exactly because of their enmeshed functions as collectable, ritual communication, and (visual) gift exchange, making them objects entangled in relationships" (2020, pp.691).

Acknowledging, too, the historical function served by picture postcards in colonial expansion, in our own experiments with postcards we have sought to challenge the exoticizing gazes still too often transmitted alongside the declaration 'Wish you were here!' The postcards we have made and sent have been both formative and representative of the ways in which transnational exchange has woven our work—across disparate sites, on differently oriented projects—together. They have carried and anchored the connecting threads that years of collaboration have spun: threads intellectual and intimate, professional and personal.

Following the feminist praxis that undergirds GlobalGRACE, my curatorial approach has been to make explicit the ways in which these connections—as well as our individual circumstances and alongside site-specific data collection and independent research—have shaped our analyses. The set of postcards I made for colleagues feature photographs taken at a Rio de Janeiro

conference centre in May 2019, the last time we were all together. That morning, before a day heavy with administrative meetings and academic presentations, we ducked and weaved around each other, tying and untying our bodies in knots, eyes closed, following instructions from colleagues. Their demonstration of play as a tool for political education also bridged distances between us.

I punched holes in the postcards so that they would fit into binders I had gifted colleagues when we first met, a functional call back to a different time. I made additional, smaller holes so I could thread a length of twine through each card before sending, creating a visual echo of the matrix of red wire I affixed to the ceiling of our first exhibition together—there, too, an aesthetic nod to processes of communication and connections forged.



Figure 1: Postcards and crossed wires at Exchanging Cultures of Equality (2018)

I wrote, stamped, and sent the postcards, photographing as I went, still frames befitting a contemplative, uncertain moment, but taken in anticipation of a more animated time to come. I wrote the poem later, as I pieced together the unarticulated thoughts and feelings I saw reflected in a staccato moving image.

The resultant video poem is, like the postcards it depicts, written to my colleagues. But it is sent outwards-facing, offering a passing glimpse into the intellectual, affective and creative

possibilities to be found in transnational collaborative research—even amidst stop-start moments of crisis.

Motion. Stop.

From the very beginning, we have sent postcards

Shared different sorts of writing

The personal as political

A creative method

An exhibitionary device

Images chosen

Forms shaped

Gifts exchanged

This collaboration forges bonds

Echoes of conversations past weave new connecting threads

Sometimes wires crossed

Sometimes knots joyously untangled

Laughter is not lost in translation

This material culture will cross oceans and seas, shuffle through sorting places, fly wrapped in bundles, amid a thousand other notes

Meanwhile, we stay put

Locked down

In contact, not in touch

These are sentiments sent at social distance

Stamped with affection

Edges softened en route

Cardboard challenges to the ivory tower:

impact measured on landing

Now, purse strings severed, we gather our thoughts

Put affairs in order

Sign off

Send

See you, post-haste

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