

Living precariously and overcoming the odds

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Abstract

In this gallery contributors took the opportunity to reflect on how different kinds of precarity have made their careers different. Through five contributions (two full portraits and three miniatures), it touches upon a wide array of themes, including: economic precarity in the academic labour market (its embeddedness and its effects), motherhood and the penalty it inflicts on academic workers, the marginalised voice of mothers in the University, depression, long-term illnesses, toxic workplaces, and writing from the margins of academia. Together, they do not exhaust the different forms of precarity one may experience, but they give us a rich insight into the lived experience of five authors. For some, it is about coming to terms with their struggles and warn others, for others, it is about imagining how things could be different, and inviting and acting towards transformation.

Contributors to this gallery reflect on how different kinds of precarity have made their careers different. The image that guided its assembling is one of someone being slowed down by something encumbering them. It reminded me that I have often visited exhibitions carrying a suitcase, trying to squeeze-in one last visit before heading to an airport. I have found myself wheeling or dragging one when the fee for the cloakroom was too expensive for my student wallet, or when the lockers were too small. I have also been plainly refused entry, when security measures meant that no one with any sort of baggage could be let in. When I have been lucky to make it through the door and be let inside, I have met the gaze of suspicion of the security guards, and accepted the heightened awareness that here, I am not simply someone who loves museums and exhibitions; I am a tourist, and one to be possibly apprehensive of. The six contributors who made the portraits featured in this gallery may share similar feelings in their professional life – whether they feel that they should not be here (or are made to feel like that), or whether they are encumbered by something slowing them, preventing their progression (in all the different meanings of the word) and reducing their possibility of enjoyment.

We start with a miniature portrait by Emily Yarrow, who discusses candidly her early career experience as a precariously employed academic. Her focus is the *academic precariat* – the numerous colleagues employed on short-term contracts, hourly contracts, or exploitative contracts, for who the value of their labour is not always recognised, but without who university activities would be grounded to a halt. Emily calls this reality ‘gig-academia’, which she sees as a short-termist way of organising academic labour which endangers the future of the profession and put an enormous strain on its aspiring members. Through her accounts, she makes visible the tensions between survival and anxiety, and career development and scholarly engagement. There is no easy fix for this system of exploitation sedimented over the years, but Emily’s text is a reminder that for those of us who can, ‘we have a moral responsibility to support our precariously employed colleagues of whom there are many’. And that to be kind to oneself and to others is a good start, whatever we manage (or not) to achieve in the fight against exploitation. In a similar vein, Gabriella Kiss uses the image of the game of the sack race to describe her experience of academia. It may be fun for a child to try to run with their legs in a sack, but for the grown-up, she says, ‘It’s not a funny game, it is a real race, but I have a handicap’. Gabriella opens a window into a context and system that will be foreign to many readers, but her articulation of the relationship between the specific patriarchal culture of post-socialist Hungary with the experience of being a female academic and a mother will sadly sound too familiar. Her

analysis may stem from a specific context, but the themes discussed are universal: women bearing the responsibility of parenthood disproportionately; being unable to progress as quickly as male colleagues; or women with children suffering various forms of discrimination for being a woman, and for having children. Gabriella recounts how her professional survival has required accepting a number of trade-offs, or balancing acts: balancing the demands of family and career, balancing the need to pursue individual agendas and academic ‘service’, and balancing doing meaningful but more demanding work with simply getting the work done. It is the awareness of those trade-offs that helped her keeping a sense of focus and direction.

Motherhood is also the central theme in Chrisavgi Sklaveniti’s text, which offers us a Bakhtinian dialogical analysis foregrounding the hidden and marginalised voice of mothers. The position of working mothers in society, she says, ‘is always inferior, and (...) always causes us anxiety’. This anxiety, she adds, ‘is what unites us in the face of patriarchy, together with feelings of underestimation and underachievement’. The stories she presents aim to raise awareness about what motherhood feels for working mothers in academia; it is not a depiction of how working mothers appear in the academic world, but of how the world appears to working mothers. Those stories would be utterly depressing and discouraging if Chrisavgi did not follow with an attempt to imagine what it would mean to overcome patriarchy in terms of cultural norms, work practices, and public policies. For example, she suggests that we need to appreciate that motherhood is not a uniform experience, and that the different stages of child development all pose specific challenges for the possibilities of managing work and motherhood. She suggests that acknowledging the father’s role in relation to parenthood would be a decisive step towards modifying societal expectations about gender equality. Chrisavgi also addresses the blatant anomaly made visible by the Covid-19 pandemic: the disjuncture between current work arrangements and the possibilities offered by technology to positively restructure and reorganise work.

Garance Marechal takes us into a different territory with a portrait that is by her own description, reminiscent of Francis Bacon’s visceral paintings. It is a rich and poignant account of the struggles of her academic career and trajectory, dealing with depression, various health problems, and years later a formal diagnosis of multiple sclerosis. It is a tale of struggle, of hardship, but also of resilience, courage, and temerity. It is a tale that may bring tears, but also admiration and humility in the face of adversity. In my correspondence with Garance, she told me how writing this text stirred painful and difficult emotions. It makes me feeling even more grateful and privileged that we are able to read it. There is no happy ending here, but a sense of perspective:

There isn’t any resolution. My long struggle with acceptance is still ongoing, and layers of impairment never fully dissolve. They elude the will and my determination. Both hopelessly and expectantly, I am still trying to find ways of healing in the midst of my daily encounters with a rebellious, evasive mind and body.

As in Samuel Beckett’s ‘Waiting for Godot’ from which she takes inspiration, Garance’s tale can be read as a cautionary one. The play’s character Vladimir and Estragon are just like us. In the academic world of deferred and uncertain gratification, how often are we putting our life on hold for something that will never come?

In the second miniature portrait of this galley, Ann Armstrong reaches a similar conclusion, but from a different starting point. A one-sentence summary of her text could be: academia is a harsh place, and it does not get better. She discusses her journey, portraying herself as, ‘someone who

was naïve throughout her journey from being a doctoral student to taking early retirement', and who never really overcame the shock of encountering the toxic aspects of academia. Her account features vivid and angering descriptions, healing poetry, but also some useful advice. One may never be entirely able to avoid the most dysfunctional and toxic aspects of life in the University, but one can at least be mentally prepared for it.

The final portrait and third miniature is Molly Hand's invitation to problematise the fact that the majority of academic scholarship is produced and published by a privileged minority – in the US context she writes from, those on the tenure track – and to reflect on what is lost in this process. Molly recounts her own career story, occupying different positions in government and outside of academia, and still trying to maintain a research agenda and a rich publication profile. The title 'Why even bother?' takes its cue from the general attitude Molly has faced as an independent scholar – someone who does not have to write and to publish scholarly work as part of their job, but who nevertheless wants to. She has pursued what she calls 'a practice of defiance', which consists in, 'persisting in doing the work that was important to me, continuing the research and writing and editing and publishing I'd been trained to do and had no desire to leave behind when I started working full-time outside the academy'. Molly makes it clear that it has not always been easy. Here, as we exit the gallery, the tone is different though: defiant, joyful and seditious. Her conclusion is an invitation to democratise the production of knowledge and tear down walls. In an era where we assess the value of knowledge based on its 'impact', an apt image is the one of knowledge being like a keg of powder, and there is only one thing to do with it: fire it up!