

Excursions

Volume 10, Issue 1 (2020) | Chaos



Cover photo: Unbenannt #3 by Felix Spiske | Photo by [Markus Spiske](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Essays: Research in Times of Chaos

Heather McKnight
The Storm: Processing Contradictions

www.excursions-journal.org.uk

The Storm: Processing Contradictions

Heather McKnight

University of Sussex

29 April 2020, 23 days into lockdown, a moderate storm hit Brighton Beach. I threw on wellies, raincoat and rushed outside to a virtually empty promenade, relishing every moment of stumbling along not having to watch my distance, a curious security as it hurled stones across the walkway. Strange dark horizons brought a brief sense of agency and exit, left me haunted with its absence. When the sun came, the streets filled again with people (= danger, stay at home, stay safe). 5 May, I post the video online: “can we bring back the storm?” I ask, how stupid, it never left.

The world adapting... must tech-up and accelerate into a blur of zoom/ skype calls, days slip away silently collapsing into one. Sitting to write, lost in the news, reading as if from another world. Tempting to become tethered to uncertainty, to forget how real this all is. The moment of paralysing pointlessness, revealing my own privilege that underpins structural oppression; inertia of such thinking damages self and society. Instead, breathe, exist in contradiction. Remember: there are acts of resistance that we can engage in, we can start small and build, donate, march if you can, connect with your network, be flexible, listen, write... However: balance this against staying safe, caring for your household, not missing deadlines, not getting angry, not over-sharing. Fight the impossible, stay strong and succeed, the future is here, but we are all about to die with the planet we have destroyed...? Lost again in the rain...

...back to work, not research, online support shifts and the other horror of the benefits system, this time looking in from the outside. 'Helping' with impenetrable forms. Field contradicting messages seek alternatives to requests for impossible documentation. Dense administration, less accessible, more intrusive, more automated, less human(e). Designed to discriminate. Broken exclusionary procedures that ultimately deny people access to fundamental needs of housing and food, even during pandemics. How does writing a niche academic article or PhD most likely no one will read help this? I ask hopelessly.

In isolation, research is thrown into a place intensely important due to the pressure to complete and contribute, to fulfil expectations and promises, and at once wildly insignificant and selfish. Working an article on order out of chaos seems like a bizarre joke, as did working on the 'future' of universities, despite fantastic work happening in unions, networks, and protests. Each time I press send on an email I feel like crying – guilt/ inertia/ rage/ fear. What have I done instead of doing something else?

Then I close my eyes and I am running to Brighton Beach in the lashing rain again, are we in the eye of the storm or in the midst of it? Of course, the answer is both, and the storm is fractured, riddled with privilege and structural and physical violence. We can weather it if we have money, protective clothing, if we have food and shelter, if we are not the subjects of brutal racist attacks, or victims of climate crisis rooted in colonialism, or other violent structural exclusions. Grasping at hope I listen, realising that we can become the storm, we are the storm; the "paths in the midst of collapse are layable, right through the middle".¹ They start inside, begin with what we do, push and move against oppression: listen, speak-up, care, act, resist, critique, repeat, listen... and try to forge a collective path in this cycle.

¹ Bloch, Ernst (2009). *Heritage of Our Times* (1 edition). Cambridge: Polity Press. p. 8.