Slavic Studies Goes Public: Who? What? Why? Where? When?

VICTORIA DONOVAN

JAMES RANN (iD)

DARYA TSYMBALYUK (iD)

Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article

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ABSTRACT

Public engagement, impact, and knowledge exchange are concepts that today rank highly on research agendas across the UK. Yet the discussion of what constitutes engagement, on the politics and practicalities of building collaborations with non-academic partners, and on the ethics of conducting such work are still at their very earliest stages. Emerging from a British Academy-funded workshop, "Slavic Studies Goes Public: Creating an ECR Network in the Public Humanities," this series of essays and critical-creative works — collaborations at the boundary of academic writing and artistic practice — explores what we see as some of the most important questions relating to public engagement in our field. What institutional factors and politics inform and determine the "who" of our public engagement work? How can the us/them dichotomy be rethought and with it the idea of "giving voice" to "voiceless" communities? How can those leading projects be sure that the legacy or change is desired by or necessary for the communities engaged? When does engagement end? When should it never have begun? Participants at the workshop responded to these questions in six reflective essays and three critical-creative collaborations. Rather than offering definitive answers, we hope that the workshop and this series will form a point of departure, engendering further conversations, collaborations, and creativity around Modern Languages and engagement.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Victoria Donovan

University of St Andrews, GB

vsd2@st-andrews.ac.uk

This series was organized by Victoria Donovan, James Rann, and Darya Tsymbalyuk. It emerges from a British Academy-funded workshop "Slavic Studies Goes Public: Creating an ECR Network for the Public Humanities" that took place at the University of St Andrews on 23–24 January 2020.

VICTORIA DONOVAN, SLAVIC STUDIES GOES PUBLIC: WHO? WHAT? WHY? WHERE? WHEN?

It was on Day Two of our *Slavic Studies Goes Public* workshop, under the watchful eyes of the taxidermized residents of the Bell Pettigrew Museum of Natural History, as we stamped our feet and clicked our fingers in time to Cayenna Ponchione-Bailey's remarkable keynote on "Socialities in Music-Making", that I felt confident our event had been a success. Bringing twenty-one academics, artists, and activists from Canada, the UK, Ukraine, the USA, and Russia to a coastal town in rural Fife to reflect on the ideologies, ideals, and ambitions that inform work with public audiences was a logistical challenge (though one I now, in Lockdown No. 3, look back on as a remarkable privilege). But despite travelling from half a dozen different time zones, in some cases with young children in tow, participants brought an extraordinary energy and enthusiasm for the topics under discussion. This fact confirmed for me a suspicion that has motivated this project from the beginning: there is currently in our field a genuine thirst for exploring the application of our research beyond the traditional confines of the academy, for fostering meaningful connections across disciplines and sectors, and for finding new, more creative languages for communicating and disseminating our work.

"*Public engagement*", "*impact*", and "*knowledge exchange*" are concepts that today rank highly on research agendas across the UK. This situation emerges in large part from the decision by the UK's four academic funding bodies to include the assessment of "impact" alongside "outputs" and "environment" in the *2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF)*, the system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions. Yet, while ten years have passed since the word "impact" entered academic parlance, institutional understanding of what constitutes engagement, of the politics and practicalities of building collaborations with non-academic partners, and of the ethics of conducting such work is still far from perfect. While *important work is underway* among public engagement professionals to define the evolving parameters of the field, there remains a disconnect between public engagement theory, which tends to be thoughtful, reflective, and led by senior research administrators, and practice, which can be institutionally driven, tokenistic, and—as Maria Brock points out in her essay—unsustainable or even unethical as a result of the precarity and unmanageable workloads faced by many academics. Our workshop, then, intended to make an intervention into the ongoing conversation about public engagement, to encourage those with established engagement portfolios to mentor colleagues thinking about the relevance of their work to broader audiences, to foster connections between researchers, artists, and cultural professionals, and to stimulate excitement and creativity by crossing professional boundaries through collaboration.

Despite having read about people's research and projects prior to the workshop, I was nonetheless taken aback by the breadth of experience and expertise of those who gathered with us in *Bell Pettigrew Museum's* vitrine-crammed halls (you can read more about participants' public engagement work *here*). Crowding around tables next to skeletons, taxidermy, and spirit collections, we discussed, among other work, *the "Prozhito" project*, a digitization initiative which is making hundreds of Russian-language personal diaries and memoirs available to the public, and *GURTOBUS*, a community culture bus that promotes contemporary arts in Ukraine's smaller cities. During peer-to-peer mentoring sessions held in the verdant surrounds of *St Andrews Botanic Garden*, we learned about the challenges of researching non-heteronormative sexualities in Russia and the rewards of curating micro-installations with teenagers in Volgograd and Almaty. Strolling through the glasshouses' different climatic zones, we heard about *Donbas Odyssey*, a project that engages narratives of displacement through exhibitions and interventions in public spaces; nestled among the palms and the cacti, we discussed experiences collaborating with Ukrainian *artists* to find appropriate strategies for exhibiting Soviet heritage in rural museums that are under threat of closure by local authorities.

We conceived of the workshop not just as an opportunity to showcase the many exciting and impressive public engagement projects ongoing in our field, but also as a space for self-reflection,

institutional criticism, and the expression of dissent. In order to facilitate these conversations, the workshop roundtables were structured around five questions relating to the politics and practicalities of conducting public engagement work—Who? What? Why? Where? When? Among the prompts we asked participants to consider when preparing for the roundtables were the following: What institutional factors and politics inform and determine the "who" of our public engagement work? How can the us/them dichotomy be rethought, and with it the idea of "giving voice" to "voiceless" communities? How can those leading projects be sure that the legacy or associated change is desired by or necessary for the communities engaged? When does engagement end? When should it never have begun? A full recording of the workshop is available *here*, but we have also asked some of our participants to return to these questions in the six reflective essays and three critical-creative pieces that follow. Rather than close down these discussions, we hope this series will form a point of departure, engendering further conversations, collaborations, and creativity on the public engagement theme.

JAMES RANN, EVERYTHING IS FOR EVERYONE UNTIL IT IS FOR REF

One of the problems of being a scholar of the Soviet Union with a limited imagination is that you start to relate everything to the USSR. These red-tinted spectacles are particularly unavoidable when thinking about academia itself—a field that occasionally feels like a utopian project for transforming humankind but more often like a semi-decrepit bureaucracy sustained by slogans. In this context, even when it comes to manifestly positive activities such as making research relevant and useful, it is easy to fall into the sort of ritualized relationship to official values that Alexei Yurchak sees as typical of late Soviet communism, in which *"people engaged with authoritative language at the level of the performative dimension".* Like Komsomol members parroting party lines about the brotherhood of nations with a half-raised eyebrow, in private some academics talk of "impact" with a certain ironic detachment, not because they don't believe in it per se, but because they are obliged to be so ostentatiously committed to it in funding bids and job interviews.

It is partly because of this culture of eye-rolling that the *Slavic Studies Goes Public* workshop felt so refreshing. By taking public engagement out of the performative space of grant writing and performance reviews and into one of open-minded debate and critique, it allowed participants not only to dissect what public engagement is and should be but also to remember its genuine value. Given that at one point, as Victoria says, we were standing in a circle and clapping, you'd be tempted to describe it as an evangelical experience, a chance to be born again in the church of impact. However, it would be more fitting to think of it as a sort of alternative-reality perestroika, one in which a bit of glasnost really did galvanize a fresh but questioning commitment to the cause.

The mutually self-sustaining combination of scepticism and enthusiasm needed for impact to be meaningful and not merely tokenistic is evident in the essays collected here, in which workshop participants reflect on their individual relationship to public engagement and its significance in Slavic Studies. The prompts for these reflections and the discussions that preceded them came in the form of a series of open-ended rhetorical questions. These questions are perhaps one of the most important outcomes of this event because the fact that they remain unanswered serves as a reminder that the problems of public engagement cannot be solved, but rather need to be constantly readdressed. The time and space needed for such reflection, granted to us in the workshop, is of course a rare privilege, which is perhaps why many of the contributors here promote a new paradigm of public engagement as an unending, open process—what Jessica Zychowicz calls "a live action, not a means or an end" and which Maria Brock describes as "a story told [that] does not need to end at all, but [that] can serve as a starting point for other stories".

In fact, metaphors of openness and closedness—of barriers and flows—are a recurrent theme, as is a focus on the interaction between ethical concerns and material realities. Sofia Gavrilova, in her contribution "What are the Boundaries of Public Engagement in a More Connected World?", takes a clear-eyed look at the meaning of impact, especially in politically sensitive regions, and ends with a call for academics to attend to "our ethical responsibilities" but also "to defend our findings and the boundaries of our expertise, to be honest and to maintain

healthy relations with the people we engage". Psychosocial scholar Maria Brock focuses on these same boundaries between self and other in her essay, drawing on her experience working with LGBTQ+ activists in Russia to highlight the potential dangers of an extractive relationship with informants and contextualizing these research relationships in the shaping conditions of the precarious contracts favoured by modern universities. My own essay, "Does Impact Reinforce the Boundary Between the Academy and the World?", also dwells on the inadequacies of institutions—most notably the failure of Modern Languages as a discipline to respond adequately to a multilingual, interconnected world and, more broadly, the dangerous reification inherent in the ritual invocation of the divide between public and academia.

A similar preoccupation with place and with issues of inclusion and exclusion unites two very different essays by Maria Korolkova and Kirill Repin. Korolkova draws on her diverse experience as a curator of screenings to question received wisdom about the importance of a glamorous cinema experience in finding new audiences for old films, exploring the negotiation "between glittery packaging and the stand-alone excellence of film content". In his analytical reflection, "Public Engagement as a Place of Encounter and Dissensus", Repin disrupts the binary between "university" and "public" to focus on a more fundamental "space of learning" as "an incubator for the socio-political imagination"—a conception in which public engagement becomes part of "a larger process of democratic cosmopolitanization without an end". We are reminded of Zychowicz and her call for unending engagement as "a live action", a term that comes at the end of an essay in which she seeks to put a division in space—the distance between Canada and Ukraine—into its temporal context as she urges scholars not only to be attentive to the limitations of established historical narratives but also to adopt a more dynamic modus operandi to combat the "tsunami of (mis)information" that characterizes this populist era.

As scholars and activists working with Russia and Ukraine, we are perhaps more aware than most of the prevalence and dangers of such misinformation. The countries we study feature prominently in both mainstream headlines and in murkier, madder conspiracies—although it is perhaps naïve to treat those two as distinct. When it comes to public engagement, this might seem like a gift—the public are already engaged!—but it is also a significant risk. Just as a box-ticking approach endangers "impact" and "knowledge exchange" by making them hollow formalities, so, in much contemporary media discourse, "Russia" and "Ukraine" have an incantational function, becoming empty notions invoked for rhetorical, self-serving goals, not real living entities to be understood and re-understood. By the same token, however, by reimagining public engagement in Slavic Studies as a ceaseless, active process, we can hope that these essays might contribute to a similar revivifying estrangement of the perception of these countries. The academy may be a decrepit bureaucracy, but it can still strive for utopian transformation.

DARYA TSYMBALYUK, TIME TO PLAY!

How does the practice of retracing the spaces we inhabit, whether these are institutional (the university, the gallery, the museum) or pertaining to identity (researcher, artist, activist), affect the way we think, talk, and make things happen? We hosted the *Slavic Studies Goes Public* workshop in a taxidermy museum and a botanic garden, hoping for the shadow of a dinosaur or the delicate folds of a plant fossil to disrupt the flow of our discussion and to open a way for new imaginaries of public engagement.

Madina Tlostanova writes about postcolonial/postsocialist tricksters, figures of resistance engaged in a constant questioning and reconfiguration of conventional modes of thinking. By doing public engagement we inhabit a version of Tlostanova's trickster identity, destabilizing existing categories of "researcher", "activist", and "academic" through our boundary-crossing activities. Tlostanova's category of the trickster appealed to us when coordinating the workshop because, unlike "researcher" and "artist", it avoids reconstituting what, in the essays written for this cluster, Repin calls the "symbolical boundary" between the university and the public and Rann refers to as "border-oriented thinking". In this way, the figure of the trickster challenges the idea of artists as the Other outside of academia who can serve as reliable partners and possible translators of research into engagement practices; or, vice versa, the perception of academics as translators who are able to bring a more intellectually sophisticated flavour to artistic events and outputs.

Being a trickster means being ready to play. When planning the workshop, we tried not to assign people to the panels that aligned most obviously with their project(s), but instead to play and to ask questions none of us were fully prepared to answer. Two days is not a long time, however, so how do we continue to play at a (social) distance? We have applied the same thinking that informed our workshop to this last section of our series, which showcases critical-creative collaborations: three sets of tricksters were paired up, after meeting at the workshop, although their individual projects did not seem to have obvious connections. We asked the pairs to play around with the idea of public engagement and see where their collaboration could take them; the journeys turned out to be very exciting.

"Notes Inside a White Cube" is a visual essay authored by Isobel Palmer and Clemens Poole. The use of the preposition "inside" in the title indicates the kind of questions that should be asked *inside* galleries or other institutional spaces during the process of engaging with publics. The essay itself is visually located within the cube, turning it from side to side, a dice thrown by the tricksters. The objects in the photographs are placed inside a white structure, representing a cube, but unlike an actual cube this structure remains open, allowing the objects to come into contact with the outside, engaging with trees, buildings, and cracks in the asphalt. Similarly, the questions asked in this essay remain open, never answered—perhaps because they mean to push us to reflect on the intentions, motivations, interests, and powers that drive public engagement work.

Video essay "The Stories We Tell: Memory, Engagement(s), and Donbas" by Precious Chatterje-Doody and Darya Tsymbalyuk reflects on storytelling as a practice, and the ways in which we can engage it to narrate together with others. The collaboration itself is an experiment in telling a story differently. Instead of presenting the drawings and the text (the two basic components of the piece) in two separate and static forms, the images and the words move following audio narration, camera shifts, and changes of light and shadow, becoming something else through their movement. The result is a metamorphosis—but so was our process of working together, as we took on unexpected roles and played new kinds of games, maybe an inevitable aspect of being tricksters of public engagement.

"Miners' Stories from Eastern and Western Ukraine: In Search of Identity" is an essay-conversation between Galina Oustinova-Stjepanovic and Maria Voronchuk. A series of responses to the project *Miners' Stories from Eastern and Western Ukraine*, in addition to having different voices constituting the fabric of the text, the dialogic nature of the essay is embedded in the very use of two different languages, English and Russian. Moreover, the visual components form a narrative of their own. The essay subverts the usual dynamic in which a researcher analyses a work by an artist, instead presenting a model in which the artist replies, turning the experience of engaging with a cultural product into a sequence of reverberations where the boundaries of private and professional, spectator/reader and creator are blurred.

The critical-creative pieces presented here not only celebrate collaboration and experimentation, but also allow us to envision a future for the network created during the *Slavic Studies Goes Public* workshop and the kinds of work and engagements it seeks to practice and promulgate. The network is planning a number of future events exploring public engagement practices and reflecting on the methods, ethical concerns, and power relations that inform our work with diverse audiences. A critical-creative collection collaboratively authored by network members is also a planned output of these events. Meanwhile, the conversations initiated during the workshop quite literally continue, as many of the participants engage in the recording of the podcast series *Doing Things With…*

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Victoria Donovan
University of St Andrews, GB

James Rann *orcid.org/0000-0001-8397-4502*
University of Glasgow, GB

Darya Tsymbalyuk *orcid.org/0000-0002-8293-5541*
University of St Andrews, GB