Evidence for the future: time and proof in commercial risk forecasting

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"We are an intelligence and analysis company that forecasts. We are not a news organisation that tells stories. We are not political scientists who explain. We do a little of both, but our raison d'être is to forecast the outcome of various risk scenarios. We rate risk level, but the real value is to give the client an actionable forecast against which to invest." Introduction to SFS and Style Guidance:

Principles of Analysis

Commercial risk forecasting is an altogether still rather under-explored economic growth activity, providing commodified expert analysis about future risks to clients ranging from insurance, banking, extractive industries, government and defence, logistics, to INGOs. Producing forecasts about an uncertain future, commercial intelligence providers promise clients to give them the information they need to mitigate risks to their ventures, investments, and personnel. Risk forecasting follows its own rules and logic to identify, select, and process evidence, the output of which becomes a new form of upstream, pre-processed evidence for industries and spheres of activity we know from the literature on indicators, risk, and technicalisation.

This essay looks at the temporal nature of evidence in commercial futurology. What are the evidentiary practices put in place to socially produce forecasts about the future from current and past, 'risk-relevant events'?[1] What are the consequences of specific regimes of evidence for the nature of this evidence, and what new insights into the nature of globalised capitalism can be gained from investigating future evidence as a knowledge-making practice in its own right?

As Christina Boswell convincingly demonstrates in her detailed deconstruction of 'evidence-based policy-making', expert evidence works primarily in symbolic ways: it is not so much the content of knowledge that is being valued, and which is used to shape policy decisions, but rather that the display of this evidence signals the credibility and authority of an organisation or entity and its policies (2009, 8). Under an evidence-based approach to policy-making, analyses and predictions are thus used to justify decisions *ex post,* under the pretence that they preceded the decisions, thus masking the usually deeply ideological nature of such decisions under a veneer of technicality.[2] But what happens in the case of commercial risk forecasting, when the forecasts are truly produced 'upstream', or prior to the developments and events that they purport to predict?

I would argue that despite the temporally preceding, extraneous, 'granular'

knowledge that feeds into these forecasts, the temporal modalities of production of risk briefs ultimately contribute to the circularity of knowledge-production in globalised late capitalism.

My reflections here are based on five years of work experience as Senior Africa Analyst with a London-based, 'boutique' risk forecasting company that I call Select Forecasting Services (hereafter SFS) here.[3] As SFS originated as a service to the insurance industry, its understanding of risk was from the outset very much shaped by these client interests, and structured the 'forecastable' political and violent risks in categories that corresponded to specific types of insurance.[4] As evinced in the opening quote above, the main daily task of analysts was to choose the event, identify the risk it presented, formulate a risk scenario based on this, distil this information into a 300-word, 'actionable' forecast for clients, and adjust assigned risk scores accordingly.

These daily briefs, in addition to weekly forecasts and a database of standing country forecasts, were SFS's core business. The first step in the production of these briefs meant selecting from recent risk-relevant events those that would affect client interests by changing the *outlook* for a specific type of risk for a certain country, area, or industry. A high-risk, high-probability event (a military coup, or asset confiscation, e.g.) almost certainly warranted a brief, but in many cases it was not so clear-cut. I thus had to learn to adopt a client-focused mindset that privileged events relevant to their interests (tax reforms, e.g.), and disregard events that spoke more to my own anthropological sensibilities (any 'social unrest' that did not directly result in property damage, e.g.).

In any case, it meant framing developments in a perspective of potential impact on client interests. Once an event was selected as worthy of a forecast, the task of the analyst was then to condense all the available information into a 300-word, 'actionable' daily brief, based on the risk-relevant event, and the analyst's knowledge of the context and the historical precedent. Here I also quickly learned that there was little patience for overly sophisticated or nuanced background analyses.

Indeed, although I was hired for my country expertise, my knowledge was only valuable in very selective and specific ways, and had to be rendered 'intelligible' to the requirements of risk forecasting.

The daily back-and-forth between analysts, desk, auditors, and sub-editors refined draft briefs into actionable and unambiguous forecasts. Rather than focusing on these social processes of co-production that transformed freely available news items into proprietary, commercially valuable forecasts, thereby contributing to the accelerating privatisation of the digital commons, let me here turn to the

evidentiary practices at play.

Although 'evidence' as such was not part of the everyday vocabulary of work, we can identify two different registers of evidence-making in practice: one is the transformation, through internal processes of selection, of open-source reports on events (facts) into risk-relevant events that serve as a basis (evidence) for the analysis and production of forecasts. The other is the production of the actual forecasts, or 'evidence for the future', whereby facticity is produced by the internal processes of vetting and auditing. These together can be analysed as the evidentiary practices of commercial futurology, where, I would argue, their relation in and with time is key.

> *Forecasts condense different temporalities: the historical precedent, present events, and future developments are pulled together into a brief, which flattens out a complex, multi-temporal social, political, and economic topography into a highly utilitarian routemap of events yet to come.*

In that sense, the forecast could be seen as a trans-temporal hinge, a 'configuration of socio-cultural life that is imbued with the capacity for bringing together phenomena that are otherwise distributed across disparate moments in time' (Pedersen and Nielsen 2013, 123–124). However, while such forecasts do indeed appear to allow for the 'co-existence of different temporalities [...] as overlapping tendencies in the present' (124), the forecast taken at face value derives its whole *raison d'être* precisely from its production *prior* to the anticipated future following a linear notion of time. And yet, due to the modalities of their production — the evidentiary practices put in place to produce 'accurate' and 'actionable' forecasts — the idea of recurrence, or temporal circularity also applies.

For when does a 'fact' normally become 'evidence'? When the fact has been verified, proven, by whichever evidentiary protocols govern that specific domain (cf. Chua, High, and Lau 2008). In the case of SFS, events are made risk-relevant as they happen, when they are selected. Forecasts, however, are evidence for the

future only *qua* their having been vetted by the internal process of selection, processing, publication, and quantification — verification, i.e. 'material proof', can only happen after the fact. The fiction of facticity is thus projected (and admittedly so) in the future tense.

If the forecast is accurate and the predicted development comes to pass, its evidentiary nature shifts, from being the result of the technocratic production of 'evidence for the future' according to jealously guarded internal analysis and audit processes, to becoming 'material' evidence in a chain of risk-relevant events, which in turn serve as the basis for the production of new forecasts. In the very same moment it is validated by the events, the forecast loses its entire commercial value, as it is transformed from a proprietary form of knowledge — evidence for the future — into freely available data, or simple facts.

The forecast — evidence, in emic terms — only has value in the future tense.

This is also true if a forecasted event does not come to pass, or happens in a different way than forecasted. Because the 'standing country briefs' are regularly updated, too, the past is subject to rewriting, to get the past 'protospectively' (cf.

Pedersen & Nielsen 2013) to fall in line with the new, unfolding futures. This is in many ways the qualitative equivalent to the quantitative 'yield curve', a mathematical model of projected future returns, constantly adjusted by automated market inputs, and used by financial traders, where 'the past enters as a set of former predictions' (Zaloom 2009, 260). In the case of risk forecasting, the speculative former future, only made 'true' by internal evidentiary practices, becomes a proven, factual, past event in a constantly updated chain of risk-relevant events that feeds into the production of new evidence for the future.

One of the consequences of this is that forecasts have a reverse explanatory power — rather than making a case for 'resource-based conflicts',[5] forecasts could be said to contribute to the production of 'conflict-based resources'. In the most extreme, this takes the form of betting against the market, as we know it from literature on risk and financial markets (or in fictionalised form), but it also works in much less obvious, perhaps more insidious ways. Sally Merry has demonstrated how the rise of indicators as tools of global governance 'facilitate governance by self-management,' as countries and entities are made responsible for their compliance with the criteria for good performance set out by an indicator (2011, S85). But while it is accurate to say that the 'explosion of rankings and audit culture' pushes the audited towards compliance, producing a 'hierarchical reputation economy' with often 'perverse outcomes' (Gilbert 2015, 85), in the case of risk forecasting the risk indicators are normally not known to the audited (countries, in this case).

Compare this with the outcry of governments when the big financial ratings agencies downgrade their risk ratings: this is understandable and justified, given how such an adjustment will raise the costs for a country to issue sovereign debt. But arguably a raise in political or violent risk ratings has equally direct knock-on effects, with investors suspending or reconsidering their investments, or service providers and insurers adjusting their prices and premiums — while the cause for such effects remains largely unknown to the target countries.

In fact, the only instance where protests against a forecast were lodged was

usually when the information contained therein might have negatively affected the standing of a commercial actor in a separate, enclosed arena where such a hierarchical reputation economy comes into play again — the stock market, for example. A forecast considering hypothetical risks to a certain mining company's railway line in a specific Central African country might send said company's share prices on a downward trajectory, if traders and shareholders have access to the same brief. In that sense, the success of SFS — the broadening of its customer base — has important consequences for how risk-relevant evidence is defined, which ultimately resulted in a weakening and diluting of its forecasts, as less and less specifics could be mentioned without the concerned entities intervening and threatening, in the worst case, a libel suit.

The rise of commercial intelligence providers, and more specifically, of risk forecasting, is a consequence both of a 'heightened ontological insecurity' about the future — the immediacy of event and effect on a global scale that makes it increasingly difficult to establish a predictable relationship between present action and future consequences (Reith 2004), and the economic potential of colonising the terrain of the unknowable 'near future' for stupendous monetary gains, i.e. the productive life of risk (Zaloom 2004; 2007). Where 'risk is mitigated by smartness' (Ho 2010, 5), expert knowledge about the future is basically a guide to action, reassuring customers in their own decisions (Rottenburg et al. 2015, 2–3; Reith 2004, 395). However, more than only providing a routemap to future risks, I would suggest that the rise of 'audit cultures' (Strathern 2000) *inside* companies plays an at least equally important role in how such evidence for the future is consumed, which shows evident parallels to Boswell's argument about the validating, symbolic role of evidence in policy-making: investors, corporate risk managers, and insurance underwriters need to be able to demonstrate that they have consulted 'expert opinion', which then allows them to proceed with their business (often as previously decided) mitigating against *internal* fallout in case the risk actually came about.

I would thus suggest that although risk forecasting derives its entire commercial value from 'thinking outside the box' and 'foreseeing the unforeseeable' for its

clients, a 'feedback loop' between future and past events is hardwired into its evidentiary practices. While this makes the forecast more 'accurate', it ultimately reinforces rather than challenges the dominant economistic modes of thought that mould the way corporate actors understand and act upon present social realities.

Notes:

[1]. As such it builds upon an earlier conference presentation on the social production of risk scores assigned to given 'actionable forecasts'.

[2]. Although more recently, political decisions seem to have dispensed with the pretence of verifiable facts altogether — cue Brexit.

[3]. That company no longer exists as a legal entity, having been bought up and incorporated as a new internal division by a multinational commercial intelligence provider.

[4]. The categories were: property damage, death and injury, kidnap and ransom, civil war, interstate war, terrorism, and protests and riots for violent risk, as well as regime stability, currency, taxation, regulatory, CEND (Confiscation, Expropriation, Nationalisation, Deprivation), and labour unrest (strike action) for political risk.

[5]. A still dominant line of thought in media reports and something more poststructuralist analysts of the political economy of conflict have been writing against most forcefully over the past 15 or so years.

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Does Evidence Matter?

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Evidence, whether in law, in natural or social science, or in belief systems, is about establishing certainty. Evidence has thus been central to law, to science, and to theologies as a way of making truth *visible*[1]. Evidence in these realms is not confined to establishing fact; establishing fact serves to create certainty about truth. The paths to certainty, i.e. the requirements of methods to achieve certainty in these different realms and also in different scientific traditions, different legal orders and different religious beliefs are diverse (Berti et al. 2015). I do not want to compare such different methods of generating evidence and of making it credible and persuasive through various ritual forms (ibid.) Rather, I want to ask whether evidence (still) matters.

While we assume 'evidence' to be a fundamental element of different knowledge practices, it seems to me that its status and relevance is changing,

and that this has implications particularly with regard to its role in mediating power differentials,

(mediating in the double sense of being a medium of but also of balancing out). The question whether evidence matters leads to the question what status "truth" has in different fields of interaction, and whether the status of truth is changing in some fields, but possibly not in others.

The status of truth is closely related to the necessity and the possibility of judgement, distinguishing between true and false, particularly in law. It is in the changing necessity of judgement on the one hand, and in the changing possibilities of judgement on the other, that we can possibly see changes in the status of evidence. Because of its meaning as the way to make truth apparent, questioning evidence means asking how evidence changes when new technologies impact on the possibilities and the character of our knowledge about the relation between cause and event (see e.g. Rottenburg et al 2015). Equally, changing conceptions of how social cohesion is preserved – via retribution, reconciliation or prevention – influence (not necessarily but possibly) the relevance of truth and evidence. Thus we need to ask whether and how the nature of evidence is evolving, and whether its relevance and status in legal procedure and other forms of knowing is changing. More precisely, we should examine in what fields of social interaction evidence matters, in which legal fields, in which debates of academic knowledge. Asking where and when evidence matters is also asking how evidence relates to asymmetrical relations of power in legal procedures. Is evidence power? Most importantly, what is evidence to justice?

Does Evidence matter?

Evidence provides the justification for judgement: it serves to establish the possibility to distinguish true from false. Judgement within the legal field differs from that of science, insofar as it determines not only truth or falsehood, but thereby also attributes fault and guilt. Judges, unlike anthropologists, I would

claim, face an imperative to decide (or Luhmann's proscription to avoid decision).

But is this really so? Is there not more to legal practice than its systemic code legal/illegal (*Leitunterscheidung;* Luhmann 1995)? Is this distinction not a normative fiction that has at its root and as its implicit end a specific idea of law and legal procedure, but does not actually describe the operation of many a legal system?

The attribution of responsibility and liability are central to any concept of law. Anthropologists have for a long time pointed out widely varying notions of responsibility and liability in different legal orders (Evans-Pritchard 1937; Gluckman 1965; Falk-Moore 1972; Strathern 2009). They have shown that these constructions of responsibility differ in their theories of causality, their norms of obligation and their ideas of morality, and that they differ in how they relate causal responsibility, responsibility in terms of duties and obligations and moral responsibility to each other. Many "traditional" norms of responsibility have long or cyclical socio-temporal conceptions of the liability of an individual or a collectivity, extending towards the past, towards the future, and most importantly taking into account as relevant for the attribution of responsibility actions that enable those which produce the state of affairs in question (Kirsch 2001). Modern law, by contrast, has relatively short temporal and socio-spatial conceptions of responsibility, linking liability to specific forms of evidence that concur with contemporary scientific and technological methods of making facts visible, thereby limiting liability to that which can be proven according to such methods of establishing cause and fact. Any legal system, of course, has gradations of responsibility, knows extenuating circumstances, distinguishes situations in which strict liability is the norm and others in which liability is moderated.

However, for the evaluation of the status and relevance of evidence the question is not whether there are differentiations of liability, but whether judgement is necessary, and therefore whether truth needs to be established, and what place evidence thus has in legal procedures.

Or: When does law decide, and when does it seek to relegate questions of truth to the sidelines and foreground questions of peace? When does evidence determine truth, and when does this truth determine a judgement? Are we not today facing two developments in legal procedure – unrelated to each other – that fundamentally change the nature and relevance of evidence in legal procedures?

One of these developments is the increasing complexity of evidence in highly complex fields of technological impact (Beck 1996). On the one hand, the perception of causal links reaching far in space and time are ever more explicitly pronounced; on the other hand, the very complexity of these links often engenders a fragmentation of responsibility and liability both in law (Veitch 2007) as well as in moral commitment. Moreover, those institutions of legal responsibility attempting to reflect some of these interrelations are often criticised as insufficient. Liability in modern law, despite its gradations of extenuating circumstance, different degrees of culpability, categories such as aiding and abetment, have been criticized as individualising cause, reducing analysis to immediate causation rather than taking into account enabling structures, and to reducing narratives of conflict by the simple dichotomisation of perpetrators and victims (Clarke 2010).

More generally, current institutions of responsibility in law appear to abstract from what could be called enabling contexts; they perform their cuts in the chains of enabling interactions at brief intervals (Strathern 2001).

The result is often "organised irresponsibility" (Veitch 2007). This raises the question whether the nature of evidence in the anthropocene, an anthropocene that is fundamentally shaped by the specific asymmetrical interdependence of a world capitalist system, is reflecting the far reaching relations in which we live in such a way that it jars with the current categories of legal judgement, legal liability or the different legal conceptualisations of participating in causation.

Does evidence about our current world exceed contemporary legal possibilities?

What does the shift to statistical and algorithmic forms of evidence mean in this context of evident causal interdependence for our understanding of truth? Big Data and algorithmic technologies "encode particular understandings, political interests and ontologies. What to quantify, how to name it, how to make diverse phenomena commensurable, how to engage elementary data depend on practices of knowing that are embedded in institutions of power and professional education..." (Rottenburg/Merry 2015, 4).

Moreover, these technologies of "fact making" offer new possibilities of establishing evidence of risk, rather than "fact". Evidence of risk is, however, different from evidence of fact. Their temporal qualities are opposite. The technological possibilities of calculating risk are increasing, while the possibilities determining cause in a way that could accord with differentiated legal categorisations of responsibility seem to be decreasing. That is: the complexities of causation as evident through evidence are not mirrored in corresponding legal categories of responsibility. While law has always also regulated the future, prevention, as the logic of risk control, often suspends legal procedure and turns to the governance of risk – whether in matters of violent crime, technological impact, environmental harm, climate change, or any mixture of these (like robotics, nano- and bio-technologies etc.). In some fields this means controlled exclusion (see Garland 2001); in other fields it means insurance (see e.g. Laidlaw 2014, 208-212), i.e. the collective sharing of risk.

The other development is the tendency to increasingly rely on methods of mediation, of ADR (Alternative Dispute Relation; see e.g. Nader 1999), of making deals that we observe in legal fields as diverse as financial crime, sexualized violence, racist attacks, divorce law, contract law or tort. Often, and traditionally, such mediations occur *after* facts have been settled; they replace punishment rather than judgment. However, they do not necessitate judgement of fact, fault, or guilt. They can do without and replace judgement along with punishment.

Arguments are often brought forth that such alternative dispute resolution actually benefits all parties to a dispute more than punishment would do. This

might be the case because it lessens the costs of procedures, it makes restitutive measures more accessible for the victims. Because it can desist from precisely attributing guilt and rather ameliorate suffering, the increasing resort to such procedures poses the question of whether this changes the relevance of evidence in legal procedures. If the goal is a settlement, an agreement, to what degree does truth matter? We do not have to decide whose narrative is true. Both, or all can be, and the issue at hand is to find an agreement that satisfies all.

No matter whether we approve of such abstention from judgment normatively and consider it productive for certain social goals, we need to ask what its implications are. I would venture the thesis that it affects power relations in legal conflicts; that the lessening relevance of evidence privileges "the Haves" (Galanter 1974) because often in a compromise, a deal, the weak lose out.

It appears that the relevance of evidence and judgment is decreasing only in specific fields of law and only in specific situations or constellations. We can thus possibly identify patterns where evidence loses significance, and where it retains its role in providing the grounds for determining fault and liability. These patterns might tell us many things. They might tell us what type of conflicts are deemed irresolvable by attributing guilt, such as increasingly in divorce law, but also – sometimes – matters of collective violence. They might furthermore indicate in which fields evidentiary complexity is assumed to make conventional legal categories of fault and guilt inappropriate, for example with regards to technological impact, especially of new technologies. They might tell us in which situations costs are estimated to prevent access to the law, such as when ADR is advocated as a measure of access to law for the poor.

They thus probably also tell us something about the changing relation between evidence and power, the effect of different procedures for the relations between the Haves and the Have-Nots (Galanter 1974).

Evidence and Justice

So what is the impact of these developments sketched out above on the status of evidence? And if we can actually observe a changing – decreasing – relevance of evidence in legal procedure, how does this relate to our notions of justice? How dependent is justice on truth? Might experiences of justice also transform, as when, for example, verdicts of guilt are experienced as insufficient to bring about justice because they leave unchanged the conditions of suffering, and ameliorative measures are felt to bring about substantive justice? If we see truth as only one element of legal judgement, peace and well-being being equally or more important ones, are we also witnessing the emergence of notions of justice that depend less on truth and more on the re-establishment of harmonious relations or simply on material well-being? And if this is so, can we learn from other normative orders in which – allegedly – such a focus on the re-establishment of harmonious relations and restoration (or compensation) always has been central to legal procedure? Who benefits from such changes in the different fields of law where they occur? Truth and Reconciliation Commissions attempted to combine the two, truth without judgement and punishment making for reconciliation. They put a high value on evidence, dissociating it from judgement – and in effect most often also from liability.

While we might question the sense of retributive punishment (but see e.g. Wilson 2003), can we do without the attribution of liability or responsibility altogether? Or rather: what are the effects for social relations of giving up on liability and guilt and replacing it with insurance or reconciliation?

If evidence is central to the attribution of liability or guilt, can we forgo it without sacrificing justice? If attributing liability and guilt is increasingly unjust: reductionist, individualizing and inadequate to the complexities of distributed agency in our current world, are there less reductionist methods of attributing liability? If so, what type of evidentiary procedures and methodologies do they rely on?

These questions are central to oppositional struggles, too. Struggles for justice are today often also struggles about the legal attribution of responsibility, because law is perceived – rightly or wrongly so – as defining the content and scope of both retrospective and prospective responsibilities and the distribution of obligations. Such struggles often attempt to give justice to the complexity of interdependence and correlation in world society and overcome any unjustly reductionist, individualising, or nationally limited conceptions of legal responsibility. Thus, they often attempt to transform legal institutions of responsibility to accord more to alternative visions of just responsibility. Be it environmental movements that engage in the negotiations of climate justice; be it protest for better working conditions in global production and consumption chains; be it the criticism voiced against the notions of command responsibility that is the focus of the trials at the International Criminal Court, to name but a few examples: such struggles try to expand the spectrum of responsibility by taking into account those involved in creating enabling structures. For these endeavours, such struggles need evidence, evidence which mirrors the complexity of the issues at hand; they have adopted forensic methodologies (e.g. Forensic Architecture 2014), and engaged in 'data activism' (Milan 2016) that takes up the possibilities for social struggles, advocacy, and campaigning provided by the possibilities and accessibility of so-called 'big data'. They (attempt to) wrench evidence from the institutions of power within which it is produced, and provide, counter-evidence.[2] Precisely because any evidence that reflects our inescapable entanglement is imbued with the very power differentials of these entanglements, such counter-evidence faces particular challenges.

Evidence matters.[3] We need evidence to attribute responsibility, especially when it reaches far and wide. We need evidence to counter-balance power differentials and to accomplish some equality before the law. Thus, we need evidence to make law just.

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[1] After all, its etymological root is videre, to see.

[2] Such oppositional evidenciary practices have different leverage in cases where they oppose alternative evidence, and those in which they oppose the sidelining of evidence.

[3] I thank Agathe Mora for pointing out to me Susan Haack's book by the very

same title „Evidence Matters: Science, Proof, and Truth in the Law, Cambridge, CUP. I am dismayed to admit that at the time of writing I have not been able to get the book, and have therefore not been able to read it.

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Cultural evidence and the law

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How do we decide whether or not to accept the evidence of our senses, or to put our faith in the statements of others? These are questions we all face constantly in our daily lives, but they take on particularly focused form in academic and practical disciplines dedicated to making systematic sense of the world around us, such as – in somewhat different ways – law and anthropology.

There are several reasons why anthropologists need to become more interested in the topic of evidence (Engelke 2009). First, in the context of our own intra-disciplinary debates, we need greater clarity about the standards by which we judge arguments based upon ethnographic evidence. Above all, how do we anthropologists convince ourselves – and then set about convincing other anthropologists – that we are 'right' (Hastrup 2004: 458)? Second, if we aspire to a practical or public role for our anthropology, we need a far more developed *language* of evidence at our disposal, to allow us to engage with experts in other fields by demonstrating more clearly how we know what we claim to know.

One possible way forward in developing such a language is to look at how 'evidence' is treated in law, a discipline for which the notion is absolutely central.

Insofar as "evidence", according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition, entails the quality of being evident, anthropological findings rarely if ever fully achieve that status. But the *OED* also defines evidence as 'information, whether in the form of personal testimony, the language of documents, or the production of material objects, that is given in a legal investigation to establish the fact or point in question'. Though explicitly oriented towards legal contexts, this particular definition seems applicable to anthropology too, both in terms of the kinds of information referred to and – more fundamentally – in linking evidence to specific problems or issues. Testimonies, documents, and material objects do not in themselves intrinsically constitute evidence, but only take on that character in relation to a particular set of questions.

But although the *kinds* of information drawn upon in law and social science are

the same, the two disciplines treat them in markedly different ways (Kandel 1992).

> *Thus, whereas lawyers are concerned with locating liability, and so assess actions normatively in order to punish the guilty or compensate the injured, social scientists seek to explain them in more general terms, as aspects of local culture and practice. In other words, the two professions use evidence for different purposes: as Twining neatly puts it: 'judges have a duty to decide... scientists and historians mainly conclude' (2006: 253; italics added).*

The means of processing that evidence are also different – though there is a degree of overlap in practice, because neither discipline is rigidly bounded by the limits of the logical strategies that most characterise it. Whereas legal reasoning is predominantly deductive, and typically works through syllogisms – (i) in general, if p then q; (ii) in the present case, p; (iii) therefore, q (MacCormick 1994: 21–32) – social science reasoning is usually inductive, and makes extensive use of analogy and dialectic. The two disciplines also have very different understandings of 'facts' and 'truth'. Lawyers speak of 'facts' in order to distinguish them from 'laws' rather than to make claims about their ontological status: a 'fact' is something that can be decided by a lay person without knowledge of the law. Moreover, the convention in common law is that any matters judged to have been established to the required standard of proof are thereafter treated as facts, as being certain. The legal attitude to 'truth' is equally pragmatic: 'truth' is the evidence provided by a witness who has been deemed to be credible. Anthropologists, by contrast – all too aware of the problems in obtaining and ordering their fieldwork data – are disinclined to speak of 'facts' or 'truth' without hedging qualifications.

When anthropologists are called upon as 'experts' in legal procedures, this is generally in order to provide evidence on 'cultural' matters. In British courts, for example, the commonest context in which anthropological evidence is sought is that of asylum appeals. After all, according to the *1951 United Nations*

Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, a refugee is someone suffering from a 'well-founded fear of being persecuted' for reasons that seem central to their "culture", namely, their 'race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion'. Indeed, the *Convention* requires that the claims of would-be refugees be evaluated with reference to their cultural, socio-economic, and historical contexts.

Even so, culturally grounded misunderstandings are common in asylum hearings because of the highly varied backgrounds from which asylum applicants come (Kalin 1986). These misunderstandings often concern fairly straightforward aspects of cultural difference: inconsistent transliterations of personal names from languages with non-Roman scripts; anomalies over dates, resulting from conversion from non-Gregorian calendars; variations in the structures of kin relationship terminologies; different systems for naming parts of the body; or different classifications of illnesses and diseases. Such misunderstandings can – in principle – be easily overcome by making the court aware of how and why the confusion arose. Far more troublesome, though, are suggestions that certain acts that seem odd or unlikely to legal decision-makers are explicable in terms of the actors following the dictates of their own "traditions" or "cultures". Anthropologists may then find themselves being asked to explain, or explain away, culturally specific differences in behaviour.

> *Such legal demands – which teleologise culture by offering it as the alleged cause of delinquency or the motivating factor in generating persecution – pose a whole set of epistemological and professional dilemmas for anthropologists (Good 2009).*

There is a moral dimension to this, too, of course. Judges and advocates are largely unaware of the ethical dilemmas posed for anthropologists from one culture, especially a hegemonic one, when required to speak for people from another.

In legal contexts there are seemingly intractable practical and ethical difficulties associated with 'communicating "culture" (and its social consequences) without reproducing essentialist representations' (Schwandner-Sievers 2006: 224). Does the anthropologist expert witness tacitly accept the lawyer's premise that culture itself is the explanation for strange or seemingly non-credible behaviour, thereby contributing to 'the reification of these contexts by articulating them within the constraints of ... legalism' (Hepner 2003); or try to explain the fluid, optative and processual character of culture, and thereby raise doubts as to the validity of the appellant's motives? This dilemma also arises in the context of the 'cultural defense' – a mitigation strategy especially common in the USA, whereby defence attorneys seek to obtain lighter sentences for clients from minority or immigrant backgrounds by arguing that they had acted according to the dictates of their culture. Anthropologists may then be asked to testify as to the 'authenticity' (Renteln 2004: 207) of the cultural beliefs in question, that is, on whether the stated motives of the accused do indeed correspond with views widely held by

their cultural peers (Van Broeck 2001: 24).

This legal resort to cultural essentialism places social science expert witnesses in a further quandary, because not even Talcott Parsons, who did so much to make 'culture' the central trope of mid-twentieth century American anthropology, believed that culture determined people's actions.

Most contemporary anthropologists on both sides of the Atlantic probably agree with Gerd Baumann that culture 'does not *cause* behaviour, but summarizes an abstraction from it, and is thus neither normative nor predictive' (1996: 11; italics added).

In asylum cases too, advocates routinely seek to conceal the optative and contested nature of their clients' cultural practices, which they see as fatally weakening claims dependent upon persecution resulting from such practices (Akram 2000; McKinley 1997). For example, I am often asked, in my role as 'country expert' in asylum appeals, to comment on aspects of Sri Lankan Tamil kinship, because the asylum seeker's claim depends in part upon their fear of persecution arising from their violation of some core kinship norm, such as their marriage across caste or religious lines, or their coming out as gay or lesbian. But of course it does not follow that any such violation, however serious, automatically results in persecution. Sri Lankan families, like families everywhere, vary greatly in their responses to the socially deviant behaviour of their children and although this behaviour may also incur wider public censure, this is by no means always persecutory in nature. The most one can say is that such behaviour makes social disapproval, and possible persecution, more likely.

Even in the 'hard' physical sciences knowledge is socially constructed, at least to the extent that experimental results, and the conclusions to be drawn from them, must be validated by one's peers. Indeed, the standard tests enunciated by the US Supreme Court for determining the admissibility of expert evidence – the original *Frye* test and the later *Daubert* test – rest in whole or part, respectively, upon the general acceptance, within the relevant professional community, of the

methodology whereby that evidence was generated.

Consequently, in litigation involving competing experts called by either side, there is 'not so much a contest between "true" and "false" beliefs as a test of the strength and unanimity of the prevailing consensus' (Jasanoff 1996: 100).

This is as true of the evidence of engineers or medical researchers as it is of the evidence of anthropologists.

Some have argued that admissibility tests of this kind should be fairly unproblematic for anthropologists, given the general acceptance within the profession of the method of participant observation. That seems unduly optimistic, though, for several reasons. First, how clear are we about what precisely participant observation entails? What, if anything, serves to differentiate it from the ad hoc observations that we all routinely and necessarily make in our daily lives? Moreover, the current *Daubert* admissibility test in the USA depends heavily on Popperian criteria of falsifiability; how – if at all – can the findings of participant observation be defended in such terms?

What is more, social scientific evidence raises distinctive problems of its own, revolving especially around its inter-subjectivity.

Particularly complex problems are raised by the fact that anthropologists' analyses derive largely from their own experiences as recorded in their field notes. In the 2007 Country Guidance case *LP (Sri Lanka)*, for which I was one of the experts submitting written and oral evidence, the Home Office's lawyers were anxious to neutralise the expert evidence of the British security specialist Dr Chris Smith, who had drawn important conclusions from his interviews with the Sri Lankan Inspector General of Police and other senior officials. In written submissions to the court, the Home Office argued that 'it is important that the tribunal is provided with the factual material upon which that opinion is based, in order to conduct its own assessment of the conclusions to be drawn from it'.

During the actual hearing, the Home Office barrister went further, arguing that Dr Smith's evidence should not be accepted unless he also provided the interview notes he had made at the time.

As the other expert seated in court, I was all too aware of the problems such a pre-condition would pose for me too. Had the court demanded access to my notes I would have refused on grounds of professional ethics, though it was unclear to me what the legal consequences of such a refusal would be. Luckily the situation never arose, because the judges rejected this demand in the case of Dr Smith, commenting that 'in this jurisdiction experts are not merely the providers of raw data but they can be the interpreters of it as well'.

The problems that might have arisen were not limited, however, to ethical issues surrounding guarantees of anonymity to my interlocutors.

Notice the assumption being made by both sides here, that one's field notes are 'raw data', and so will somehow constitute a more factual form of evidence, less 'contaminated' by the interpretations and biases of the expert.

And yet, of course, the link between one's field notes and the conclusions one draws from them is by no means simple. Far from being models of order, consistency, and analytical rigour, as outsiders might naively imagine, field notes are almost always in fact unsystematic, haphazard and disorderly (Michael E. Lynch, pers. comm. to Jasanoff 1996: 109). Most basically, as Lynch goes on to note, most of the conclusions drawn by an ethnographer

> cannot easily be traced to specific notes taken at some occasion. [F]ield notes tend to describe what I happen to have noted at a given time and place, and not more general, cumulative insights about the routine order of things (ibid.).

Under these circumstances, the knowledge provided by social scientists, which is 'transparently value-laden, political, and contested' is particularly hard to reconcile with 'the law's institutional commitment to notions of unambiguous

facticity and truth' (Jasanoff 1996: 111), so that social scientists are very likely to be accused, when under hostile cross-examination in court, of drawing conclusions far beyond what can be directly substantiated by specific field records, which are in any case liable to be dismissed as mere anecdote.

Lawyers do of course recognise that even documents require 'interpretation' if their meanings are to be correctly understood. (In legal contexts, the term 'interpretation' is used to refer to the activities of judges in teasing out the correct meaning of some legal text, rather than with reference to the actions of the court interpreter in cases where litigants or witnesses cannot speak the language of the court, which they term 'translation'.) Because of the 'complacent commonsense empiricism' (Twining 2006: 28) displayed in their attitude to facts, however, they are far less likely to recognise that drawing inferences or conclusions from field notes, or from film and video evidence, requires acts of interpretation that are far more complex. Most social scientists take it wholly for granted that even the 'facts', let alone the constructions to be placed on them, are the products of particular theoretical perspectives, and subject to contestation (Good 2004). This is of course a dismaying scenario for legal decision-makers, whose task in reaching decisions that are both timely and just is already difficult enough, so it is hardly surprising if they seek reasons to discount social scientists' conclusions, or at least to call the weight and authority of their evidence into question.

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Bonded labour in Pakistan

Ayaz Qureshi
November, 2016

The most common pattern for bonded labour in Pakistan is for a landlord or an employer to extend a loan to labourers, in advance of the work done, on the understanding that this advance payment or *peshgi* would be paid back by providing labour. Although in theory the loan is repayable over a period of time, in practice borrowers often cannot pay it back, despite their efforts, and become trapped in a vicious cycle of debt and forced labour. Landlords or employers exercise exclusive rights over the labour power of those who are indebted to them. They restrict labourers from taking up extra work elsewhere and control or manipulate other spheres of their lives as well. For example, if a family of bonded labourers at brick kiln has to visit relatives in a different town for a wedding, they may be required to leave behind at least one adult member at the kiln as a guarantee that the family would return to resume work. In extreme cases a landlord will decide on his workers' marriages, the education (or not) of their

children, and will exert the kind of control that a master had over his slave but with the added advantage of not having to make the initial investment of purchasing an individual.

Typically entire families of bonded labourers in agriculture, brick making and fishing work for the same landlord or employer. In brick kilns, for example, once a member of a family of bonded labourers has worked as a kiln labourer, he or she cannot work elsewhere at his or her own discretion while the debt remains outstanding. In some cases, family debt is transferred from one generation to the next even if the main earner has died or suffered permanent disability due to the hazardous nature of the work. Children have been documented to be working as main earners to pay off the debt for their dead or incapacitated elders. Landlords, their male family members, and foremen have been reported to sexually molest women bonded labourers who often do not speak out against such atrocities, due to their vulnerability to further violence whereas men in their families keep their silence or feign ignorance due to fear of violence.

Bonded labour is clearly no different than slavery.

The control exercised over men, women, and children of bonded labourers amounts to 'ownership rights' for the landlord or employer. In the case of agriculture, and to an extent brick making, the control exerted by the 'employer' is significantly increased because workers and their families often live 'on site' and are therefore not only constantly vulnerable to abuse but also face the threat of eviction, leading to a loss of living space. In recent past, many landowning castes have ventured into setting up industries and have taken with them their client castes to work for them in factories, especially in brick kilns and tanneries. Despite the new 'contractual' nature of bondage in these industries, the influence of traditional hierarchies and caste privileges remains strong. In other words,

even though the relations between the employers and employees are premised on capitalist methods of labour management (so as to achieve the control of labour and compression of costs), the vertical ties of subordination are rooted

in the consciousness of both the employers and the workers as historically given and socially acceptable.

Some of the most horrific abuses of labourer's human rights take place at the mining sites. Use of physical violence, incarceration in private 'jails' and the tracking down of those who are non-compliant have been reported for miners in various parts of the country. They usually live in shabby quarters at the mining sites hundreds of miles away from their native villages. The middlemen or recruiters, who have worked their way up to become sub-contractors, recruit workers from their own villages and adjoining areas by extending *peshgi* and thus binding them to work at mines located away from major towns. The fact that the labourers cannot escape the middleman because he is a co-villager or even a kinsman, coupled with being at a long distance from home, keeps the workers at the mines. The mines often lack necessary safety equipment and the labourers are forced to work in extremely hazardous conditions with no insurance. Occupational hazards further lead to a heavy burden of disease, which in turn often leads to workers taking out additional advances to treat the very illnesses that arise from the work that they undertake, thus creating a vicious cycle of debt-bondage. Tactics such as falsifying accounts, delaying wage payments, demanding rapid repayment and withholding or reducing periodic advances are used across all sectors to strengthen the grip of the employer and his men over bonded labourers. Violence or the threat of violence towards the individual worker and their families with verbal and physical abuse are also used to extract work from 'lazy' labourers and to prevent any attempts to escape. Even if a labourer does not directly experience physical abuse from his employer, the possibility of violence is part of his consciousness due to widely circulated stories about punishments meted out to defaulters and renegades.

The women labourers in agriculture are exploited not only by the employers but also by their husbands who demand productive and reproductive labour from them. The notion of 'honour', in this patriarchal social system, attached to the protection or violation of the female body. It turns their bodies, at once, into sites

of vigilance and control and targets of abuse. Landlords have been reported to sexually assault women in order to shame entire families into submission and to continue the bondage. The threat or actual use of sexual violence or other forms of violence against women is an effective tool in their hands to keep bonded labourers under their control. In addition to the everyday physical violence that women have to endure or the threat of which that looms large, there is the structural violence of patriarchy which remains invisible, often internalized as a cultural value and unchallenged at multiple levels.

Bonded labour enjoys a degree of cultural acceptance at broader level in Pakistani society.

There have been accounts of judges in the higher judiciary reprimanding labourers for not honouring their debts. Some academics condone the system of patron-clientism, which forms an important basis of bonded labour in agriculture, as fundamental to Pakistani society. The workers in debt-bondage are seen to have 'chosen' to sacrifice their freedom for the security and other benefits that come with patronage—e.g. access to loans, to the police, courts, schools, and hospitals. The implication is that this relationship is mutually beneficial for the landlord and the worker. Another common perspective on bonded labour is what has been termed by some economists as the 'double coincidence of wants'. According to this a system of advance payments is a mutually advantageous contract between the employer and the worker as it provides a degree of predictability and regularity to both parties by ensuring a stable supply of a disciplined labour force to the employer and regular employment for the labourers. In a context of high unemployment and precariousness it is, thus, the security of employment that the labourers willingly trade for their freedom and the employers risk their capital in order to ensure future supply of labour. Therefore, it would make perfect sense for not only the employer to keep mounting the debt on the labourers but also the labourer to avoid clearing it completely. The *peshgi*, therefore, is a way of tying not only the labourer to the employer but also vice versa. Therefore, the labourers/debtor should be grateful

to the employer for much needed credit and a secure employment and the employer/creditor must be appreciated as the lender of last resort given the 'imperfections' of the market and the government in countries like Pakistan. Excessive debts that land labourers into debt-bondage actually result from their own greed and conspicuous consumption rather than any unfairness on the part of the employer. The occurrence of coercion and physical abuse are statistically insignificant, consequence of the laziness and dishonesty of a few labourers.

The claims about patron-clientism as some form of social safety net in the absence of a 'perfect' market or state, or the absurd logic of the coincidence of wants, do not justify the inhuman conditions in which bonded labourers are entrenched.

Meeting the sudden needs of the labourers such as expenditures on unexpected illnesses or the need to spend on weddings, should not absolve the employers from the charge of using economic inequalities and the desperate poverty of the labourers to lock them into labour supply for themselves. Whether in the garb of traditional patron-clientism or in its more naked form of 'contracts', the practice of debt-bondage continues to thrive on the highly skewed distribution of political and economic power between the rich and the poor.

A Tale of Two Rooms: Debt, Success, and Freedom in Indian Microfinance

Sohini Kar
November, 2016

"See, I don't have a TV or an *almirah* [wardrobe]," said Ilina, pointing to her sparse one-room flat, while in one corner—the makeshift kitchen—her husband squatted over a stove, cooking lentils.(1) "I don't waste the money; everything goes where it's supposed to," Ilina explained. We were in the eastern periphery of Kolkata (formerly Calcutta), India; it is an area that is home to migrants of many sorts: rural migrants, refugees from the Sunderbans after cyclone Aila, and slum dwellers evicted from other parts of the city. The state government had built rows of single-room flats to house these migrants, though there is little else by way of infrastructure. Ilina, a wiry and energetic woman in her thirties, was appealing to Anand, the branch manager of a commercial or for-profit microfinance institution (MFI) that I call DENA,(2) for a new loan. Ilina was offering her bare accommodation as proof that she would not waste money, and indeed of her deservingness of a loan.

Over the past two decades, microfinance—small, collateral-free loans that are repaid on a regular basis—has been celebrated as a mechanism for getting people out of poverty.(3) These loans are meant to enable poor borrowers to improve their lives socially and materially. Ilina's empty room, however, posed a paradox:

> *The poor must prove that they do not waste their loans on material goods; simultaneously, how does one account for a successful borrower, when there are no signs of wealth for MFI staff to read when judging their creditworthiness?*

Signs of Success

In their promotional materials, MFIs offer aspirational lives for their borrowers. Debt, in other words, is meant to mediate between the condition of poverty and one of relative success and wealth. Worked into these narratives of prosperity achieved through microfinance is a desire for a materially better life. Take, for instance, customer success stories posted by one such MFI, Ujjivan, on their website. One story focuses on Mita Gharai, from Midnapur, West Bengal. In the story, Mita gets a loan from the MFI to grow her grocery store business. Along with entrepreneurial success, success is measured by improved social status, extra income to spend on private education, on leisure and celebrations, as well as to acquiring consumer goods.

In contrast to Mita's material signs of success, Ilina used her empty room to show not only her frugality, but also her reliability as a borrower. Even though Ilina said that she ran a tea stall, loan officers were well aware that borrowers often used their loans for consumption, rather than production purpose (i.e., running a small business). Rather, microfinance staff needed to ensure that borrowers had sufficient income and means to repay the loans. As such, they looked for evidence in the homes of borrowers during the house verification process to ascertain creditworthiness. Borrowers too used this time to appeal their homes as evidence of being deserving of credit.

For Ilina, the absence of consumer goods was evidence of the fact that she did not waste her loans for consumption purposes. On the one hand, this followed the dictates of microfinance lending for production purposes. Yet, such sparseness could also backfire for borrowers. As MFI staff explained, potential borrowers often underestimated their income or claimed to be poorer than they were, because microfinance was marketed to the poor. Yet, loan officers, particularly in the for-profit sector, were concerned with repayments more than anything. An empty room, then, could be read not as a sign of frugality, but of failure.

While Ilina struggled to make her empty room meaningful, Subhas, the husband of another borrower, found his possessions created the opposite effect. Subhas lived not too far from Ilina, but in an informal slum settlement. Most of the residents in the neighborhood worked as day laborers, many as rickshaw drivers. Subhas' hut, built of wooden planks on the edges of a pond, consisted of one room, with a small *khatia* [charpoy/cot] bed on one side. An old but sizable television was featured prominently on a makeshift shelf.

Noticing the television, Anand turned to Subhas, asking: "Did you just buy that?" Subhas proudly nodded yes. "How much did it cost?" asked Anand. "Rs. 8,000," he replied. Note that Subhas was not the actual borrower of the loan. Loans from DENA, as with many other MFIs were only given to women, although it was widely accepted that men would oversee loans or facilitate repayment in the absence, and were often required to serve as guarantors.(4) As the other borrowers, mostly women, arrived for the weekly meeting, Subhas turned on the television, showing his new purchase off to his neighbors. Anand spoke sharply, indicating he was not pleased with the way in which Anand had spent his money: "Dada, please don't mind [*kichu monekorbena*], but could you turn off the TV?" Turning it off, Subhas and another man who had just come in went round to the back, to the ledge overlooking the pond, to smoke a *bidi*. Unlike Ilina, Subhas sought to convey success through the purchase of a new television set, Anand, as he later explained to me, found it to be an extravagance. Ironically, in a room that was otherwise sparse, the presence of the television set seemed out of place; it spoke volumes, overdeterminining Anand's assessment of the borrower's

creditworthiness.

The two rooms—Ilina's and Subhas'—then come to highlight the paradox of poor borrowers as borrower's creditability is interpreted in two divergent ways. For Ilina, emptiness of the room is meant to speak to her frugality; for Subhas, the television is a sign of pride and success. Yet material possessions in both cases signify more than their owners hope for or expect. On the one hand, emptiness can mark economy; but also failure. Possessions like television sets can mark success, but also extravagance.

Freedom from Needs and Wants

Material possessions—as signs that loan officers read—can signify too much or too little wealth for borrowers to be successful in the loan applications. Loan officers assess material success in order to understand how and whether a borrower can pay back her loan. Such mediation is not simply a crude financial calculus; rather, loan officers use moral judgments to navigate these assessments. In particular, they weigh the goods as "needs" that are good, and "wants" that mark borrowers as wasteful.

Debt is laden with moral meaning, and weighs particularly heavily on the debtor rather than the creditor.(5) Borrowers like Ilina and Subhas have to be interpreted as "good" or "bad" debtors, where, as Deborah James has observed, the former are considered to be "modestly moving upward step by step, having invested in the future by eschewing frivolity and keeping an eye on worthwhile values,"(6) while the latter use debt in ways that are unsustainable. In order to make these moral judgments, however, MFI staff read the few material possessions in the otherwise empty rooms of poor borrowers for signs of creditworthiness. Ultimately, these decisions to sanction or deny a loan can shape the lives of poor borrowers and their aspirations for a better life.

Borrowers like Ilina and Subhas have "frustrated freedoms," whereby the degree

of agency they believe they have is, in fact, limited by material resources.(7)

Even while offering the poor the prospect of aspiring to a middle class lifestyle, microfinance lending practices constrain these very desires by having loan officers determine what is a need, and what constitutes wants. The agency of each borrower—as with poor recipients in welfare or aid—to consume more or less as an attempt to prove one's deservingness is ultimately limited by how these signs are read by mediators such as loan officers.

(1) All names pseudonyms.

(2) DENA, a commercial or for-profit MFI where I conducted 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork between 2009-2011, gave loans ranging from about Rs. 5,000 to Rs. 20,000, to be repaid over a year at weekly meetings with a 24 percent annual interest rate. This research was supported by the National Science Foundation, the Social Science Research Council, and the Wenner-Gren Foundation.

(3) Kar, Sohini and Caroline Schuster. Comparative projects and the limits of choice: Ethnography and microfinance in India and Paraguay. *Journal of Cultural Economy* 9, No. 4 (2016): 347–363. http://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2016.1180632

(4) Kar, Sohini. 'Relative Indemnity: Risk, Insurance, and Kinship in Indian Microfinance.' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 23, No. 2 (Forthcoming).

(5) For instance, see Graeber, David. Debt: The First 5000 Years. (New York: Melville House, 2011); Peebles, Gustav. The Anthropology of Credit and Debt. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39, No. 1 (2010), 225–240. http://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-090109-133856

(6) James, Deborah. Money from Nothing: Indebtedness and Aspiration in South Africa. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015): 222.

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'Epitome of feminism': the rise of the social phenomenon of trendy hijabistas

Assma Youssef
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Feminism is not an immutable and easily-defined concept. It is conditioned by culture, religion, politics, education and other social factors. The secular-humanist approach to feminism has long dominated global discourses on gender equality and women's rights. However, the rise of the 'trendy hijabistas'[1] is seen, by some, as a way of challenging the secular humanist approach and insidious stereotypes on hijabi women. It serves as a tool through which Muslim women can reconcile their beliefs with a desire to look fashionable within a western context.

The term 'epitome of feminism', featured in the title, is one of the positive comments that Noor Tagouri, a hijabi journalist, received for her recent decision to appear in Playboy magazine. In the eyes of the social media commentator, Tagouri was defying stereotypes, rooted in (neo)colonial discourses, that veiled

Muslim women are oppressed. Tagouri explained how being a hijabi journalist 'empowers her in demystifying the stigma surrounding Muslim women.'[2] Her modus operandi resonates with other hijabi fashionistas like Dina Tokio, Ascia AKF, Habiba da Silva and many more who seek to undermine these stereotypes in the context of rising Islamophobia.

> *But is the rise of the social phenomenon truly a symbol for empowerment? Or does it inadvertently strengthen intersecting forms of oppression against Muslim women of lower socioeconomic backgrounds?*

Like many, I completely acknowledge that Muslim women are not a monolithic entity. As a result, the 'veil' or 'hijab' has a different meaning depending on the individual wearing it. In *Re-orienting Western feminisms* Chilla Bullbeck explains how attitudes to the veil differ depending on the country. For instance, in Iran the veil is enforced on women by state law, whereas in France it is prohibited under republican secular laws.[3] This has created a myriad of ways to perceive the veil globally. But, a major on-going debate about the 'veil' is the extent to which it symbolises modesty. For trendy hijabistas like Dina Tokio and Ascia AKF, their glamourous clothing lines and make-up tutorials are compatible with Islamic guidance on modesty, beauty and piety.

Many of course disagree with this perspective such as the author of *Love in a Headscarf*, Shelina Janmohamed who explained that 'today's fashion industry is about consumerism and objectification – buy, buy, buy and be judged by what you wear. Muslim fashion is teetering between asserting a Muslim woman's right to be beautiful and well-turned out, and buying more stuff than you need, and being judged by your clothes – both of which are the opposite of Islamic values.'[4] Islam, as indicated in verse 23:40 of the Qur'an, encourages its followers to lower their gaze to avoid attracting attention and making others uncomfortable. Janmohamed is highlighting the potential for 'modest fashion' to stray away from Islamic guidance on beauty, modesty and piety.

While Janmohamed reveals these potential contradictions, other anthropologists

like [Emma Tarlo](#) have come to different conclusions. In *Visibly Muslim: Fashion, politics, faith*, Tarlo presents the ways in which Muslim women raised in western countries face inter-generational tensions over styles of dress. While the mothers favour culturally traditional clothing, the daughters seek to balance such pressure by re-styling western clothes with hijab. Coming from an anthropological background, Tarlo focussed on the cosmopolitan university-educated Muslim milieu and less so on the working-class Muslim milieu.[5] Indeed, the biggest names in this fashion trend come from prosperous countries like America, Britain and Kuwait as portrayed through the high-end clothing.

Many hijabistas like Tagouri claim their work encourages Muslim girls to be 'their most authentic self' and to rectify 'misrepresentations (of Muslims) in mainstream media today'.[6] But given their affluent socioeconomic background, many trendy hijabistas like Tagouri are (inadvertently) perpetuating an image of an 'acceptable hijabi Muslim girl' in a western capitalist context. When I look at the front-cover of magazines featuring hijabi women, they are most often light-skinned, thin and alluring, albeit, stereotypically European looking. For me, it reinforces racist ideas about beauty in the west and east where fair-skinned women are considered more beautiful than their darker-skinned counterparts.

> *While these new trendy hijabistas are trying to defy misrepresentations about them amongst western non-Muslims, their image has the potential to force many Muslim girls into an essentialising straight-jacket. One in which they must resemble the light-skinned, thin and glamourous hijabistas in order to feel accepted in their hijab within a western context.*

Recently in the UK, a report published by the Women and Equalities Committee of MPs stipulated that Muslim women still feared wearing a headscarf 'restricted their employment opportunities'. Indeed, according to the report, Muslim people face the highest level of unemployment of all religious and ethnic groups at 12.8% compared to 5.4% for the general population.[7] Even in America, hate crimes against Muslim Americans and mosques tripled, according to a California State

University researcher, who said the country had not seen such a high frequency of incidents since the September 11 terrorist attacks.[8] Statistics on rising hate crime and unemployment levels suggests structural discrimination against Muslim women is still rife.

From these statistics, it appears that the trendy hijabista movement does not address the issue of structural discrimination against Muslim women in the west. The movement is clouded in contradictions as it seeks to create a sisterhood, yet seems to be concerned mainly with correcting the perceptions of non-Muslims about Muslim women. Some trendy hijabistas, as demonstrated in Tagouri's interview with Playboy, are more concerned with white morality than the conditions these morals cause Muslim women of disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds and of darker ethnicities.

Throughout the recent controversies surrounding 'trendy hijabistas', many criticisms have circulated on the web. However, my argument which criticises the implications of selling images of glamorous light-skinned hijabi women on darker skinned hijabi women has received little attention and remains under-researched. This truly emphasises how, as argued by the renowned feminist Nawal el-Saadawi 'a hierarchical system subjugating people merely because they are born poor, or female, or dark-skinned' remains stronger than ever in spite of this flourishing social phenomenon.[9]

[1] Olivia Blair, "Noor Tagouri becomes first hijab-wearing Muslim woman to feature in Playboy magazine", *The Independent*, 30th September 2016, accessed 1st October 2016.

[2] Blair, "Noor Tagouri becomes first hijab-wearing Muslim woman to feature in Playboy magazine".

[3] Chilla Bullbeck, *Re-orienting Western feminisms: women's diversity in a postcolonial world*, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

[4] Radhika Sanghani, "How the hijab went high-fashion and divided Muslim women", *The Telegraph,* 18th February 2016, accessed 1st October 2016.

[5] Sarah Yasin, "An Interview with Emma Tarlo, Author of visibly Muslim", *Patheos,* 24th February 2016, accessed 1st October 2016.

[6] Noor Tagouri, "Salam...I know right",30th September 2016, accessed 1st October 2016.

[7] Graeme Demianyk, "Muslim women face discrimination and stereotype when seeking jobs, committee of MP's says", *The Huffington Post*, 11th August 2016, accessed 1st October 2016.

[8] Sam Levin, "Hate crimes and attacks against Muslims doubled in California last year- report", *The Guardian*, 29th July 2016, accessed 1st October 2016.

[9] Nawal el-Saadawi, "Nawal el-Saadawi quotes about patriarchy", accessed 1st October 2016.

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Call for papers: Critical Approaches to Irregular Migration Facilitation

Luigi Achilli
November, 2016

Workshop: Critical Approaches to Irregular Migration Facilitation: Grounding the Theory and Praxis of Human Smuggling

Where: University of Texas at El Paso, El Paso, Texas (USA)
When: April 6, 7 and 8, 2017

The facilitation of irregular migration – labelled by the state as migrant, people or human smuggling – has been primarily articulated as a violent, exploitative practice under the control of transnational crime. It has also been tied to often problematic articulations of class, race, gender, informal forms of labour and sex work. Furthermore, the language of crisis, crime, violence and humanitarianism often associated with references to smuggling has reified specific geographic locations and their people as inherently dangerous and in need of surveillance and control. Amid this context, the explosive militarization of border control practices and stricter immigration criminalization policies have been articulated as the only effective measures to fight the alleged spread of smuggling, depicted as a global security threat under the control of networks of vast, dark reach. The migratory flows in the Mediterranean, the Horn and the North of Africa, the Pacific, the Middle East, the US Mexico Border and Central and South America; the punitive efforts to control human mobility and the narratives pertaining to transits and their facilitation are clear examples of this approach. More often than not unintended outcomes have ultimately outweighed national security and border protection policy. The vast border and immigration enforcement systems have prompted spiralling financial costs. Attempts to block or contain migration routes have only redirected unauthorized migration flows into more dangerous and remote routes, leading to the injury, death and disappearance of thousands of people on the move. Furthermore, border enforcement has played a role in the very reliance of migrants and refugees on often dubious facilitators of migration services or criminally-organized entities that engage in specific forms of violence.

Amid the panic caused by the overly-simplistic, fear-driven narratives of smuggling and those behind their facilitation, the social, economic, cultural, moral and affective significance of smuggling to and from the perspective of its actors (facilitators, clients, their families and communities) has remained vastly unexplored.

To this date, narratives of tragedy, death, graphic violence, and transnational crime have continued to obscure the basic realization that the facilitation of

irregular migration is ultimately a response to the lack of channels for legal entry and transit to which so many yet specific few are subjected.

Building on the experience at the [European University Institute in Florence in the Spring of 2016](#), this second edition of the Smuggling Workshop seeks to continue the conversation towards empirically grounded smuggling research, a field often silenced by the onslaught of anecdotal evidence or technocratic-legalistic perspectives concerning the facilitation of irregular migration. This time around the workshop will have a particular focus on collectively building the theory and documenting the praxis of human smuggling, relying on the empirically documented perspectives of its actors.

> *This workshop is a collective effort to comprehend the ways in which migrants, refugees, their families and communities along with those facilitating their transits perceive, talk about, and partake in the phenomenon.*

The workshop takes place at a critical time in migration studies, when despite the vast abundance of scholarship on the lives of migrants and refugees, grounded empirical work on the processes involving their journeys and the effects and *affects* in them interwoven is still scant and scattered across the disciplines.

A gathering of innovative and critical voices in smuggling from academic and policy circles, the workshop seeks to consolidate the creation of an interdisciplinary and global collective of professionals engaged in the empirical study of migration facilitation that integrates perspectives from the global north and south. With this goal in mind, we invite abstracts on the theme of irregular migration/human mobility facilitation for an international workshop to be held on April 6, 7 and 8, 2017 at the University of Texas at El Paso. We seek to bring together critical, empirical engagements on the facilitation and brokerage of irregular migration as witnessed locally, regionally and comparatively.

Some themes to consider include theoretical and empirical engagements with:

1. The political economy of human smuggling/facilitation of irregular migration
2. Trans-Local/trans-regional/global smuggling practices
3. Comparative and historical perspectives on smuggling
4. The converge of migration facilitation with other criminal/ized markets and/or practices
5. Smuggling, trafficking and "modern day slavery"
6. Etiology of violence and victimization in smuggling
7. Philosophical, ethical and moral dimensions of smuggling
8. Race, class and gender as manifested in smuggling practices and smuggling research
9. Theory and methods in smuggling research and their implications and critiques
10. Anti-smuggling law enforcement and prevention campaigns (risks, side-effects and consequences)
11. Role of stakeholders in anti-people smuggling operations (IOM, UNODC, Frontex, CBP, ICE, etc.)
12. Global migration governance and domestic law initiatives on anti-people smuggling measures

OUTCOMES

Building on the experience of the first workshop, selected contributions will be part of a series of proposals for special issues and/or edited collections on the facilitation of irregular migration. We look forward to receiving and considering submissions that encompass the complexity of migration facilitation across and within regions, regimes and time periods, and for selected participants to be engaged in the publication process.

SUBMISSIONS

Preference will be given to work that draws on ethnographic research. Please submit a 250-300 word abstract to **smugglingworkshop@gmail.com** by November 15th, 2016. Participants will be notified of their acceptance by December 1st, 2016. Organizers will provide verification letters for participants requiring visas. Workshop papers are due by March 15th, 2016. ***<u>Please be advised that as a condition of your acceptance, and given the working, creative and intensively collaborative nature of this second edition of the workshop, all participants must commit to submit their work by the deadline</u>***. Questions can be addressed to the organizers, <u>Luigi Achilli</u> at the European University Institute (Luigi.Achilli@eui.eu), <u>Antje Missbach</u> at Monash University (antje.missbach@monash.edu) and <u>Gabriella Sanchez</u> at the University of Texas at El Paso (gesanchez4@utep.edu).

CO-ORGANIZED BY:

National Security Studies Institute University of Texas in El Paso Gabriella E. Sanchez gesanchez4@utep.edu	Migration Policy Centre European University Institute Luigi Achilli Luigi.Achilli@eui.eu	School of Social Sciences Monash University Antje Missbach antje.missbach@monash.edu

And the winner is… #MeadCompetition

Allegra
November, 2016

The work of anthropology explores some of the most exciting and relevant issues facing humanity. We study our collective origins, the roots of violence, economic injustice, health disparities, family and kinship, constructions of "race," education systems, how cities organize themselves, how we talk, climate change, emerging digital worlds, and so much more. But all too often anthropologists conclude our research into these vitally important topics with scholarly papers that are accessible only to a narrow pool of academics.

SAPIENS and Allegra are part of a movement to make anthropological research, theories, and thinking relevant to the public. From magazines like Anthropology Now and PopAnth, to books like David Graeber's *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* and Gillian Tett's *Fool's Gold*, to T.M. Luhrmann's regular columns in *The New York Times*, anthropologists are emerging everywhere with new public voices.

To further encourage anthropologists to write about their work for a broader audience, Allegra and SAPIENS partnered earlier this year to launch a new competition for popular anthropological writing. An impressive 68 articles were submitted from anthropologists living and working around the world. We are thrilled to announce the winners.

> *First prize* *goes to Amy Starecheski's "The House Society on Avenue C," a searing and intimate portrait of the world of squatters in New York City.*

> *Second prize* *is awarded to Hannah E. Marsh for her essay "The Biological Fallacy of American's Race Problem," a playful and personal view of the very serious subject of constructions of race.*

> *Third prize* *is awarded to Robyn Eversole for "Illogical Objects and What they Tell Us," which is about things that don't seem to serve a purpose anymore but still seem to be put to good use.*

We congratulate the winners and thank all of those who submitted an entry. Please stay tuned for the publication of the winning pieces on Allegra and SAPIENS! And of course, some Allegra considerations on the competition itself: did we find the next Margaret Mead – and is it a good idea to arrange such a search via competitions?

Featured image *by John Curran (flickr, CC BY 2.0)*

Slam that ethnography! – Introduction

Tanja Ahlin
November, 2016

Have you ever been in a conference room, listening to one presentation after another, only to realize that they all seemed strangely similar? As in, following the same structure, being read (!) in the same monotonous tone? The words didn't really come to life in front of your eyes, but rather blended all together into some

kind of thick fog. You left the room and looked out the window of the conference building, into the sun, or rain, and the sunrays or the raindrops were so close you could almost touch them, but there was this thick, cold glass between you and life. You felt something was missing, so many things remained unpronounced, caught in the rigid net of academic (re)presentation. You intuitively knew that many of the presenters, too, must have felt somehow unfulfilled. No matter how often they rehearsed the familiar refrain, "it is complicated," you felt that justice had not been done to the multi-layered experience of fieldwork in which both research participants and researchers feature as multi-faceted human beings. Is there a way to break the mold that constrains academic writing, through that conference building glass that confines us to pro forma stylizations?

With this and other writerly questions in mind, we organized a week-long ethnographic writing workshop for PhDs at the University of Amsterdam, which took place in late May 2016.

> *Our goal was to shake up ideas and assumptions (or lack of them) about ethnographic writing and presenting, to reflect on the different styles of writing that anthropologists might employ in different contexts, and to reflect on what writing culture might specifically mean to medical anthropologists.*

Julie Livingston, author of *[Improvising Medicine: An African Oncology Ward in an Emerging Cancer Epidemic](#)* (2012), kicked off the week with an inspiring lecture to a group of 33 students and staff members that focused on finding a balance between the spectacular and the mundane in ethnographic writing. Using her own work as an example, she demonstrated the ways that attention to detail can help readers to contextualize and make sense of so many of the spectacles we witness when working in places where poverty and precarity shape the realities of health and sickness. In a series of afternoon workshops, she had us crunching numbers, making us re-think where the numbers we use in our texts come from, how are they produced and what they do when we use them in ethnography.

In his lecture, Robert Desjarlais, author of *[Subject to Death: Life and Loss in a](#)*

[Buddhist World](#) (2016), described in detail his writing method, from collecting data to writing field notes and analyzing them, to the final written outcome. In his workshops, he also challenged us to think about the vision we each had for our writing: in the manner of Italo Calvino and his *Six Memos for the next Millennium*, which six words would you characterize your ethnography with?

The third lecturer, Eileen Moyer, reminded us to attend to time and space in our texts, and quoted poets and fiction writers to inspire us to think about writing style when reading academic texts as well as fiction and other creative forms. In her workshop, she led us through a process of finding our own voices as writers, to reflect on the conditions we each need to find a flow, and to practice different narrative voices to reach different audiences, be they anthropological, public health or otherwise.

A week of lectures, discussions and concentrated writing time culminated in a morning of ethnographic slam on Friday morning. During the slam, workshop participants were encouraged to present something creative drawing on their anthropological work that they had written during the short, intensive period.

But what is an "ethnographic slam"?

Thinking of a creative way to highlight the work done during the week and to encourage creativity, we proposed an improvised experiment to bring together writing informed by ethnography with the form of a poetry slam, a type of performed poetry. Poetry slam was established in the 1980s by the Chicago poet [Marc Smith](#), who was tired of poetry being trapped within the confines of a small, elitist establishment that made poetry inaccessible to the outside, non-literary world, and also unbearable to listen to at a live reading (sound familiar?). Smith's solution to passionless, exclusive poetry readings was slam, a vivid, energetic performance in which the poet engages with the audience and together they form a community engaged in a lively dialogue. In the Introduction to his book [*Take the Mic: The Art of Performance Poetry, Slam and Spoken Word*](#) (2009), Smith urges aspiring poets:

Please don't be one of these soul-sucking zombie poets. Reach deep inside, pull out your pulsing heart, and fling it on the stage. Make the audience listen. Grab it by the throat…figuratively speaking, of course. Use your voice, your eyes, your body, your heart, your soul, and your mind to fire to life the passion, sense, and subtleties of the poetic words you toiled over past midnight, affixing them to the page. Make faces, stomp, gesture, whisper, yell! Do whatever it takes …

Given the enthusiasm and engagement that is invested into such events, it comes as little surprise that poetry slam quickly grew in popularity. First it took over the United States, where it gave rise to poetry slam masters such as [Sarah Kay](#), [Robb Q. Telfer](#), [Tim Stafford and Dan Sullivan](#). Since then it has been spreading ferociously around the world.

The ethnography slam we created at the end of our workshop was meant to take us a similar direction, to break the molds of rigid academic writing and presenting, real and imagined. A written text, performed in a way that makes the audience *actually listen*, with their whole body, not just the mind. Since this was a new territory for us to explore, there were few rules and instructions, but there were some: Take this opportunity to learn how to take the stage. Keep it short, two to five minutes at the most, but take your time, there's no need to rush, there won't be any Q&As, no discussions at the end. Use your body, play with your [hands](#), what can they express that escapes the words? Be creative, use your imagination however you can, let yourself go, just this one time it's allowed. And if you can find a way to make 33 people laugh at any point, all the better.

As in poetry slam, creativity, imagination and fun were at the core of our ethnography slam, to be used, to paraphrase Marc Smith, as tools to expand rather than limit the possibilities of the written word .[1] But there was one crucial difference between the two. Though initially set up as a variety show, poetry slam has eventually developed into a form of competition, whereby the audience evaluates the performance by clapping and the best poets are finally awarded ("*but not always*," reminds us Smith in his book).

In ethnography slam, however, competition was not our focus. We all experience enough of that when we're applying for scholarships, grants and positions. Even more importantly, competition breeds perfectionism, which is often exactly what curbs creative expression. Instead of trying to be perfect, the ethnography slammers were encouraged to create a 'safe space' for each other, a kind of soft cushion, couched in acceptance rather than judgment.

Because the week was intensive—structured around morning craft lectures, afternoon group work and two public keynotes—there was little time to prepare for the ethnography slam. This, and the fact that none of us had ever done an ethnography slam before, created a bit of anxiety: How to choose what to write about? When to find the time to write the text? And how to prepare for the presentation? Working in three smaller groups of eleven people was helpful for many when trying to find answers to those questions. To make the process of choosing the topic of the piece easier, each group chose a theme: *Difficulty, Silence, Dialogue*. Then, we brainstormed within our groups about the possibilities of what might be included in a presentation: Change of voice? How about some acting? Playing instruments? Showing short clips? Finally, we helped each other fine tune the words we used as well as to practice the performance itself. All this may sound like a lot, but because we had little time, we all managed to pull it off in a couple of hours.

And how did it turn out, in the end? Despite the constraints of time limits and insecurities related to diving into the unknown, the ethnography slammers rose to the challenge brilliantly. Set in a wonderful theatre space on the university campus rather than in a lecture room, the performances brought out laughter, tears, tensions and silences. Surprisingly, many stories dealt with troublesome issues or concerns that ethnographers faced when entering, staying in, or leaving their field. To paraphrase Kristine Krause, one of the ethnography slam performers,

we go out to the field to find certain stories, but we can never think about the

kind of stories that will find us.

On the day of the ethnography slam, it was these stories in particular that finally found their outlet.

Cheryl Maddalena (2009: 230), a poetry slammer, writes that while it may begin "with an inspiration and the simple impulse to perform original, heartfelt work on stage," poetry slam often entails a certain kind of personal transformation.[2] Or, as the poet Natalie Jordan put it, "performing from the heart improves the soul."[3]

> *If the ethnography slam had to be described with a single word, "transformative" would certainly be it.*

That was how Robert Desjarlais referred to it immediately after the event, and that is what, hopefully, will also become clear from the posts that will be published in this blog series over the coming week. Some of these posts have been slightly edited and adapted from the presentation to the written form. While it might have been best to see these presentations with one's own eyes, we decided against filming the slam in order to really make it a safe space for personal expression. Publishing online is, of course, a very different endeavor, as the virtual world is far from what could be called a safe space. Nevertheless, we hope that the blog readers will be able to catch some of the energy that ran though that day.

> *For those curious and courageous enough to try ethnography slam, this is our advice: infuse the event with kindness, have loads of fun, and let yourself be surprised.*

[1] Smith, Marc. *The Spoken Word Revolution (Slam, Hip Hop & the Poetry of a New Generation).* Ed. Mark Eleveld. Naperville: Sourcebooks Mediafusion, 2004 (p. 116).

[2] Maddalena, Cheryl J. "The Resolution of Internal Conflict Through Performing Poetry." Arts in *Psychotherapy* 36.4 (2009): 222-230.

[3] I Speak Verbatim; Now Here is the Ultimatum by Natalie "Olivia Moore" Jordan

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Slam that ethnography! – Imagine further

Eileen Moyer
November, 2016

After a week of performed ethnographic poetry, *Robert Desjarlais* and *Eileen Moyer* wrap things up in their concluding remarks. If you haven't read the posts yet, go back and start from the beginning. It's worth it!

Imagine Further

by *Robert Desjarlais*

Imagine yourself suddenly set down in a small theatre hall near a slow-moving canal at the University of Amsterdam one Friday morning in early June. There are signs that a music performance took place there the night before, chairs left here and there, electronic equipment in black boxes, a skinny microphone stands on an empty stage. Today, the room will be used for a rather unique event, an

ethnography slam, with a number of participants performing words, sounds, and images drawn from the tonalities of their fieldwork in places as diverse as Kenya, Indonesia, India, France, Germany, and the Netherlands.

Imagine further that most here are beginners, without previous experience, with little to guide them. People start to arrive, hesitantly, curious, filled with anticipation. They are carrying notebooks, pieces of papers, cups of coffee. They sit shyly in the audience, waiting for the first performance. The organizers of the event, courageous in their inventive effort, get things going by welcoming all those in attendance and encouraging the participants to speak freely, creatively, without concern for judgement or the formal constraints of academic writing.

The first performer takes the stage, the mood quiets, and spoken words resound through the room. We're being brought into the intricacies of a fieldwork encounter, but this is no dry piece of scholarship, there's no thesis argument or analytic frame or comprehensive body of research advanced for the sake of anthropological knowledge.

What there is, instead, is a taut play of dialogue and reflection that gets at a moment keenly real.

These words come to a close, the first performance is a success, there's relief in that, and slight surprise, and in the room along with a round of warm applause there is the faint but emerging sense that something different is at hand, charged, vast, unordinary.

The second performer takes the stage, and the next, still others follow, and with each of these immersive engagements we enter into select worlds of language, silence, stillness, relation, unspoken pain. The themes come like litanies of existence, tearing into what's at stake in the lives of those known through research encounters as well as what's crucially involved in the researchers' relations with them.

Through a mosaic of words we learn about the concerns surrounding a young man hooked on heroin in Indonesia, *Joshua is a good guy, his brother-in-law tells me...If he really wanted to put and put his mind to it, he could recover but...* We hear the playful, knowing rhymes of the Daktari, from Nairobi, *I'm kinda tired of WHO/ Telling me what to do*. We hear the words of an elderly woman stricken with dementia and the researcher who accompanied her in walks in hallways, *I tried to relate to Ms Lichthart by talking to her although I did not understand her, by repeating her words...* We encounter the lifeworld of an elderly woman being cared for by others, *the older you get, the more you are still... the wash cloth touches your face and moves to your left cheek...* We approach but can never comprehend fully the concerns of an admirable young woman struggling with a muscle disorder, *Instead of a perfect response, I would prefer some vulnerability.* We learn of an elderly woman who is considering her possible death through euthanasia, or by her own hand, *she might still have the problem that she might have wanted to die, but didn't know how to*. We come to know of a woman who died of cancer and the researcher and friend who cared for her through the days of her dying, *These are strange love stories, because we engage and follow, and open up and hardly draw boundaries*.

> *These are strange ethnographies that we are hearing, for in skirting the scholarly and professional demands of academic writing, in forgetting those constraints for a week or a morning, the performances open up our thinking on the lives and yearnings of those subjects who cannot be reduced to orderly, well-reasoned tracts of interpretation.*

The room is coming alive now with life in all its varied textures and tones, at once incisive, disordered, painful, moving, haunting. The energy of a particular scene or word, acts of encountering or listening to another, is with us now. And it's not just the lives of the subjects of the performed texts which are coming to our attention, be they the residents of nursing homes or schools or neighborhoods in far-off cities. We're also sensing the lives of the performers themselves, these vulnerable, spirited persons on the stage, performing alone or ensemble, many of

them at the start of promising careers, learning to write for the discipline, trying to locate their voice in writing, unsure of what is possible or permitted, and finding in the texts they penned through the week, in the midst of a writing session or drawn from their fieldnotes, an encounter that transfixed them. They're finding in these chords a voice that goes beyond what they have written to date, a poetic voice that seems to sing out to the world, beyond anything intended or anticipated that morning; and the sudden fact of this creative, emergent act, this *poiesis* on the spot, moves and surprises them, and us, speakers and audience members alike find themselves thrown into the emotive and imaginative charge of the performances, as if we're suddenly faced with a collective rite of transformation where the world and its subjects are starting to look different, and with this the potentialities of fieldwork and ethnographic writing take on renewed significance.

Imagine that ethnography, etymologically, is the writing of a people, the graphic trace of a way of a life, and that the graph of such writing usually takes form in the space of the printed page. Imagine further that the morning's performances led those in attendance to appreciate the ways in which ethnographic writing can go beyond the printed page and work otherwise than the well-honed channels of analysis and get at features of life in ways that disturb and alter the idea, the very graph, of ethnographic writing.

The Pleasures of Academic Life
by *Eileen Moyer*

The pleasures of academic life are many. Getting paid to read books I like, to hold conversations with people from life worlds radically different from my own, and to contemplate creative modes of sharing what I learn in the process: writing,

filmmaking, photography. I really do think it is amazing that such a profession exists, and I try to remind myself from time to time to be grateful that I get to live this life. There are moments, however, when no reminder is needed, when I'm simply overwhelmed by the joy of what I do.

In the past few months I have had the pleasure of being knocked flat, more than once, by the pleasure of watching PhD students and colleagues bravely experiment with new writing voices and tackling the tough, emotional topics that so often remain beyond the pale in academic writing.

This pleasure—well, pleasures really—emanate from an ethnographic writing workshop in which I was recently involved as organizer, lecturer, workshop leader, and audience member. The first pleasure came when the student co-organizers, Tanja Ahlin and Silke Hoppe, approached me in mid-2015 to propose that I work with them on "some kind of writing class for PhDs." Like them, I thought it strange that students were offered so little guidance on writing at the University of Amsterdam. Given that we are so often told that the thing we do most as anthropologists is write, one would think that more time, money and effort would go into thinking about and teaching techniques of ethnographic writing. Because much of my work is, like Tanja's and Silke's, situated in medical anthropology and science and technology studies, it also seemed to me that some sort of coaching should be made available to students who were expected to write for multiple audiences in the domains of (medical) anthropology, public health, global health and health policy. In our department, students also have the possibility of writing a dissertation based on articles or a book-length manuscript, yet they are not given training in these different modes of writing.

Having previously taught a course on ethnographic writing that was cut due to budgetary constraints—despite students rating the class highly and asking that it be taught again—I was truly pleased when Tanja and Silke approached me to organize 'something' to address their desires to improve their writing. Although I was not thrilled that we were expected to do this 'extra-curricularly,' in our own

time, I was happy to hear that there was a small fund we could draw upon to invite external lecturers. Together, we drew up a proposal that was eventually funded, we identified and invited two great writers of ethnography known for their generosity toward students (Julie Livingston and Robert Desjarlais), and began to plan the workshop. We knew we wanted to keep the class size small, so that we could workshop the writing in the way creative writing courses do. Given the great demand (more than 30 people signed up in a week!) we decided to offer plenary lectures in the morning and work in three groups of 10 (eventually 11 to accommodate the desperate to attend) to workshop ideas and writing samples in the late morning and afternoons.

For me, the workshop offered many additional pleasures, and I'm not just talking about the nice food in the beautiful Villa Mattern. Most importantly, I enjoyed getting to know the PhDs better. In my day to day work, I tend to focus most of my energy on 'my' PhDs, which brings its own pleasures, but hearing about the projects of other PhDs in the department made me more aware of the depth and breadth of our department.

I listened with wide open ears as students talked about their struggles to write up the densely packed ethnographic research materials they had collected.

We laughed and cried together as people shared paragraphs about chronic illness, growing old, physical impairment, drug addiction, loneliness, loss, love and death. Others, first year students mostly, attempted to develop an ethnographic voice that sounded both reflexive and informed. All in all, scary business. I was at times overwhelmed by the bravery of students who dared to experiment if front of their peers, not all of whom were friends.

Nothing, however, prepared me for the greatest pleasure of all: The Friday morning Ethnography Slam Event! Although we had conceived the event as a way to get people to experiment with writing styles and to practice *performing* rather than simply presenting their research, the truth is, we didn't really think too much about it. Or at least I didn't. I rather suppose that Tanja and Silke did a lot

more work on this front. I remember that on the morning of the event I drank a triple espresso before leaving the house, assuming that I was going to have to work hard to appear attentive during the four hours of scheduled back-to-back presentations in front of me. The night before, most of us had had a bit too much to drink at the closing social event of the week, and I was certainly a bit foggy brained. I'd been warned in advance from several participants that I should not expect much. I was told some people were even angry at me (at me??) for insisting that they perform publicly, that they didn't feel safe. Also, they didn't have time to prepare; the night before over drinks nearly everyone said they weren't at all ready.

Yet, from the first presentation, I was enthralled. I felt like a proud parent as writer after writer got up and performed—yes, PERFORMED—his or her ethnographically-informed theatre piece. Poems, multi-media presentations, short essays and just-so stories delivered with great ceremony and aplomb. Who ARE these people, I wondered? Are these really my students, my colleagues? Are these the people I pass in the hallway and nod at? The people I chat with at the coffee machine about methods and deadlines? Before the first hour was up, my phone and Cloud storage was full. No more room for videos and photos. Devastating. Devastating beauty, that is. When the performances came to an end, Tanja asked me if I or one of the other lecturers/teachers would say a few words, to reflect on the day.

But there were no words. We all agreed. It was impossible to follow such exceptional talent, emotion, and bravery with a mundane academic round-up.

The pleasure did not end there. In the days and weeks following the workshop, I was regularly approached my participants and their PhD supervisors. It seemed the effects of the workshop were already visible in dissertation and article manuscripts, that students who had been blocked before the workshop were finally writing again. Many were even enjoying it. Recently, I had the chance to watch one of the workshop participants deliver a paper-academic style. I felt

deeply proud (even had a tear in my eye) as she opened with a vignette that she had begun crafting in my workshop a few months earlier. She'd honed it to perfection and everyone was on the edge of their seat. How grateful I am to have played a small role in helping an amazing woman find her voice and gain the confidence to use it. The definition of pleasure.

Featured image (cropped) by *Carla de Souza Campos* (flickr, *CC BY-SA 2.0*)

Slam that ethnography! – It is what it is

Kristine Krause
November, 2016

Here's yet another round of ethnographic slamming with contributions by *Kristine Krause*, *Lex Kuiper*, *Marije de Groot*, and *Carola Tize*. Still not sure what an ethnography slam is? The introduction explains it all. You should also check out the first and second installment of this fabulous thematic week!

It is what it is
by *Kristine Krause*

This is a love story.
It is about **M**,
a special woman who died when she was only 43.
It is about things we get in fieldwork

that we have not asked for.

It is what it is.

[The first time ever I saw your face](#)
I was seeking shelter
from the rain on North East London's street in late November.
You sat quietly in the back of your shop,
your heavy eyelids half closed,
as if you were sleeping,
one of your round shoulders shifted out of your dress.
The regulars had opened the door for me.
I chitchatted with the men.
You were listening.
Later you just said:
Come back tomorrow, I will have a lot for you.

I came back the next day
and you made me fix the Christmas decoration.
You always made me do things I did not expect to do.
Things I had not asked for.

Bringing your money to the bank,
sleeping in your bed next to you,
with a flouncy pink silk nighty from you.
Washing you, when you were very sick and dying.

I ate your food –
I am still hungry for it.
The cross crust of your jollof rise.
Your spicy stews,
the nutty taste of your okra soup,
grilled Tilapia with your special seasoning.
I came almost every day for almost a year.

If not, you would call me:
K, where are you, come, I am waiting for you.

Later, when I came back to London,
your shop was my first stop:
The place where I would leave my bag.
The place where I would wait for friends.
The place where I would eat.
Your place: my fieldwork home.

You were the special woman,
who took me in
and helped me getting my research going.

Every fieldworker has a story like this:
people who for whatever reason help us getting started.
These are *strange love stories*,
because we engage and follow,
and open up and hardly draw boundaries.
Because we are doing fieldwork
and fieldwork means we take what we get, —- or not?

You were also the woman
who got really sick
and did not tell anybody
until the cancer became monstrous.
It scared the hell out of me.
My research was on what people do when they are sick.
But this was too much.

Things I have not asked for:
The evening when you called me from the hospital
after your monstrous and smelling wound had started bleeding again
and you said: K, come and wash me.

The impossibility to not follow this request.
I knew you were dying.

It was early in the morning,
and I took your scented soaps and lotions
from your flat, where I had slept.
I went to the hospital.
There you were:
thin and fragile,
in pain,
with the big smelling wound.
We walked to the shower with a walker.
I helped you untie the hospital gown.
There it was.
I took the handle from the shower,
I took soap,
I took a flannel.
I felt the structure of the monstrous growth under my fingertips.
Dragon skin.
I soaped the gross growth.
For a moment
I had the feeling the smell was gone a little bit.
I washed you.

And the nights
that followed the night of your death:
you came to me.
I don't believe in ghosts.
But I saw you.
Coming towards me
with this horrible wound
all over your front body
and your hands stretched out

towards me
Arrrgh!

Things I did not ask for:
A pink silk nighty,
food,
to wash you,
a ghost.

This is a love story.
It is about **M**,
a special woman who died when she was only 43.
it is about things we get in fieldwork
that we have not asked for.
It is what it is.

Joshua
by *Lex Kuiper*

Who is Joshua? As I flipped through my fieldwork notes, this question kept popping up. Until recently, the answer was condensed into just these few lines:

> Joshua is a man in his mid-thirties.
> He lives with his family.
> He uses heroin daily.
> He started methadone therapy not long ago.

This had somehow become Joshua; a still life composed of age, housing situation, and substance consumption. Frozen in time he was easily captured in these

dimensions.

In the text below, drafted for the Ethnography Slam, I wanted to do something that I then felt I could not do in my dissertation; that is, create a mosaic of Joshua that shows the complex temporalities at play and his deep, though often difficult, entanglement with other heroin users and his family.

Each tile in this mosaic is a window constructed from the words of others, from Joshua's memories, from his persistence to hope while he kept being orientated toward his past, and from the love and gratefulness he expressed for his family.

None of these windows give us an answer to 'Who is Joshua?' They do not try to capture him. Instead, they capture fleeting moments in a web of time, place and possibility. I hope these outlooks portray Joshua as more than a still life.

Joshua

Joshua is a good guy, his brother-in-law tells me. He was a great altar server. He knew the Bible by heart. Really, he could recite from it. He has been in and out of rehabilitation nineteen times and still has not recovered. If he really wanted to and put his mind to it, he could recover but...

...

Joshua

Joshua and I are sitting at his family's road-side restaurant. Two of his brothers are cooking in large pots and his mother is cutting vegetables in front of us.

He says: I went by [my heroin dealer], but he was not home […] It has become difficult to reach him lately. […] Now I can't find him and it is difficult to get my goods. […]

Can't you buy it somewhere else if you cannot find him?

I can buy from Angga, but Angga has become arrogant. Many people don't like it

that he shows off his status now. Also, it is more expensive while the quality is the same.

…

Joshua

I look at his mom, who is still cutting vegetables.

So your family knows you use, I ask.

Yes, they know… Poor mom, she still works here and gives me money.

Yeah, yesterday you got one million rupiah [from her] right? Can she afford that just with this food stall?

My mom gives it, but I already [cut my daily use by half]. But I need to buy new stuff.

…

Joshua

At home Joshua tells me: I truly want to change. My poor mother. And also, if my mother is not there anymore, how will my future be… And I am bored. My life is monotonous. Every day is the same: looking for heroin after waking up. My life has no goal. So I came up my own programme to become clean.

…

Joshua

My friend tells me, without a blink: they say Joshua got shot.

What? He got shot? Where did he get shot?

I don't know, Lex, usually it is in the leg. Yeah, he is a repeated offender right? Or

it is likely that he was already being followed by a police officer. Or maybe he wanted to flee.

...

Joshua

As I talk with Joshua, other methadone users wave their hands at me. 'Get away from him,' they signal. Zorro even calls me, saying I should come over... I signal that everything's okay. But Eka comes over and sits behind me with his phone for no apparent reason. I think he wants to check whether Joshua wants my money. Joshua seems to be too much in his own thoughts to notice.

...

Joshua

Yesterday my mother asked: 'When? When do you really want to stop?' My poor mother...

When do you want to stop?

Well... later. I still take methadone here, but I bring a plastic bag. Yesterday they did not look, I immediately spit the methadone in the plastic bag. Joshua laughs.

I saw there is a sign now, they say there is someone who is often naughty [and therefore people need to swallow methadone in front of a nurse].

Joshua laughs. I don't want to drink continuously, I don't want to become their asset. I'm afraid I will get stuck. Many [users have become] like that. They order me to increase my methadone dosage, but I don't want to...

Oh, [the clinic's staff] order you to increase your dose?

Yes, they want me to increase it, but later I'll end up being unable to leave.

...

Joshua

The most important thing is not to lose hope. If you lose hope you become lazy to live.

...

Joshua

Before heroin would be transparent, but now it's dirty... But still we have an evil brain that will tell us to keep using it. And this is the effect. I used to have so many girls everywhere and now... I've to pay women for sex.

It's a pity right, all my brothers are older than me, but I look the oldest. I've spent all my money and all my youth.

...

Joshua

On a cupboard in his family home many trophies with Joshua's name are on display. On the wall, pictures of him and his motorcycle.

Sorry my house is so small, he says.

He points at a smiling image of himself.

Here my face is still great, right... Not yet destroyed by drugs. No infections had appeared yet.

The pictures display him on a motorcycle or standing with a trophy. He points at the girls holding the racing flags.

I would go clubbing with the women every night.

He points at other people:

This one died.

This one overdosed.

This one now has a store selling motorcycle parts.

This one became an entrepreneur.

They also used, everyone used. It was just that... they had it under control.

...
Joshua

Intuition and emotions in research
by *Marije de Groot*

After a week of writing and learning how to use different voices in text, how to deal with numbers and percentages, and discussing the translation of field notes into text, the moment was there for the ethnography slam. The ethnography slam turned out to give space to emotions that were developed during my fieldwork. One of my uncertainties while studying the wishes to die and desire for euthanasia of elderly people in the Netherlands, was about researching someone's ideas and concerns for the future. This raised questions about what this talking about the future means. Will stories change, or maybe even disappear over time? Since you get closer to your fears or when you get closer to making a final decision, many people might change ideas, move their concerns a bit further forward or might come across other aspects of life that make all these thoughts less, or more, relevant. At certain moments, data can feel slippery or give the

feeling of a fata morgana that disappears when you come close.

Where is the space in academic writing to deal with intuition and uncertainties? It's not always easy or possible to integrate these feelings into your academic text or presentations, although they are interesting for debate. What do or can we do with them?

Emotions might influence our work, the way we write about our data, but also our – or my – own feelings during the writing process. This slam gave me the opportunity to be creative with my own intuitions and uncertainties, to become aware of their existence, to work with them, to give them space and to process them into text and performance.

Unexpectedly, all the emotions that were processed by the slam participants into beautiful and dynamic performances brought an intense explosion of energy. The event created motivation and the ability to deal with a large part of our work that is overshadowed in the daily academic life. It was an intense bonding experience too. Unfortunately, it is not possible to completely capture and translate these dynamical performances into written text, but below is my attempt to do so.

Studying the 'will be' and 'might have'

If he will be very old and if his wife will have died. If they will not have been able to have children. If he will sit alone all goddamned day in a small rental apartment. If there will only be a few people left in the neighbourhood he lives in and if all these people will not be his type of people. If he will have the idea that other people start to forget that they are dealing with a person when dealing with him, and if he will suffer from loneliness. Then he would ask the GP for euthanasia.

He opens the door, walks back with his walker into the living room, sits down on his sofa and turns off the TV. The girl for whom he just opened the door is sitting on the couch next to him. He tries to listen to what the girl is saying, but he can't

hear her words and decides to start talking about what he wants to say: he wants to die, but doesn't know how to die in a decent way. He stands up, walks with his walker to the table where all the paperwork for his euthanasia request is organized next to the book with pictures of his life. The girl is now sitting at the other side of the table. He tells the girl that he asked two doctors for euthanasia, but they both refused his request. They expected someone with terrible pain, which he does not have. But – as he explains to the girl – sitting alone, the whole goddamned day … Loneliness also hurts. He expects to lose his independency and to become dependent from care. This system of care provokes him to die in a less decent way, to use the old knife of his father. But he does not want to do this and hopes that, although the girl says that she only listens and can't actually do anything for him, this story might change the law or influences the opinion of doctors. So he waits, uncertain about the time he should wait and what could happen.

He might have wanted euthanasia if he might have become so old and if his wife might have died years earlier. If he became lonely. He might have requested euthanasia with his GP and he might have said that in case he might stop eating and drinking he might also die. But he might have refused to do that. Without food it might have been okay, but without fluids perhaps not. He might have asked another doctor for help. They might have told him that he should stop taking his medication first. But not taking medications might have brought back his old pain that he had gotten the pills for, or he might have increased the risk to get a stroke. And for whom might he in that case have suffered for? And in case all of these things might have worked out in this way, he might still have the problem that he might have wanted to die, but didn't know how to. And the chance that he might have used the old knife of his father might have become bigger. Which might also have been awful for the nurses who might have found out in the morning and might have to mop all the blood away.

This all might have happened if he would not have died in a natural way a few months later.

The Inevitable Effects of Divergence
by *Carola Tize*

The process of writing my dissertation has unexpectedly familiarized me with the entire emotional spectrum, and has simultaneously deepened my relationship with my computer, whom I have nicknamed Cesar. He carries my writing alter ego with an ironic twist; at times he appears as a dictator, commanding, demanding and relentless. Other times he has been kind, diplomatic and surprisingly willing to compromise in moments of contemplation.

While the field research suited my natural patterns as a social butterfly and networker, writing and sitting has been an unexpected journey of self-discovery, a relentless quest inward to find my own voice.

> *The question as I was starting to write was, 'How can I write in a way to truly represent my voice and my style, while at the same time representing the voices of others?'*

Gaining confidence in my style has been an ongoing process, and has yet to stabilize as part of my newly acquired academic identity. I am still discovering what it means to find a consistent flow and relay the potential millions of words, sentences and paragraphs that are jammed in the indefinable crevices of my brain.

Searching for 'the' representative voice and style, is not purely developing in relationship with my computer. Instead it has come to take shape as an ongoing process in reflection with others. The ethnographic writing workshop came at a time when I was fraught with self-doubt. I could say that I was blocked, and was

riding the ebbs and flows of emotions that come with placing insecure words on a page that I myself did not envision completing. From one day to the next we were suddenly immersed in a space where we were able to share and explore writing voices, styles and simultaneously provide support in our mutual struggles to portray social worlds we observed as bystanders during a specific period in our lives. Shifting perspectives and voices allowed new ways of depicting ethnographic moments, which previously had seemed distant and lacking interconnection. It was in exchange that new ideas and words took shape.

The ethnographic slam became a platform for exploring creativity in our writing and presentation styles. We were engaged in team efforts, cooperation and laughter much needed in our lonely writing endeavors. We went far beyond our comfort zones and transitioned into a dynamic presentation process that moved everyone from laughter to tears to reflection.

The piece I decided to present was taken from observations of the school ethnography I conducted in Berlin-Neukölln, and focused on intergenerational processes and the role of youth agency in resisting or reiterating social vulnerabilities through the generations. This piece probably would not have come to find the light of day, if we had not pushed ourselves to think outside the box.

Shut the door Amir!

The empty hallway is filled with anticipation. The grey stone floors seem to cave inward with years of heavy use. Tiny specs of grey decorative gradation give way to the naked cement in front of the funneled spaces, the most frequented centimeters that merge learning and imagined freedom. The yellow glim of artificial light obscures the untold stories and encounters formulated over decades. The combination of murky yellow and meaningless beige portrays walls of another era. Black streaks from the sole of sneakers and chipped paint signify human contact, at times obscured by indefinable substance clusters that forbid willing contact. Next to the door frame of the room number 8D a massive hole commemorates a moment of uncontrolled anger, yet to be repaired. Down the hall

the rare absence of a disobedient student on the brown wall mounted bench marks a moment of serene rarity.

The door to 7B opens, a hand appears and beyond the orderly chaos of a math class becomes visible. "Shut the door Amir!" "But I'm done and I have to go to the bathroom" "Shut the door NOW!" The door closes and the voices lose clarity from the distance of the hallway.

The closed doors confine the boundaries of the fragile stillness, permeating no further than the peripheries designated by cement and wood. The cacophony of screams, laughter and the pushing of furniture only penetrate into the empty hall between spaces intended for learning.

The undeniable shrill voice of Lara, the teacher from 7A commands one of the students to get back to her seat. Her voice permeates even cement walls at a threatening pitch that demands obedience. A moment of calm before a shriek erupts with a sudden scuffling of furniture behind the door of 7A. The door flies open and Lara commands Omar in front of the door. "Sit and we'll discuss after class!" Only a few minutes until the bell. Omar fidgets, goes back to door and decides to peek in and wave to his friends. "Omar, OUT!"

He becomes the sign of life in the dim hallway until less than a minute later the giggling and then scuffling of four feet becomes audible. Two girls appear, one holding the edge of her black headscarf, which had come undone. With full body weight she slams open the door to the girl's bathroom and the two girls disappear inside.

Once again the hallway returns to the ever imminent stillness of anticipated chaos.

Slam that ethnography! – Breaking boundaries

Sarita Fae Jarmack
November, 2016

Welcome to part two of this week's ethnography slam, this time with contributions by [Josien de Klerk, Annelieke Driessen, Susanne van den Buuse,](#) and [Sarita Fae Jarmack.](#) Missed the previous posts? Here's the [introduction](#) and the [first part](#) of the slam.

Unbounded Ethnography

by *Josien de Klerk*

The text you will find below is not written to be read. It was performed in an Ethnography Slam, together with eight other texts all around the theme of stillness. The Ethnography Slam was part of an invaluable workshop on Ethnographic writing organised by the [Health, Care and the Body Programme Group](#) of the Amsterdam Institute of Social Science Research at the University of Amsterdam in June 2016. Writing used to be something I did, struggled with and, occasionally, enjoyed. But after the discussions on the voice of a text, the delicate balance between spectacle and the mundane, and distinguishing between myself and being a narrator, I have come to view writing as a craft, a skill that can be practiced, something that you can experiment with like a painter does with colours and techniques. And I do experiment, practicing tone and voices in my writing; in articles, or little observations of everyday life. It is fun to think about performing texts, teach students to change writing styles in text, or to integrate videos in online texts (unfortunately the text below was not filmed):

> *there is an entire world of creative possibilities in writing and lecturing. That for me is the idea of ethnography as unbounded, to think beyond our normal 'categories' of output, and that is true invaluable lesson I picked up from the workshop.*

My work on the aging body and generational care in Tanzania was already a mixture of writing and filming. The delicateness and slowness of moving in advanced old age renders itself extremely suitable for film: long shots in the edited product can capture the slowness of movement. The detail of skin and tendons from up close, the older person's spirit contained in a look can capture strength and frailty at the same time. It is therefore that the text I wrote for the ethnography slam is a performance about 'producing fieldwork': how we filmed a 93-year old Tanzanian woman. In the text I try to capture in words the irony that

we asked her to 'move' to show her 'immobility'. Unbounded ethnography: a text about producing a film that I then use to teach students.

Before reading the text below, imagine a stage, a semi-dark theatre, a few lights directed at the stage and a group of eight researchers standing, saying nothing for a long time. Just standing, until the public starts to shift uncomfortably. After all, the theme of our group is stillness. Then imagine each researcher coming on stage one by one pausing, before performing their texts. When you read this text imagine silences, different tones of voice, volume-changes and gestures.

"Birds sing and rays of sun shine through the open door diffusing their light in the half-dark room. A wooden bench for visitors stands to the side of the entry-door leading to the back-room.

Its midday and quiet, her grown grandsons are out working. On the opposite wall a poster in English. 'If you don't love me now, don't love me later.

A mattress lies near one side of the room, a girl, feverish is resting on it.

Close to her *she* sits, legs stretched out in front of her. The colourful cloth she is wearing falls off her shins, revealing wrinkled but shiny skin. The tendons in her arms stand out, she must be *so* strong.

I ask her to get up and to show how she is doing work on the land. It's no problem for her, a radio-show already captured her long life-story; she a woman who lost her children, raised her grandchildren and still remembers the Germans.

She rises to the challenge, with a look of barely contained laughter. She slowly rolls on her knees, uses her stick as a lever and hand over hand over hand lifts herself. At 93, movement does not come easily.

She stands and walks, one foot after another, crossing the meters to the *shamba* nearby. There, she pauses, let's herself fall down and starts weeding, meanwhile throwing jokes at a neighbour.

ZOOM to her hand, capturing its routinized movements

ZOOM to her calloused feet, the cracked soles used to walking barefoot.

And back to the house again, the same process. Ever so slowly she places her stick in front and starts lifting. Hand over hand, over hand, over hand, until she stands on her feet.

She shuffles back, bends down deep and enters the semi-dark room.

She leans to the wall and she gently drops down.

Her deep bellowing voice resonates in the house when she laughs and talks. Her face is still dark in the places where the thief hit her two weeks ago and she looks affectionately at the young grandson who came to her aide.

It is quiet inside, time has come to stop, now that we are done with the movement.

We continue to film.

Outside bicycles pass, chicken chuckle, her grandson plays soccer.

Dust particles dance in the sun, coming from the grass-covered floor. They are joined by the smoke from the stubble of cigarette she has just rolled from home-grown tobacco-leaves. She holds it between her long stiff fingers, and takes a deep drag.

Blowing out smoke she looks away, in obvious delight and then

… just

… rests."

TRANSLATING DEMENTIA

by *Annelieke Driessen*

1.

You will read in my dissertation–
That I walked with 'Ida Lichthart' [1].

You will read in my dissertation–
That Ida told me that she was nervous, and that her husband had broken his own bicycle but was angry with *her*.

You will read in my dissertation–
That I did not understand her and yet tried to respond to what she said – first with questions, then with affirmative statements, wondering whether it was her or I who was incapable of understanding.

2. [2]	**3.**
o "Buhhdddddddd dat eee – eens zo ook. Ja ik…"	o "Buhhdddddddd that aaa – once so too. Yes I…"

	Ida walks the hallways. Her thin body wrapped in her night gown. About this, her daughter commented to me: my mother used to be 'fuller', to be heavier, now just a shadow of who she once was, she is now – in the words of her daughter – what she would have never wanted to be. The 'incontinence pad' as nurses call it, full, between her legs. She just got up. The psychologist had suggested not to wake her. To let her get up in her own pace. So she does. Then Ida walks. The care workers will soon walk with her, take her by her arm, lead her to one of the old-smelling bathrooms. Soothe her while she screams. Wash and change her. But for now, Ida walks the hallways. She has taken my arm. Taking me along as if that is what was always supposed to happen. We walk towards a door.
– "Open, Openmaken?"	– "Open, Open up?"
o "Ik ben zo – ik ben zo zo, ik ben nou *zo* zenuwachtig van dit van.. h-hij mijn man die heb eigen.. maar hij heeft het meteen degeen die.. meteen.. ik word als…"	o "I am so – I am so so, I am really *so* nervous of this of… h-he my husband he have own… but he has it immediately the one who… immediately… I become as…"

	I speak carefully:
– (voorzichtig) "Zenuwachtig"	– "Nervous"
	I use her words to affirm her affect. She continues:
o "Maar hij had hh-het zelf – had hij zijn *eigen fietss* ssstukgaat – stukgemaakt op de…"	o "But he had it-tt by himself –he had his *own bicycle* breaks – broken on the…"
– "Stukgemaakt? Echt?"	– "Broken? Really?"
	I repeat her words.
o "JA! Vier."	o "YES! Four."
– "Vier?"	– "Four?"
o "Vier! Vier, maar ook ook dus bijna vier." (pauze) "Nou eh …"	o "Four! Four, but also also so almost four." (pause) "Well eh…"
	And then she speaks clearly:
o (helder:) "en *toen was hij kwaad op mij* en hij had het nog, nou komt het ook weer met een bak van binnen." (pauze)	o "and *then he was angry with me* and he still had it, now it comes again too with a bin from inside." (pause
– "Hij was kwaad op u! Was hij kwaad op u?"	– "He was angry with you! Was he angry with you?"
o "JA! Ja ja. Maarja, meestal heb je ze dan omdat ze je dan staan bovenboord en zo. Ze zz… zeggen ze … tussen sowieso kan je … dat is zuuh schapen… ja dat zzz ze kan een beetje schaatsen met die honden. Beetje gek hè?	o "YES! Yes yes. But well, mostly you have them then because they stand you above board and so. They they ss… say… between anyhow you can… that is zuuuh sheep… yes that sss she can ice skate a bit with those dogs. A little crazy, right?"
	She speaks softly:

– (zacht:) "Ze kan een beetje schaatsen hè, ja!"	– "She can ice skate a little bit with those dogs. A little crazy, right? Yes!"
	I move through the hallways by her side. She had grabbed my arm, taking me along on her seemingly never ending walks in the circuit of the hallways. She holds my arm still. Moves as if I am now a part of her.
o "Ja, ja Ja."	o "Yes, yes, yes."

4.

In my dissertation
You will not read Ida's words as she spoke them

In my dissertation
You will read that I could not understand

In my dissertation
you will not read what I could not understand.

*****

The four parts of the slam stand, in reversed order, for translations that I (must) do in my research: translating practices in which I participated and observed into field notes (3), translating conversations into recordings (here I am aided by my voice recorder), translating transcriptions from Dutch to English (2), and translating these data into an argument (1).

The questions usually raised about these translations pertain to ethical concerns about informed consent in relation to recording conversations with people with

dementia, accuracy of translation, the quality of field notes and analytical rigour respectively. In my slam, I tried to speak to these questions, while at the same time speaking to the impossibility of answering them.

> *The question of consent is indeed a thorny one, even if one believes, like I do, consent to be a process.*

This consent, I would like to argue, is very well possible with people with dementia if the researcher relates to them with care. This begins with carefully designing the research, taking into account the vulnerabilities of the research participants; and requires attentiveness throughout fieldwork and writing. Striving for this consent, I tried to relate to Ms Lichthart by talking to her although I did not understand her, by repeating her words, by translating her words into text, her Dutch into English, her incomprehensible speech into my writing.

When taking this stance, recording conversations with respondents with dementia can be regarded as a way to engage with the politics of exclusion in academic writing: recording, transcribing and performing the voice of those who are now not understood, is itself an attempt to take them seriously, while neither projecting meaning onto them, nor showcasing them as 'gibberish'. By including the recording with Ida's voice, mediated by my recorder and the speakers, into my slam, I hoped to make her part of the academic conversation in which she would otherwise never be heard.

Doing an 'accurate' translation, or at least one that is true to what Ida said, is not easy either. Aware of difficulties of translating from one language to another in general, I found it to be sheer impossible to translate Ida's and my conversation into English (let alone to perform it as if merely the language had changed!). Is 'zuuuh' a sound, or rather a word – 'ze' [she]? Or is it half a word maybe, like the start of 'zussen' [sisters] or maybe even a word that starts differently, like 'zacht' [soft]? And is 'schapen' (which translates as 'sheep') not a first attempt to say 'schaatsen' ('ice skating', the word that Ida says right after 'schapen'), and would

translating it as 'sky skating' be more 'accurate'? By choosing 'sheep' as a translation, do I make Ida sound more incoherent than she seemed in Dutch?

Yet another translation took the form of my narration of the events. Translating practice into words *cannot* be done accurately – and yet I wrote the words. With my slam I hoped to problematise the 'power' I have over Ida's wor(l)ds. This is reflected in my slam's introduction and conclusion, which is once again devoid of voices out of order like Ida's, which are nevertheless the reason and foundation of my writing.

In our group we took up the challenge to do something in the slam that we could not do in writing. And yet, here I am trying to write it.

In replacing the voice recording with the transcript much is lost: the sound of Ida's voice, even if mediated by the recorder, the way it sounds, it trembles, it hesitates – none of this can be heard in the written text. But even so, doing this slam made me realise that the boundaries of academic writing can be pushed, as long as I remain aware of the translations embedded in the text, through which Ida's and my conversation is altered again and again.

[1] Here I am using a pseudonym. In the safe space of the performed slam, I used Ida's real name.

[2] When I performed the slam on stage, I stepped forward with every new layer of translation added to the text. Instead of the Dutch transcription of the recording used here (2), I played the original recording of Ida's and my conversation to the group. I considered uploading the original recording here to be too sensitive in terms of research ethics, for Ida's voice could be identified.

How I discovered the poet in me

by *Susanne van den Buuse*

How do you learn to write as an ethnographer? Of course, the answer is: you learn by doing. Yet, I have always felt a lack of guidelines, a starting point. What general rules or lessons can you hold in the back of your mind when writing? At the Ethnographic Writing workshop, me and a group of fellow PhD students finally got the guidelines we were longing for. Three renowned ethnographers Julie Livingston, Robert Desjarlais and Eileen Moyer were willing to share their writing tips and tricks with us. Not just in the much used lecture format, but mainly in working with us in small groups for an entire afternoon each. We wrote about a number that appeared in our research, we observed in busy places, and thought about our values in writing – what do we find important when we write? One of the most interesting exercises we had to do was thinking about the question: who are you as a narrator? This is not the same person as you in your daily life. How do you find out what kind of narrator is within you? Being familiar with an objective writing style resulting from my psychology background, I tried to play with a – to me totally unfamiliar – poetic, descriptive style. Below you see the result, written in less than one hour during the workshop and presented in our 5 minute presentations at the end of the week.

> *The beauty and richness of all the stories from our field and the ease with which we were able to come up with them, creatively written and presented with movement, sound and even play, was astonishing to me. This makes the workshop the best experience I have had in my PhD life so far.*

"No more stillness

Still. Go to the dictionary. Look up the word still. It's an adjective. Means: not moving or in motion. Also means: free from disturbance, agitation, or commotion.

Sounds peaceful, doesn't it? Sounds relieving. Relaxed. Free from disturbance. Not moving. Pausing.

The older you get, the more you are still. Your brain cells do not fire as many electric impulses. Your joints stiffen. You remain seated more. You move less. Eventually you surrender to your aging body, and to the hands of the nurses. They do the moving now, for you. Or rather, you move together. The nurse moves when you cannot. The nurse extends you.

But then, wouldn't you like to do more by yourself? Wouldn't that make you feel good? The nurse hands you the wash cloth, holding it with both hands so that the opening faces you. She gives you an encouraging smile. You feel the implicit request, implicit demand. You raise your arm slowly, reach out your hand, slide it into the wash cloth. It has been long since you held a wash cloth. It feels wet and soft. The nurse already put the soap on it. Slowly you start moving your hand and bring it to your face. You close your eyes.

The wash cloth touches your face and moves to your left cheek. In a circling motion you guide it over your left cheek, your mouth, right cheek. A drop of soapy water runs down your arm, which trembles as you fight the force of gravity, lying in your bed. The image of the nurse, nodding with encouragement, appears vaguely through your eye lids which you hold nearly closed against the soap. Your hand arrives all the way up at your forehead again. "Well done!" the nurse calls out. Tired from the exercise, your arm slides back on the bed sheet. It is still trembling. You sigh.

The nurse grabs the wash cloth again, rinses it, and removes the soap from your face. Three firm strokes. Dries your face with a towel. You blink a few times. Well, didn't it feel good? To have washed your face again, after so many years?

The next morning, as you wake up, your arm hurts a little. Oh, but that will get better with practice! Don't you worry. There is knocking on the door. The nurse enters before you can answer. As always. Good morning! She gives you a quick look with a smile. Moves hastily into your bathroom. Things being moved, running

water. Are you ready to try some washing today?

No more stillness. Activity is what counts. Activity is good. No more stillness.”

Bridging distance: letter writing

by *Sarita Fae Jarmack*

It is always nerve-racking to *perform* at a panel, but I figure if I have followed the standards guided by those before me, tested amongst peers, and refined with the help of editors, surly not too much damage can be done reading all those blocks of words out loud. Academic papers have rules. They are formulated to conclude. They are structured into fact-packed and squared off paragraphs. As they generate currency, they have purpose, a destination. But a year into my PhD, I was wondering where is the space to explore the unconventional content, to experiment with unfinished content? Should I tuck it away for rainy Sunday mornings, pretending to separate it off from the process that goes into writing conference papers? As I am interested in blurring these boundaries, I took this ethnography slam as a space to do so. Under a group topic *Dialogue*, I shared about a fun habit of mine during fieldwork: letter writing. In some small way, through my practice I hope to continue experimenting with challenging this panel reading tradition.

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…and for those days when writing just doesn’t seem so fun, [making a recording of work is a nice alternative](.).

> *Sliding my hand across the paper in micro movements, my muscles contract with each hand-written letter. Can you see my hesitations*

between the words or the smudged trails of ink on the ends of sentences? I sulk in my horrendous spelling with scribbles here and there and purposely shmooshed together letters to hide my lack of commitment to awkward words. Pausing to warm my hands on the coffee cup, I set it down leaving a ring – a signature of its own on the papers of my life. The candles dance on the table while the hum of chatter and coffeehouse music plays in the background. My fingertips touch the corners of each paper, letting the sharp edge crease my skin.

Pulled from my core and spewed out as a canvas of thought, my hands slowly breathe life into my affection for those of whom the letters are received by. I meditate on your existence as I write. An extension of my being, bridging space and time with those at a distance. This letter is a place for others to mingle between the crevasses of my brain, the intimate contradictory thoughts of which my daily shortcomings are made of. I wish for it to be a dialogue of play between the realities in which you and I live amongst.

Those letters, with their unique fold, penmanship, smell, and touch; They go beyond the impact of which any email or text could possibly hold. They are tangible and travel with me, a piece of you and thus a piece of me in return, saved for years, left as windows into our lives and sealed with our own spit.

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