

# Introduction

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CREATING NONFICTION ACCOUNTS OF OUR RESEARCH

# THE STORIES WE TELL



LIFECYCLE OF A RACETRACK  
GHANA IS DIFFERENT  
A VERY SPECIAL BIRTHDAY PRESENT  
UP MY ALLEY  
PORTRAIT OF A MUSEUM  
FIELD ENCOUNTERS OF THE THIRD KIND  
CARING FOR TEETH  
TRADING SOLITUDE II COUNTER-INTUITIVE SQUARED  
FARMERS AND FOODIES  
A RIJEKA MORNING  
ON WATCHING SHOES BEING MADE IN ADDIS ABABA  
AN ENCOUNTER WITH AMUSEMENT HUNTERS ON CHINESE SOCIAL PLATFORMS  
IDENTIFYING THE TROUBLE WITH PRACTICES OF ARTISTIC RESEARCH  
BED SHARING PRACTICES IN A HOLY CITY IN SENEGAL  
GETTING ACQUAINTED WITH THOSE WE OPPOSE  
GOING CRYPTO  
THE LONG GAME  
BIG BROWN DATA  
DREAM OF ELECTRIC PEOPLE?  
NO ENGINEERS

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Maastricht University

# *The Stories We Tell:*

Creative Nonfiction  
Accounts of Our Research

*Edited by Elsje Fourie and Christin Hoene*

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# Intro- duction

Elsje Fourie and Christin Hoene

Time comes into it  
Say it. Say it.  
The universe is made of stories,  
not of atoms.

*Muriel Rukeyser, The Speed of Darkness*<sup>1</sup>

This anthology combines creatively written accounts of research conducted by members of the University of Maastricht's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASoS). We come from a faculty accustomed to looking beyond the physical nature of things; we might therefore find Rukeyser's poem particularly compelling, with its notion that stories swirl around us as effortlessly and pervasively as drops of water or molecules of air. To go a step further, that stories not only surround us, but *are us*—that our lives can hardly be imagined as anything other than a collection of stories we tell others and ourselves. And there's something for each of our disciplines in the poem's message. For the historians, the notion of stories sedimented slowly over time; for the philosophers, sociologists and anthropologists of science, the blurring of lines between the natural and the social. Those who study the arts might be struck by the sparse beauty of her words, while those among

us who study politics and globalisation are reminded that narratives are more ancient and powerful than borders.

This anthology is borne, however, from a suspicion that we scholars in the social sciences and humanities are not the only ones who believe that stories matter deeply. Tales, narratives, myths, yarns, fables, sagas, chronicles, episodes: whatever their flavour, stories seem to be a language we all speak in one form or another. We suspect this applies to researchers outside FASoS, too. In social psychology, criminology, and all sorts of other fields, scholars increasingly refer to a “narrative turn.”

Of course, you don't need to be an academic at all to believe in the power of stories. The impulse to dissect last night's must-see HBO drama around the water cooler with colleagues, or to read just one more chapter of that new novel before bedtime is the same human impulse that likely prompted you to pick up the booklet you hold in your hands. And it is the same impulse that—we hope—will keep you turning its pages.



<sup>2</sup> At FASoS, we would particularly like to thank the Faculty Board and our colleagues Sally Wyatt, Aagje Swinnen, Anique Hommels, Esther Versluis, Darian Meacham, and Raf de Bont.

The 19 short vignettes contained herein are the results of our collective effort. We decided to write them in the form of creative non-fiction (CNF), a burgeoning literary genre that uses the techniques of creative writing to tell factually accurate narratives. In the words of a key proponent, CNF involves “writing true stories that provide information about a variety of subjects, enriched by relevant thoughtful ideas, personal insight, and intimacies about life and the world we live in.”<sup>3</sup> If this sounds like a rather vague definition, that’s because the genre is indeed flexible. What matters is that its authors present their experiences and the experiences of others “truthfully” (here definitions vary but fundamentally involve keeping to an unspoken contract with the reader) but with the kind of writerly flair usually associated with fiction, poetry, and screenplays.

The idea for this volume came about when one of its editors, fresh from completing a creative writing course and a novel manuscript, returned to the office eager to further develop these skills, and to share them with colleagues. Three creative writing workshops at FASoS followed. What immediately became clear was just how much of an unfilled need there was at our institution for events such as these. Participants hailing from several faculties opened up to each other in surprising and inspiring ways over the course of several afternoons spent playing with words. So great was the enthusiasm that we decided not to end the project there, but to develop some of the short pieces we’d written together into a printed anthology. The project picked up a co-editor, a researcher with experience both in analysing creative writing and creating her own. A visually talented contributor and colleague, Sarah Anschütz, stepped up to design a cover image that strikingly evokes our volume’s theme. A final key step involved securing funding from a faculty board and a set of department heads innovative and generous enough to believe in the value of this rather unusual initiative.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Gutkind, L. (2023). *What is Creative Nonfiction?* *Creative Nonfiction*. <https://creativenonfiction.org/what-is-cnff/>.

For the sake of cohesion, we gave all the contributors to this volume a more specific brief: to write a short vignette that either evoked a particular setting or recounted an event that they had encountered while conducting research. Within these modest constraints, approaches varied greatly. Some of the resulting pieces transport the reader to locations past, present, and even virtual through lush prose and sensory descriptions: Maud Oostindie makes the woodsmoke of the Italian Alps sing, and Brigitte Le Normand imagines what the bustling Yugoslav port of Rijeka must have looked, smelled, and tasted like in the 1950s. As we see through Yiming Wang’s depiction of Chinese-language fan communities online, the places we write about can be offline, online, or both at once. Many of these settings at first glance might appear ordinary. In Emilie Sitzia’s museum, Paul Stephenson and Johan Adriaensen’s drab “Eurocrat” offices, Sally Wyatt’s dentist’s chair and Ragna Zeiss’ toilet, the seemingly mundane is brought to life and shown to be anything but. Each in their own way offer a

reminder that compelling stories can be found everywhere, if we only look closely enough.

Some vignettes contain a clear plot: Valentina Mazzucato’s account of fieldwork in Amsterdam’s stigmatised Bijlmer district and Karlien Stribosch’s depiction of a tense night among fellow travellers in Senegal both deploy suspense to keep us wondering what will happen next and then upend our expectations. Others focus on character, taking us into the minds and lives of the people they have studied. Through Jacob Ward we learn what once made a surprisingly influential British Telecom engineer tick, while Marie Rickert shows us that pre-schoolers Pim and Louis have interesting things to teach us as they play. We follow Aneta Spendzharova’s

Bulgarian “cryptoqueen” as she evades the FBI’s attempts to track her down and with the help of Christin Hoene are invited to imagine how Indian physicist Jagadish Chandra Bose might have felt opening a research institute named after him during the height of British colonial rule.

*Many of us still felt “these sorts of things” don’t get published in our usual ports of call.*

Sarah Anschütz takes us into Esther's unassuming apartment in order to show how cultural barriers are broken down in real time. Then there are those authors who take the opportunity to explicitly explore their own relationships to their research subjects: Ferenc Laczó and Inge Römogens push the boundaries of the vignette form as a way of reflecting boundaries they would like to see pushed in their own disciplines; Elsje Fourie and Inge Melchior use their ethnographic visits to an Ethiopian shoe factory and Estonian war commemoration respectively as

As the above survey makes clear, we have therefore interpreted the concept of "story" loosely. Some of the writers, particularly the anthropologists among us, already had some experience with presenting their research in similar ways. Others were relatively new to this approach. What united contributors across their differences was the sense that so many things happen while we are conducting research—things that are funny, unsettling, chaotic, contradictory, atheoretical—that don't ever make it into the journal articles or the books. CNF might be on the rise both inside and outside academia, but many of us still felt "these sorts of things" don't get published in our usual ports of call.

lenses through which to reflect on the culpability of the researcher in ethically grey areas.

What also united us was the desire to bring our research to a new audience. To give our students, our colleagues outside our areas of study, and anyone else who might be interested a taste of what we do; to lend our research a playful, human dimension to which we believe many people from all walks of life can relate. Contributors themselves were immensely appreciative of this playfulness. As academics we so often feel we must be world-class, must compete, must fulfil the role of expert. None of us are experts in CNF, and these vignettes are all in a sense works-in-progress that allowed us not to take ourselves too seriously. In the words of one contributor, "Trying to write creative non-fiction has been my greatest academic experience this year."

It is our collective hope that this initiative will continue to inspire its writers and readers to take more time for such productive "play" and to stay attuned for what everyday experiences in our working lives might speak to larger readerships. If the universe is a collection of stories, what you're holding in your hands or reading on your computer screen might perhaps be called a small constellation. We hope you will be inspired to add your own stars and galaxies to the cosmos.

Johan Adriaensen

# *Trading Solitude // Counter- Intuitive Squared*

It is still early morning as I leave the hotel. Tallinn in February is wet and cold. Horses stand idle next to their carriages. The clouds escaping from their mouths offer a fleeting stain on this otherwise idyllic still life. Apart from their riders sharing banter, the market square is eerily quiet. The stage is set, but it will still take a few hours before the tourists come out and the play commences.

I pick up the pace and slide across the wet cobblestones. The interview questions I crafted in the week before my departure play on repeat through my mind. I rehearse a few phrases in Estonian in anticipation of the meeting. I'm still naïve enough to think that I can muster the courage to use them in actual conversation. As I cross Tuvi Park, my thoughts wander off to the first academic workshop I attended four years prior in Lisbon. My presentation focused on the idea that the EU's trade policy was specifically designed to unleash the gale of creative destruction on its own economy. It provoked a more senior academic to quip that my claims were "counter-intuitive squared," and to request more empirical evidence in support.

At the time, I took this as a compliment, a confirmation that I was on to something new and exciting. Now, I know better. The experience triggered me to conduct my first interview at the European Commission with then-Director of Market Access, Matthew Baldwin. Soft-spoken, interested, and kind, he entertained my every question and hypothesis, joining me on my expedition to find some proof for my claims. But with every exchange, the growing unlikelihood of my thesis dawned upon me. It was the gentlest evisceration I'd ever experienced.

This time, it will be different, I've promised myself. I'm not going to make reckless hypotheses before speaking to the relevant people themselves. I arrive at the Ministry, where a friendly receptionist greets me: "Tere hommikust." I reply with a muffled "good morning," clear my throat, and state the purpose of my visit. She offers to guide me to the office of my interviewee—one flight of stairs, turn left, turn right. On the way, the receptionist apologises that the building is like a maze. It feels like obligatory small talk, but I thank her for the assistance nonetheless. The trade official's office is clean and



organised. It has a small window that lets through sufficient light to sustain two plants. In the years prior, a smoker must have occupied the office. The smell is gone but the walls retain their ochre hue. Well into her fifties, she sits in an oversized chair, hunched behind a set of screens. An odd crossover between a competitive gamer and a stereotypical bureaucrat: alone and isolated but with many virtual friends. We run through a typical day at the office. Discuss the assistance she

provides to Estonian firms exporting outside the EU and her role in the wider administration.

Ten minutes into our conversation, I arrive at the core of my interview and ask her how she decides the position Estonia will take in the EU's external trade negotiations. I nudge her on by referring to a highly politicised case. I expect tales of Estonian businesses staking out her office, of lobbyists offering concealed bribes, of political ploys and bureaucratic turf wars within the administration—an expectation fuelled not by my overconsumption of political dramas but by a thorough reading of the academic literature.

After a brief silence, she turns her screen towards me and shows a simple

Excel sheet with the latest trade figures. “Most of the time no one reaches out to me,” she starts. “Instead I rely on these numbers and try to come up with a good policy.” As if caught sleeping on the job, she quickly points to her phone. “I’ve tried calling some of the firms for input, you know? They will say: ‘You’re the expert, do as you see fit. We have given up on surveys and consultations. It requires a lot of effort with little response.’” In a matter of seconds, her response has revealed a barrage of emotions: from apologetic to assertive and, ultimately, fatalistic.

I blank out for a second. A sudden burst of anxiety. My carefully crafted questions that I rehearsed only an hour ago have turned from gold into lead—a type of alchemy I have grown all too familiar with. At first, I frantically go through my printout, hoping to salvage any remaining questions. It is a futile exercise. I smile uncomfortably and explain that her response has thrown me off guard. The interview turns into a conversation. We share stories of Brussels, her counterparts in the Council, and the solitude of being away from home. It is a warm goodbye.

On my way back to the hotel, feelings of confusion and excitement alternate rapidly. No lobbying. No conflicts. Little (public) attention at all. The lonely policy-maker calling for attention. Back to counter-intuitive squared?

Trade policy is an exclusive competency of the EU. This means that the EU member states cannot set their own policy. Still, each of the member states

retains a trade administration, if only to control whatever the EU is doing on their behalf. In my book, I explored the administrative capacity of the member states and how it determines their activity on the European level.<sup>4</sup> As there was little research on the national coordination of EU trade policy at the time, I first conducted a series of pilot studies in Belgium, Spain, and Estonia. Estonia,

as a very small, former communist member state, does not have a dense, organised civil society at its disposal. Policy-making therefore cannot rely as much on input from societal actors but instead is more state-driven.

### About the author

Johan is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science. His research analyses the role of EU institutions in policy-making. Analytically, he focuses particularly on the role of the member states. Empirically, he looks at the EU's international trade policy.

<sup>4</sup> Adriaensen, J. (2014) *National Administrations in EU Trade Policy: Maintaining the Capacity to Control*. Palgrave MacMillan.

# Ghana- na is Diffe- rent

Sarah Anschutz

The air is crisp and I try to hide my face in my woollen scarf on this cold November afternoon in Antwerp. I am on my way to visit Esther, a 17-year old woman of Ghanaian descent, to learn more about her experiences of growing up between Belgium and Ghana. Walking through Esther's neighbourhood, I notice the African hairdresser and barber shops bustling with customers. The smell of freshly baked goods from the Moroccan bakeries reaches my nose before I can see the pastries in the shop windows, and I walk past Chinese supermarkets, Portuguese cafés, and Turkish tea houses. Antwerp's city landscape is shaped by the diverse backgrounds of its inhabitants, and about three quarters of its youth today have ties to another country—usually because either they or their parents have migrated to Belgium.

Esther's life also extends beyond the Belgian context. I think back to our last conversation, during which we mapped the various moves she has made in her life, including her changes in residence and travels. While Esther herself was born in Belgium, she has travelled to Ghana multiple times with her mother to see her "home" country and extended family. Today, I am hoping to learn more about how she has experienced these trips.

Esther buzzes me in. I cross the small courtyard of the big social housing complex where she lives with her mother and have to enter another building. At both entrances, I struggle with the heavy metal doors and am reminded of a high-security prison wing. After walking up four flights of stairs, the staircase warm and narrow, I find myself looking up at Esther. She stands in the doorway and stares at me in utter disbelief.

“You were walking all the way! Why did you not take the lift, Sarah?!” She almost yells at me without as much as a hello.

I have to laugh, and teasingly reply, “Well, you didn’t tell me which floor, did you?” A brief expression of what I think is slight embarrassment crosses Esther’s face before she laughingly opens the door wide and lets me into the living room, her long cornrows in a ponytail swinging from one side to the other as she walks in front of me.

The apartment is even warmer than the staircase and I regret wearing my thick turtleneck and winter boots. I sink down on the big L-shaped sofa facing a wall on which a television and several colourful family portraits are hung. Ghanaian music is playing loudly, the YouTube videos appearing on a computer just under the television screen. The apartment feels welcoming and lively even though we are the only two people here; Esther’s mother is still at work.

Asking how her week went, I fish out Esther’s “mobility map” from my backpack, in which I have visualised all of the moves that

Esther told me about last time.

“I wanted to show this to you.” My index finger traces the line on the map that represents Esther, recounting the different moves she has made, from the town in Flanders where she was born, to two different locations in the city of Antwerp. Seeing the map in front of her, Esther spots and corrects a smaller mistake and offers some additional explanations for these moves.

“And you travelled to Ghana at the age of 2, 5, 12, and 16; is that correct?” She affirms this and ends up comparing her own mobility to that of her Ghanaian-background friends, some of whom have also visited Ghana during their childhood and others who have not yet been able to return since migrating to Belgium.

After a while, Esther gives out a long sigh. Playing with her hair, she comments that the hairdresser did not do a good job with her braids. She gets a pair of scissors from the bedroom next to the living room, starts cutting off the braids somewhere between her chin and her shoulders and drops them to the floor. “What are you doing?” I ask bewildered. Esther chuckles, “This is not my real hair, eh.” I feel silly for not realising that she simply wants to take off the braids. The scissors are too small and it takes forever.

I hesitate. “Should I help you?” I ask not quite sure whether the question is appropriate. But Esther seems to appreciate the offer.

“Awww yes, then it will go faster.” She sits down on the floor in front of me. My fingers are not used to the movements and I doubt whether I am indeed of any help. We concentrate on her hair, and for the next few minutes, the only noise in the room is the music in the background.

Once my fingers learn to move on their own, I ask Esther about the trips she has made in the past. She speaks fondly of her family in Ghana and the importance of regularly seeing them, particularly because her parents are the only family she has in Belgium. Some

things she feels more comfortable discussing with her auntie in Ghana: “She is really wise and always knows an answer.”

“You also mentioned that your trips to Ghana were generally nice. What did you like about Ghana?” I ask.

*My index finger  
traces the line  
on the map that  
represents Esther,  
recounting the  
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has made.*

*A few months later, I finally do have the opportunity to see and experience Ghana for myself. The heat of the sun feels invigorating, and the streets of the capital city pulse with*

*life like the blood vessels of an athlete about to finish a race. Cars and minibuses honk as they rush past, street vendors sell food and every other item you can think of, and the air is filled with chatter, music, and traffic noise. One of the first dishes I get to try on my visit is waakye with plantain and I have to agree with Esther: it really does taste fantastic. Everything feels, looks, tastes, and sounds as different as Esther had promised, which makes me think back to her attempts to describe the atmosphere in Ghana.*

*I am here to accompany a research participant who happened to travel during my fieldwork. Spending time with young people in various contexts in Ghana—at the family home, with friends in public places, and accompanying mundane everyday activities—allows me to gain new insights into what these trips to Ghana mean to young people.*

Esther explains how different it is from being in Belgium. “It’s a different atmosphere, a different way of eating, a different way of doing things.” She has trouble explaining what she means by atmosphere, but gives a few examples. There are thousands of people on the street, everything is allowed, and the food is fantastic. Her voice is now rushing, almost tumbling over itself in excitement. “When you go to Ghana, you really have to try waakye!<sup>5</sup> They sell it in big banana leaves! You just have to see Ghana for yourself.”

<sup>5</sup>A Ghanaian dish of cooked rice and beans.

*As part of the broader “Mobility Trajectories of Young Lives” (MO-TRAYL) project ([www.motrayl.com](http://www.motrayl.com)), my research investigated the impact of transnational mobility and migration on young people’s lives. Having conducted 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork with 25 respondents (aged 14 to 25) of Ghanaian backgrounds in Belgium and Ghana, my research revealed how young people create and maintain affective connections with people and places in the “home” country through their own mobility and digital media use. For Esther, these connections were first and foremost to her extended family, yet others spent time with peers in Ghana and explored the country on their own. Such experiences in the “home” country are important to young people because they equip them with resources, such as confidence and a positive outlook on the future. They are integral to how young people navigate the process of becoming an adult.*

#### **About the author**

Sarah works as a Postdoctoral Researcher and Teaching Fellow in the Department of Society Studies. Her research focuses on youth mobility, migration, and transnational engagements between West Africa and Europe, using ethnographic and creative methods. Sarah loves drawing, being outdoors, and sharing good food with friends.

# On Watching Shoes *Being Made* in Addis Ababa

Elsje Fourie

I was there to watch the Japanese officials, careful and observant in tailored suits to which the dust from the streets outside didn't seem to cling for long. They were there to watch the local managers—smart in button-up shirts as they shepherded us through the cavernous workspace and its tributaries. And all of us were there to watch the workers, hunched over sewing machines hungry for the cut-up bits of cowhide being fed to them. Mostly female, surprisingly quiet. Somehow, I'd expected more chatting.

I had arrived at the factory that day in one of Addis Ababa's blue-and-white Ladas, the Soviet-era taxis that were at that time still so ubiquitous in the capital of Ethiopia. I'd passed processions of Pentecostal worshippers singing hymns under dust-choked motorway underpasses. Sped by much older domed churches spilling worshippers clad in white linen out onto the sidewalk. Watched from a lull in the traffic lights as Chinese men in hard hats and neon yellow vests hunched over bowls of noodles at tables on the sidewalk. I'd noticed gleaming shopping malls that

I could have sworn hadn't been there a week ago. And then we'd reached the outskirts of the city, where donkeys and cattle competed for space on the dirt roads and children still stopped to point at my face through the car window. I heard the echo of their high voices through the glass—"China! China!" By this, they meant simply that I was a foreigner. The factory compound was a cool and leafy contrast to the smog of the roads, its buildings crumbling gently into the overgrown grass that pressed up against their walls. My taxi driver had his feet up and his eyes closed before I had even crossed the parking lot.

This wasn't my first or last such factory visit, but it's the one that remains clearest in my mind, the place where it all came together. My quest to understand how ideas about industrial productivity travelled from Japanese boardrooms to Ethiopian workplaces had taken me to the concrete buildings set in Tokyo's quieter, tree-lined neighbourhoods, where Japan's aid officials clock in every morning. They had landed me in Ethiopian government offices; these



Now we were all on the glue-smelling factory floor together, but we each wanted something different. My Japanese guides wanted to know whether it had worked: whether they'd managed to impart some of the renowned Japanese efficiency—they called it *kaizen*—to an enterprise I'll call here the Lion Shoe Company. A glance at the colour-coded storage boxes that filled the space like red, blue, and yellow Tetris blocks hinted to them of success. But no one was wearing face masks to guard against the chemical odour, which gave them pause. Get it right, and this unassuming warehouse could beam all sorts of messages out into the world—about Japan's new role in the continent, about the dawn of a fresh age of African industry and entrepreneurialism, about the legacy of an Ethiopian Prime Minister only just relocated from the Menelik Palace to the history books. Photos of Meles still dotted the palace walls at every fifty meters, accompanied by slogans directed at both the living and the deceased: *Man of the Century, We Thank You for Your Dedication, A Great Leader Sleeps When He's Dead*.<sup>6</sup> Ethiopia was at a critical juncture, these men and women who had travelled all the way from Tokyo knew. Get it wrong, and the messages would go the other way. Inward rather than outward. Backward rather than forward.

were studies in cement also, only here, some of it was still wet to the touch. I'd been to Toyota factories on two continents, watching enormous mechanical arms whirr and zoom. I'd visited special economic zones, whose long white sheds jutted out of the surrounding grassland as if they'd been dropped there from the air, and I'd been to locally owned factories such as this one. I'd attended conferences large and small with notepad in hand. And I'd asked people about it in quieter, more intimate places: cafés, bars, taxis, hotel lobbies, even hotel rooms. Here, however, was the chance to walk next to the Japanese delegation as they judged the success of

their endeavours, a moment to watch many of the actors take their place on the same stage.

<sup>6</sup> Meles Zenawi was the Ethiopian Prime Minister from 1995 until his death in 2012.

What did the managers want? To impress these visitors, certainly—to vindicate the trust that had been placed in them. Because the Ethiopian state had hand-picked their company among dozens of hopefuls. It had seen the potential in them, had helped them to imagine that the boots being pounded into shape around them would one day be unpacked by dockers in Nanjing and New York. They weren't to know that five years later, the American President would sign an order cutting their country out of a duty-free import agreement; they weren't to guess how swiftly and mercilessly they could be punished for their government's perceived misdeeds. For now, they focused on the messages they'd heard from so many lecterns and training manuals that they could recite them in their sleep: never waste a moment or a scrap of leather; never be satisfied with good enough; never stop thinking of how to improve.

What did the workers want? Ah, the million-dollar question. It's what everyone wanted to know and didn't want to know. Studies had been done, but no one agreed. Did they want to be consulted more? To be consulted less? More opportunities for personal growth? Fewer such opportunities? More management, less management, better management, different management? To be further inside history or further outside of it? To be further entangled in the world or to be released from its grip? Perhaps—from the muted expressions on their faces and the plastic buds buried in their ears—only to be left alone to narrow the gap until the shrill ring of the closing bell.

Now we were  
all on the glue-  
smelling factory  
floor together, but  
we each wanted  
something  
different.

What did I want? For indeed, I was also on that stage, and so we must examine my motives also. Data, certainly, that most precious raw material of the social scientist, that resource that I sometimes felt driven to mine the way others hack into rock for gold, copper, diamonds. So badly did I want this data, so important was it for me to shore up what security I could before the advent of my maternity leave, that my

unborn baby was there with me, breathing in the same stench of solvents. So keen was I to believe in my powers of observation that I would ask a seventeen-year-old girl from a village three hours away to tell me how she liked her job. Through a translator, right there in a little room just off to the side, and then I'd feel entitled to her honesty.

*This is an excerpt from a longer creative non-fiction essay in which I used a visit to an Ethiopian shoe factory—where I observed the application of Japanese methods of productivity—as a lens to reflect on the ambiguities, inconsistencies, and ethical dilemmas thrown up both by such fieldwork and the larger project of promoting industrialisation in Ethiopia.<sup>7</sup> The reader is introduced to the cast of characters present that day and invited to follow many of them into settings beyond the factory floor. In listening to this polyphony of voices and trying to shape them into something legible in my writing, I find a parallel in the efforts of my academic field—development studies—to formulate interventions and policy prescriptions in the face of incomplete and conflicting information. The result is a cautious step towards hope and optimism and away from paralysis and despair: perhaps we can do no more than stitch together the collected parts and offer them for others to try on, but perhaps this is enough.*

#### About the author

Elsje studies how cultural commodities and ideas about modernity travel between, to and from locales in the Global South. Her novel manuscript, *Under Sleep*, asks whether it's ever too late to undo past mistakes, and questions contemporary clichés of the “strong female character.” It is still looking for a publisher.

<sup>7</sup> Fourie, E. (2022). *On Watching Shoes Being Made in Addis Ababa*. *Anthropology and Humanism*, 48(1): 77–82. [Published under a CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 licence]

# A Very Special Birthday Present

Christin Hoene

**It is Monday, the 25th of February 2019, and I am standing in the lecture hall of the Bose Research Institute just off a busy street in Kolkata, India. It is around 30 degrees outside, the air is somehow both dusty and humid, and the streets are alive with the cacophony of traffic that knows no rush hour, because Kolkata's roads are busy every hour of the day. But in here, the temperature is pleasantly cool, the light is dim, and the absence of noise is ringing in my ears. The contrast to the glaring and blaring February afternoon outside makes it easy to imagine that I have somehow stepped back in time to the same place just over 100 years ago.**

**I**t is Friday, the 30th of November 1917, and Jagadish Chandra Bose is standing at the lectern in the lecture hall of his own research institute, just off a busy street in Calcutta, colonial India. The lecture hall is brand new, as is the institute itself, and Bose is giving his inaugural address. He charts the path that has led him to where he is now: the pinnacle of his career and the fulfilment of his professional life's work. To describe this path as rocky would be an understatement.

Born in 1858 in Bikrampur in the Bengal Presidency of British India, Bose went to England in the 1880s to study medicine at the University of London and natural sciences at Christ's College Cambridge. In 1884, he graduated with a BSc from Cambridge in the Natural Science Tripos and a BSc from London University. He returned to Calcutta and was appointed the first Indian Professor of Physics at Presidency College in 1885, which marked one of many milestones in his career; but he received only a third of the salary his European colleagues got for the same work. In colonial India, Indian professors earned only two thirds of European professors' salaries. In Bose's case, this was further reduced by half because he was initially on a temporary contract. So for Bose, the colonial pay gap was very real. In protest, he wouldn't touch a pay cheque until the issue was resolved. This took three years. Essentially, what Bose did was demand equal pay for equal work. He knew that the work he was doing wasn't worth any less than the work his European colleagues were doing. In fact, Bose repeats in speech after speech that India did not lack scientific talent; but that Indian scientists lacked the necessary funding and scientific equipment.

Throughout the 1890s, Bose's reputation as a physicist grew in India and the West, particularly in the UK. He was the first scientist from India to be invited to deliver a Friday Evening Discourse at the Royal Institution in London in January 1897. Twenty years later, in November 1917, Bose would be standing in a lecture hall modelled after the Royal Institution, and the listening audience would surround him—both in 1897 London and 1917 Calcutta—in a large semi-circle across two levels: the stalls on ground level, and the upper circle. We find other visual echoes, too: the dark accents of the lectern, the furniture, and the gallery, for example, which might have reminded Bose on that triumphant day in 1917 of an earlier triumph 20 years ago and half a world away.

But Bose fell from grace at the beginning of the twentieth century, when he branched out from physics to plant physiology and proclaimed a philosophy of science that was as much influenced by his western education as by his beliefs in Vedantic Hinduism. Bose was an interdisciplinary scientist from India at a time when neither interdisciplinarity nor scientists from India were highly regarded in the West. But the strong criticism he faced did not deter him in his firm belief in interdisciplinarity. To the contrary: in speech after speech, Bose emphasises the inter-connectedness of the disciplines.

And he stresses this point again on this Friday in November in 1917 that marks the end of his appointment as Professor

of Physics at Presidency College and the beginning of his tenure as Director of the research institute that bears his name to this day. Bose attacks the disciplinary boundaries of western scientific institutions and says that, "India through her habit of mind is peculiarly fitted to realise the idea of unity, and to see in the phenomenal world an orderly universe." He calls his institute "not merely a laboratory, but a Temple," dedicated to finding the truth. He speaks of science and knowledge as "the burning flame born of thought which has been handed down through fleeting generations." And he welcomes the colleagues and students that have gathered around him and calls on them to carry that flame into the future: "We stand here today," he tells them, "and resume work tomorrow, so that by the efforts of our lives and our unshaken faith in the future we may all help to build the greater India yet to be." Bose dreamed of creating a home for Indian science. It was his life-long ambition and the pinnacle of his career. And on that Friday in November 1917, this dream finally comes true.

It is Monday, the 25th of February 2019, and—standing where I am now more than 100 years ago—I cannot help but imagine how proud Bose must have been. The 30th of November was Bose's birthday. And on that particular day in 1917, which marked his 59th birthday, the opening of his own research institute must have seemed like the best birthday present ever.

*My research on the Indian polymath Jagadish Chandra Bose, who lived from 1858 to 1937, started when I was a postdoc in the School of English at the University of Kent, England, from 2016 to 2020. Back then, I was—and still am—particularly interested in the cultural history and significance of the radio in late colonial India. While much is known about the Italian engineer Guglielmo Marconi, who in 1909 received the Nobel Prize in Physics together with Karl Ferdinand Braun for their contributions to radio communications, much less is known about Bose, who significantly contributed to the development of wireless telegraphy in the 1890s. In addition to being a physicist, Bose was also a plant physiologist, and a writer of early Bangla science fiction—although we only know of one story, "Runaway Cyclone." In 2013, Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay translated the story into English for the*

*first time.<sup>8</sup> Based on that translation, I published an article about Bose and the anticolonial politics of science fiction.<sup>9</sup> Together with three colleagues, I was also interviewed by the BBC about Bose and his life.<sup>10</sup>*

#### About the author

Christin works as Assistant Professor in Literary Studies in the Department of Literature & Art. Her research spans modern and contemporary Anglophone literature, with a particular focus on postcolonial literature, sound studies, word and music studies, and queer theory. Christin enjoys writing, editing, and good food.

<sup>8</sup> Bose, J.C. (2013). *Runaway Cyclone* (B. Chattopadhyay, Trans.). *Strange Horizons*. <http://strangehorizons.com/fiction/runaway-cyclone/> (Original work published 1896/1921)

<sup>9</sup> Hoene, C. (2023). *Jagadish Chandra Bose and the anticolonial politics of science fiction*. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 58(2), 308–325. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989420966772>

<sup>10</sup> BBC World Service—The Forum. (2022, July 3). *Radio waves and plants: The life of JC Bose*. [Audio file]. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3ct38sj>

# Up My Alley

Ferenc Laczó

**The decolonisers were suddenly marching up my alley, protesting racist policies and structural inequalities. It was 2019 and I was on a fellowship at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in the centre of global political power—the federal district colloquially known as D.C., short for District of Columbia—to find that the city was majority African American, its history deeply entangled with those of racism, slavery, and segregation.**

**Beto O'Rourke used to live down our alley, before he stopped spending so much time in D.C., I was told by the elderly gay couple whose basement I was staying in. That must have been before he made his current, hopeless attempt to run for President, I thought. I was happy to hear this, though, because I had admired singer Cedric Bixler-Zavala's bands in my youth and knew that Beto used to perform with him in El Paso. Beto would soon endorse Joe Biden though, in response to which Cedric**

**tweeted: "Team Bernie all the fucking way!" But that was the year after.**

I had been in the US for an extended time only once before, as an undergraduate student nearly two decades earlier. That was in the fall of 2002, just as the Bush Administration was preparing to launch the criminal invasion into Iraq that would define so much of what has transpired since. I tried to publish an ironic rebuttal of their poorly veiled plans of military aggression in *The Daily Bruin*, the UCLA college newspaper, but the editors apparently didn't know what to make of my admittedly cumbersome argument. They all assumed good intentions on the part of their political leaders, so they retitled my piece "Bush deserves benefit of the doubt." The benefit?



That misunderstood submission of mine came shortly after my college roommate, Mike—a cheerful Latino guy from the US-Mexico border area—asked me on one of my first days on the Pacific Coast whether East Europeans were white. He meant Caucasian, he soon clarified. I knew from geography that I had grown up much closer to the Caucasus than West Europeans had, but I just didn't know what to make of his question at all. And so it started.

If transnational history is the history of unexpected and consequential encounters, the ambition to write global history from the European semi-periphery comes from a sense that you don't belong to the Great Global Stories and the Great Global Stories don't belong to you. That the way you experience and interpret the world just doesn't make immediate sense to most of the rest of humanity.

of capitalism were first invented there, and the manifold innovations and diverse colours of the rest of the world all brought by logic, force, and cunning. People are globally embedded there, even if their immediate horizons remain utterly provincial. They enjoy the proximity enabled by power.

It should also be relatively easy—if utterly painful—to do so from the vantage point of Kinshasa, a part of the world where people have been robbed and murdered so shamelessly and for so long; except that they can't find the tranquillity to intellectually demolish the shallow pretences of the so-called international order, the mercilessness of Realpolitik, and all the saccharine myths of the romantics.

It should be easy enough, I tend to think intuitively, to write global history from the vantage point of Amsterdam, historically the most influential city of the Netherlands. New forms

I imagine that there in Kinshasa, people suffer from the crippling distance enforced by power—the power to oppress being something that you only truly experience if you are on the wrong end of it. They must remain provincial, even though their brutal history has forced manifold global connections on them. And as we know, things that appear out of reach—such as a major scholarly global history of Congo from the Congolese point of view—are nearly impossible to work towards.

But can we, citizens of countries that are not really part of the Western core but do not share the brutal global exposure so characteristic of the history of the Global South either, develop a vantage point of our own? Do we, citizens of countries much closer to the middle of a shockingly wide global spectrum, have a story to tell that might be worth hearing in Amsterdam and Kinshasa? As the decolonisers were marching up my alley in D.C. in their noisy and fiercely committed manner, I came to think that East Europeans have been telling other Europeans about their sense of exclusion for too long while preferring to relate to the Global South through their proud sense of Europeanness. Not exactly a recipe to make them popular either way. Perhaps it is time to realise the privilege shared with other Europeans while building on the overlapping sense of exclusion that connects East Europeans to the Global South.

*These might well have been the first, slightly vague but powerful notions that have led me to conceive of Magyarország globális története<sup>11</sup> (A Global History of Hungary) in the years since.<sup>12</sup> It is a project that uses a French template (Histoire Mondiale de la France), which has been adapted in numerous places in recent years, to approach the modern and contemporary history of a country on the European semi-periphery in a truly global framework for the very first time.*

<sup>11</sup> Laczó, F. & Bálint, V. Eds. (2022). Magyarország globális története. Corvina Kiadó.

<sup>12</sup> Laczó, F. (2022, June 7). A Global History of Hungary: A Brief Introduction to the Volume by a Co-Editor. Mosa Historia: Maastricht University History Department Blog. <https://fasos-research.nl/mosahistoria/a-global-history-of-hungary/>

Magyarország globális története is a large edited volume in which a group of eighty-two authors explores Hungary as “a country with multifaceted and substantial transnational connections whose history and society have been intertwined with phenomena from all the diverse parts of the globe.” It interprets the stories of the first Muslim Hungarians, dissects the official visit of Ernesto Guevara to the country, analyses the contributions of the Hungarian engineers who helped build independent Algeria, and reconstructs the local political trial held against Maoists, among many other subjects. It approaches Hungary as “a Central and Eastern European country which is in many ways semi-peripheral and a state that defines its place in the world as a European state and which has thus had numerous links to the processes of colonialism and decolonisation.” (Our volume two, which will be based on a comparable concept and deal with previous millennia, should be out by autumn 2023.)

On a more personal level, this diverse volume also tries to offer a detailed and substantial answer to that baffling question of Mike, my former roommate—even if, unfortunately, it is written in a language he cannot understand. Then again, as far as I can tell, attempts at communication between different people and instances of profound incomprehension across

borders have both been crucial elements of global history.

#### About the author

Ferenc is a political and intellectual historian whose main research interests concern European and global history, political ideas, mass violence, and questions of history and memory. He is the author or editor of twelve books on Hungarian, Jewish, German, European, and global themes.

# A Rijeka Morning

Brigitte Le Normand

It's 6 a.m. and the city awakes.

Marija rubs the sleep from her eyes and puts the coffee on. She smokes a cigarette in the dark and smiles tiredly when she remembers that Stjepan should be returning today from his journey to the Far East. She wonders what he will bring back this time—she hopes there will be something elegant for her, and a few things she can sell to her co-workers. She folds up the bed into a couch again, and rouses the children. She spreads some butter and jam on slices of bread, and gently wrangles them out the door to the school down the street, before hurrying off to start her shift at the paper mill. On the way there, she spots the milk-maids coming down the hillside carrying their heavy canisters of milk from the surrounding villages on their bent backs. “Like clock-work,” she thinks, continuing on her way.

As Marija hurriedly rounds the corner past Tito's square, another young woman exits the doorway of a nearby apartment building. Glancing up to her tiny balcony, Dunja can't stop thinking about it: that woman is really charging her too much for that closet-sized bedroom... But what can she do; it's nearly impossible to find an affordable flat. Walking along the canal, she spots the bubbling, churning ball of fish that always seems to collect at that one place. She takes a deep breath and feels that sweet, fishy, pungent smell of the seaside fill her lungs, chasing away the worries that had been circling in her head. Quit complaining, she thinks. You could be back home in

Belgrade instead of by the seaside! She passes the bustling market in front of the National Theater, past tables overflowing with brightly coloured fruits and vegetables and women bustling about with their baskets and trollies. "Come get your tomatoes, real Macedonian ones!" "Beautiful, sweet grapes from Dalmatia."

Dunja finally arrives before the majestic Jugolinija building facing the quay. She skips up the stairs to the marketing office, where she works.

"Good morning, young lady!" her colleague, Josip, calls out.

"Already back?" Dunja asks, surprised.

"Trust me, two weeks on the road, never more than three days in one place, is long enough."

"How did it go?"

"That agent of ours in Istanbul is a real scoundrel, I tell you. The problem is, I'm not sure who else might be able to represent us. It's a mess. You'll hear all about it in the meeting... Ah! Wait, I have something for you. From Egypt." Josip disappears and comes back with a box of sweets wrapped up in shimmering foil, jewel-like.

"How lovely!" Dunja exclaims, unwrapping one; it's a chocolate-covered date, sticky with syrup. She bites into it.

"Their sense of hospitality is unparalleled," says Josip. "They're even worse than we are. When they are serving you food, they won't take no for an answer. In fact, you have to refuse three times."

Down the stairs, out the front door and onto the street. The chauffeur opens the door and Rade Kesić takes a seat. His brow is furrowed as he mentally goes over the knot of problems that need to be discussed that day in Belgrade at the National Bank. During the brief drive he leafs through the files, thinking with annoyance that those Italians really are trying to hustle the firm out of its fair share of freight, and mulling over the intriguing conversations with the agency in Mumbai about potential business there. He glances absent-mindedly out the window, his thoughts jumping from one part of the world to another. The driver stops in front of the train station and he steps out, nearly forgetting his briefcase.

The Stevedores wait on the dock, smoking and taking good-natured jibes at one another as they wait for the ship to arrive. Finally, at 9 a.m., they spot it on the horizon; it's a Belgian banana boat. Reluctantly, they finish their cigarettes as the tugboat steers the ship into its berth. Ante, the boss, shakes hands with the captain, reads over the manifest, and gestures to his team. Banana boxes—they need to be treated with care and quickly shuttled off to the protection of the warehouses—are the worst kind of freight. If the stevedores aren't quick and careful, the shipment will lose all its value and they will get the blame as per usual.

Ante has bigger problems on his hands, though. By mid-day, four more ships are slated to arrive. Because it's tourist high season, the other docks are reserved for the passenger line Jadrolinija, and there will be nowhere to put them. And then there's the wagon problem—the railway hasn't managed to muster enough rolling stock to move the goods out of the port. He'll bring it up again with the port administration, but he knows that it's pointless. He squints at the shimmering waves while taking one last slow drag on his cigarette, then flicks it to the ground.

At 11:30, another ship pulls in. The sailors and officers stream off the ship, raucously, some of them welcomed by housewives and small children. They stroll off towards their homes to shower and enjoy a welcoming meal. When the ship is nearly empty, Stjepan, who is a radio-operator, sneaks into one of the cabins, opens a cabinet and removes a trick wall. He gingerly pulls out a couple dozen cartons of cigarettes and puts them in his duffle bag. On top of the cartons, he carefully places a wooden carving wrapped in a Batik cloth, as well as a pair of earrings, all gifts he picked out for Marija at the tourist market during his day-long shore leave. He notes that Marin and the new cabin boy—what's his name?—have already taken their share of the haul. He glances furtively out the cabin door... Coast is clear! He throws the bag onto his shoulder and walks confidently onto the gangway and then the pier.

*If you could hitch a ride with the smoke billowing from the ship's smokestack, you would see the port bustling with activity under a steaming sun.*

In a couple of hours, Marija will finish her shift and he will tell her all about his trip—the usual shenanigans with the crew on the long journey, along with the brief stops along the way, each one a variation on the same theme. After signing in with the local authorities, the boys would go see the sites and then try out the local food at an affordable restaurant. Then an evening of carousing, and some of the boys would peel off to seek exotic intimate companionship. By midnight they'd be back on the ship, ready to set off in the morning. He'd describe the sounds and smells, the hustle and bustle of street life, and the strange things he saw for sale at the food stalls. He'd tell her about riding in a rickshaw, and about how he managed

to bargain the carving down to half of the asking price. Doesn't matter which port, they always try to rip you off...

"Speaking of hustling," she'd say, "any cigarettes for me to sell to the girls?"

The clock strikes twelve as Stjepan leaves the port. If you could hitch a ride with the smoke billowing from the ship's smokestack, you would see the port bustling with activity under a steaming sun, as ships are loaded and unloaded and fishermen clean their decks and maintain their nets. Behind it, the city unfurls like a carpet into the hills above. Brightly coloured automobiles roll down the Riva avenue, and tourists with straw hats walk at a leisurely pace through the old city, smacking their lips at the enticing smell of grilling fish that wafts from restaurants. On either side of the port, loud clanging and sharp metallic odours rise from the shipyards. These smells, sounds, sights, rhythms, and movements of people, ships, trains, and

cars interweave cacophonously. The pulsating city's sinews extend into the hilly hinterland on railroad tracks and roads, and across the sea into distant lands, carrying in both directions an incessant, life-giving current.

*I wrote this text while thinking about how to narrate the life of a port city, Rijeka, Yugoslavia's most important port, and its multifaceted and multiscalar connections to other places—specifically, how to think about the consequences of these connections for the city as a space and for its inhabitants understanding of their place in the world. While none of the characters depicted actually existed, the trajectories, ideas, conflicts, and situations described are documented in the archival record for the 1950s and 1960s. Writing this fictional narrative allows me to try out one way of talking about the complexities of port cities and the networks in which they are embedded. You can learn more about the port and the Yugoslav merchant marine in my article.<sup>13</sup>*

#### About the author

Brigitte is Associate Professor of European History in a Global Context, as well as director of the Globalization, Transnationalism, and Development research group. Her research centres on socialist Yugoslavia as a modernisation project, focusing on urban planning, migration, and maritime shipping. She enjoys singing, dancing, and travelling.

<sup>13</sup> Normand, B. L. (2021). Rijeka as a socialist port: Insights from Jugolinija's early years, 1947–1960. *International Journal of Maritime History*, 33(1), 193–208.

# Field Encounters of the Third Kind<sup>14</sup>

Valentina Mazzucato

<sup>14</sup> Borrowing heavily from Steven Spielberg's science fiction film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, I refer to the fear of the unknown, but also how eerie places/experiences transform once they become familiar.

I walk in the dark hallway for the first time. Apartment doors to the left. Windows to the right looking out onto a dark night. I can't quite make out the landscape.

Fluorescent lighting buzzes overhead with the occasional lamp flickering towards the end of its lifetime. Every now and again a glass cubicle where, I will later learn, building supervisors survey the halls from their tall stools.

But that's during the day. At night the cubicles are eerily empty.

I walk at a determined pace; pretend I know where I am going.

I hear footsteps behind me. *Don't be paranoid. Why would anyone try to harm me?*

I sneak glances at the apartment numbers. Maame told me she lived at number 112. Is that on the first floor or the eleventh?

I pass an elevator, but it only services apartments 1 to 50.

I keep walking.

The person behind me keeps walking. Should I stop and pretend like I've arrived? Let the person overtake me?

There is a short but loud scream. Instinctively, I turn towards the person. He is about 50 meters behind me, walks with a heavy limp, and wears many layers of clothing. He keeps walking as though nothing has happened. I turn around and also keep walking.

After a minute, another scream.

*Keep walking.*

Then another short scream.

I come to the elevator that includes the apartment number I'm looking for. I press the button and wait.

*Look normal, pretend, pretend, pretend. Look comfortable.*

An eternity passes while I stand and wait for the elevator to arrive.

The man is getting closer.

*Maybe I should whistle? What if he also gets into the elevator?*

The man walks past me and keeps on walking.

Great relief.

I enter the lift and am overpowered by the acrid smell of urine. I squeeze into the only dry corner.

*Hold your breath, look like this is normal.*

I press the eleventh floor.

The lift shakes as it climbs at a treacherously slow pace. I have time to note the unintelligible graffiti on the walls as I cover my nose and mouth with my scarf.

The elevator doors open and a cold wind hits me in the face as I walk onto the gallery. I see a breath-taking view of Amsterdam in the distance, full of twinkling lights. I lean over the balustrade and think how dangerously easy it would be to topple over. I don't have time to give attention to my fear of heights.

I quickly survey the gallery—not a person in sight. The windows to the apartments are all covered with curtains.

In front of door 112, I ring the bell.

No movement.

I hear noisy talk in a language I recognise as Twi, based on the previous six months of language class I have been taking to familiarise myself with one of the majority languages of Ghana.

Laughter. A child demanding attention.

*Maybe knock?*

I knock.

Maame opens the door, and the smell of fried plantain wafts out to greet me. "Valentina akwaaba, come in!"

With great relief, I step into the warm light of the apartment.



The first encounter with my “field” in Amsterdam Southeast—a neighbourhood which was predominantly inhabited by Surinamese, Antillean, and Ghanaian people—was not a comfortable one. It was the year 2000 and the neighbourhood had not yet experienced the urban renewal that now characterises it. Like many people living in Amsterdam, I had never been to the neighbourhood due to its distance from the centre and its reputation of violence and drugs. I would later learn that these are partially urban myths and partially based on truths. The Bijlmer, as it is commonly known, turned out not to be a dangerous place for me. No one dared to harm a white woman—there would be consequences. But after two years of fieldwork, one of my Ghanaian research participants had been stabbed five times; Maame was held at gunpoint in an elevator, in front of her six-year-old son; and Oduro, dear Oduro, had met his death by toppling over the balustrade...apparently while fighting with someone. Ghanaians are an easy target for drug addicts. At the time, many Ghanaians did not have bank accounts and therefore usually had cash on hand. They wouldn't report a robbery to the police due to

their undocumented status or fear of putting someone in their network in danger. Many didn't trust the police.

For me, the Bijlmer soon became a place I could trust. I felt comfortable travelling there and back again on the metro in the evenings when my research participants were available. I learned the discreet hand signal that would hail one of the illegal taxis to bring me from east to west in the neighbourhood—urban planners had only thought about north-south public transport connections between

the neighbourhood and the city centre, and official taxis avoided the Bijlmer altogether.

The Bijlmer was full of contradictions. On the one hand, the run-down high-rise apartment buildings with vacant basements provided the perfect hangout for drug addicts at night. On the other hand, its location in a lush green landscape (it was designed by urban planners who in the 1960s were catering to middle-class Dutch family needs) makes the neighbourhood seem pleasant and almost friendly during the day. When I showed the neighbourhood to Paul Stoller—a colleague from the US who conducted a study of West African migrants in New York—he exclaimed with disbelief: “You call this a run-down neighbourhood in the Netherlands?!”

*In 2000 I started what would become a series of projects spanning a 14-year period in which my team and I researched the connections between Ghanaian inhabitants of the Bijlmer and their network members in Ghana. At the time, much attention was given to migrant remittances—that is, the money they sent to their home countries, which in Ghana averages an astounding 5% of its Gross Domestic Product. While I was partaking in the lives of inhabitants of the Bijlmer—who generously let me into their homes, churches, funeral ceremonies, baptisms, and weekend events—a team of researchers based in Ghana were following the lives of people connected to the migrants. It was thus that I discovered the existence of “reverse remittances,” which consist of the work that people in Ghana do for migrants overseas: caring for their homes, children, and elderly parents, and, importantly, taking care of the Kafkaesque documentation procedures set up by the Dutch government in 2000 to limit the entry of Ghanaians into the Netherlands, since disbanded and declared unconstitutional by the Dutch Supreme Court.<sup>15</sup>*

#### About the author

Valentina is Professor of Globalisation and Development. Her signature trademark is multi-sited research designed to understand how migration connects societies of origin and destination, transforming them socially, politically, and culturally. She is an interdisciplinary scholar who engages in team science. Her motto: no one is as knowledgeable as everyone.

<sup>15</sup> Mazzucato, V (2011). Reverse remittances in the migration—development nexus: Two-way flows between Ghana and the Netherlands. *Population Space and Place* 17(5): 454–468. First published online October 2010. 10.1002/psp.646

# Getting Acquainted With Those We Oppose

Inge Melchior

The sky was bright, with a few white clouds floating around. Birds were singing, cars still asleep. It was very early in the morning, in late July 2010. A time of long sunny days and short nights, here in this small northern European country. Despite the early hour, I was up, on the streets even, waiting in front of a church in Tartu. It was still a bit chilly, and I walked a few meters up the hill and down again to get warm. When would that bus from Latvia arrive? Was I the only one joining? Was I even in the right place? My Estonian was not yet fluent, so it was not unlikely that I had misunderstood what Peeter's friend had told me on the phone.

I had met Peeter a month before at the Estonian "Day of Mourning" commemoration in Tartu. Estonians, who had been deported to Siberia by the Soviet authorities in the 1940s, had shared their stories. My brown hair had stood out amongst the many grey heads. Several of the commemorators had been curious and come up to me. I had been happy that my language courses were finally starting to pay off and that I could answer their questions. But of course, they could immediately hear that I was not "theirs." What was this western European, Estonian-speaking youngster doing here in the midst of our commemoration of Soviet repression?

*And now I realised what they had been shouting at our bus.  
"Fascists, fascists."*

Peeter had been one of the participants who had come up to me to talk. He had later invited me to "this very interesting commemoration in Sinimäed." I had felt honoured, and proud that I was expanding my social network. I had just started my ethnographic fieldwork two months before, and tried to work organically; I wanted to start as much as possible from whatever crossed my path in the field. So without thinking much, I had said yes to the invitation to join. I would soon find out, however, that the event was located far from any major urban centre, close to the Russian border, without public transportation. Peeter then helped me to contact someone, who contacted someone, who contacted someone. I had eventually got on the phone with Rein, who knew that a private bus would drive from Latvia—90 km south of Tartu—to Sinimäed. Yes, I had managed! "Be in front of the Peetri church at 7.00."

And so here I was.

No bus appeared for a very long time. Then a woman, with a child who looked about seven, appeared and stopped in front of the church. They sat down on a bench. The child asked the mother to play “that song” again. The mother took her phone and put on a German song. In my head I prepared the Estonian sentence I needed and went up to the woman:

“Are you waiting for a bus to Sinimäed as well?”

“Yes we are,” she answered. Her phone caught my eye. My heartbeat went up and I felt confused. A swastika on the screen.

No time for further considerations. A man approached us now as well. “Hello, my name is Rein.”

A few minutes later we jumped on the bus, filled with Latvian teenagers, and a couple of older Latvians. Unfortunately I could not understand a word they were saying—Latvian and Estonian have completely different linguistic roots—and so I just enjoyed the scenery from my bus window.

After a three-hour drive from the south of Estonia to the North-East, we reached the commemoration site Sinimäed (“Blue Hills”). In 1944, important battles between the Nazi and Soviet army had taken place here. The Nazi army, supported by thousands of Estonian soldiers, had managed to halt the Soviet offensive, enabling 80,000 Estonians to flee to Western countries.

I guess I was naïve not to have considered my attendance at this commemoration before leaving Tartu. Even while approaching the parking lot at the entrance to Sinimäed, I was not fully aware of the situation I had got myself into. From my window, I could see people standing on the left-hand side of the road taking pictures of us. They screamed at our bus. For a second, I even felt like a celebrity, getting such a grand welcome. I saw the orange and black Saint George ribbons on their shirts, and innocently wondered why these Russians were attending this commemoration of the defeat of the Soviet army.

Only when the people inside the bus angrily started to shout back, calling them “anti-fascists,” did I suddenly feel strongly alienated from the people around me, opposed even. The bus made a turn and I saw an enormous replica of the entrance gate of Auschwitz: “Arbeit macht Frei.” These Russian-speakers had built this gate to strengthen their anti-fascist protest. A few of them even wore prison uniforms, performing the roles of Jewish prisoners behind a makeshift barbed wire fence. And now I realised what they had

been shouting at our bus.

“Fascists, fascists.”

My heartbeat went up, my palms started to sweat.

The bus parked and we all got out. Just as at the commemoration of Soviet repression a month before, the participants had brought huge flags. They had asked me then to stand there with that enormous Estonian flag, and I had felt included and honoured. This time, however, I felt a stone in my stomach. Was I prepared to be among a group called fascists? Was I going too far in my anthropological interest in local culture, betraying the values that I was socialised in? I considered telling the Russian-speaking anti-fascists that I was not a fascist, but merely an anthropologist who was attending out of scholarly interest. At the same time, I did not want to provoke the people I was travelling with. What could I do? I decided not to carry a flag and keep myself apart from both groups. On my own, I climbed the hill, up to the monument where the commemoration was about to start. I was soon surrounded by mostly old men in uniforms that made me feel uncomfortable. Little did I know that within a year from now, I would laugh, eat, and travel with these Estonian veterans and their friends, who up until today guard their and their people’s freedom.

While writing my PhD proposal in 2009, I received criticism from several professors with whom I shared my research ideas. Not the common how-to-do-proper-academic-research kind of criticism. The criticism instead had to do with ethics, emotions, and memory politics. “How are you going to prevent this from becoming a fascist work?” I was asked by an American professor in Amsterdam. “Estonians don’t deserve to be studied,” said one of my professors in Nijmegen. As an anthropologist, I wanted to investigate why the memories of WWII and the Soviet period are still so emotionally fraught to Estonians. Yes, it is true that over 40,000 Estonian men joined the Waffen SS in 1944 in an attempt to keep the Russians at a distance. Yes, it is true that Estonian society does not commemorate the Holocaust annually as we in Western Europe do. But to me that did not mean they do not “deserve” to be studied. Actually, these responses made me the more eager to investigate these Estonians’ memories. They were clearly understudied, sensitive, and highly political. However, once I needed to write down my research findings, and make the translation from gathering Estonian stories to presenting these to a western European readership, I got stuck. How was I going to prevent my work from being seen as giving a voice to Nazi collaborators and Holocaust deniers? Creative non-fiction writing can help to bring the ‘foreign’ closer to the reader, and to provide insights into my struggles as both a researcher and an individual. More on this can be found in my monograph.<sup>16</sup>

**About the author**

Inge defended her PhD on Estonian memory politics in the Anthropology Department at the VU University Amsterdam in 2015. Since becoming a lecturer at FASoS in 2018, she has enthusiastically shared her ethnographic struggles, fascination for Central Eastern European societies, and her expertise in “memory studies from below” with her students.

<sup>16</sup> Melchior, I. (2020). *Guardians of Living History: An Ethnography of Post-Soviet Memory Making in Estonia*. Amsterdam University Press.

Maud Oostindie

# Farmers and Foodies

**Scene one:**

On a cold February evening, we are sitting at the heavy wooden table in front of the fireplace. The sweet smell of burning pine wood is overpowered by the odour coming from the cast iron pot standing right in front of us. The herbs used in the dish are unable to cover the metallic, slightly rotten smell of the lungs and liver that make up most of the stew. The pig, an unnamed, chunky sow whose organs have made their way onto our dinner table tonight, was butchered a few days ago. Yesterday we had her brains for dinner (the smooth texture complemented by the crispiness of oven-baked rosemary potatoes), the day before the heart and tongue (sliced and accompanied by bread, velvety beans, and red wine). While the organs are consumed first, the pig’s meat has either been cleaned and frozen for later, or made into sausages ready to be dried and smoked (they will give off a slightly woody flavour in a few months). The rest—the animal’s blood and intestines—was enjoyed by the dogs and cats of the farm on the sunny but snowy day during which our pig became pork.



Early last Tuesday morning, Lorenzo went to get Giacomo, his friend from the nearest Alpine village who always seems to have alcohol on his breath and a cigarette between his yellow-stained fingers. Giacomo brought his shotgun and sent—quickly, expertly, unfazed—a bullet clean through the pig's forehead. After some running around, the pig's muscles finally understood that it was over: she stopped moving and fell down onto the frozen mud.

Lorenzo's noisy diesel-tractor was used to pull the pig up in the air by her back legs. If she weren't dead, she would have seen the breath-taking view she grew up with: Northern Italian mountaintops, white with snow on this winter day, sparkling with the sun that reflects the white blanket covering the fields. But alas, she cannot enjoy this view anymore. Instead, while hanging top-down from the tractor, her dead body's belly is cut open with a sharp knife, delighting the cats and dogs who gather under the delicious warm goo leaving the pig's body.

Later that afternoon, the manure in the empty pig pen still wet, Lorenzo and I sat looking out on the winter landscape while drinking coffee on the veranda. While it was still cold outside, the sun warmed us through the large windows that protect the veranda in wintertime. We had just enjoyed a simple lunch: some bread, a bit of sausage from last year's pig, Sicilian olive oil, and of course some of Lorenzo's own Tuma delle

Langhe: a soft but firm cheese made with a mix of goat's and sheep's milk. This cheese, not the pig, is the reason I am here. Lorenzo's Tuma is protected by the Slow Food Movement, and for my research I spend time both with people at the Slow Food offices as well as with farmers working with the Movement.<sup>17</sup>

Sipping our espresso, Lorenzo and I chatted about—what else?—food. He told me about his belief in the importance of knowing your territory, which means consuming products that are grown, made, raised in the vicinity of where you live. Having just had Sicilian olive oil with lunch, I asked whether he considered the (one-thousand-kilometre-far) Sicilian olive grove local, or “our territory.” Well no, he replied, but “olive oil is part of our culture, our tradition... it's not just a matter of kilometres...” And, he said, of course “we can't really put butter on the salad, right?!” Ah, the notion of culture and tradition, this raises so many questions! But just when the conversation started getting interesting, we were interrupted by Alessandro, the farm hand, to tell us that one of the sheep who had just given birth was not doing well. Lorenzo immediately snapped into action mode and told me to go and make some coffee for the new mother, as the caffeine would apparently perk her up again. Off I went to the kitchen and then to the stables. The work never ceases at a small farm like this, but I was sure Lorenzo and I would continue our conversation later—with a glass of homemade wine in front of the fireplace.

### Scene two:

A couple of weeks later I am in Bra, a small city in a North Italian valley, home to the Slow Food main offices. Earlier, in the small kitchen of my rented apartment, I grilled some winter veggies and incorporated them into a simple vegetable tart. Right now, I am walking to the house of Gabriela, a person working for the Slow Food headquarters. She has invited me and a few others to a potluck dinner. I am a bit nervous—these people all seem to have strong opinions on food, the proper way to prepare specific types of food, the correct origins of ingredients, how different combinations affect your taste buds... Food is, quite literally, the focus of both their work and their leisure time.

While the veggie tart warms my hands through my gloves, I stand in a dark street in front of a large apartment building with lit-up windows, where I search for Gabriela's doorbell. Once inside, I smell delicious foods: hearty, herby, spicy and sweet, all at the same time. Ludovico has brought a farinata, a chickpea flour pancake; Andrea has made polpette, meatballs; Diego has brought a salad; Gabriela is making something in a pan. Only after a few minutes do I see what she's making: tongue. Cow tongues. Many of them.

While eating the chewy but somehow also juicy cow tongue, I think about how different this is from the experience a few weeks earlier, when I was living with Lorenzo and we shared the single tongue of the butchered pig as a delicacy. Something about the plate full of cow tongues in Gabriela's elegant apartment feels decadent, somehow. The farinata, the polpette, and the salad are simple enough, but the conversations around them invokes an almost scientific sensibility to the ingredients and method of preparation. This strange mix of decadence and scientific detachment is very different from the straightforward (and sometimes even rough) engagement with food in Lorenzo's house.

Gabriela starts talking about where she bought them, how she prepared them—all in great detail.

<sup>17</sup> This is an originally Italian but now international organisation promoting good, clean, and fair food systems (summarised by their maxim “buono, pulito, e giusto”) and working towards the preservation of local food cultures and traditions. More information on [www.slowfood.com](http://www.slowfood.com).



I cannot help but wonder how he would act if he were at this dinner party, what he would think. Would he find these people pretentious? Elitist? Would he be annoyed by the abundance of cow tongues? Honestly, I am not so sure. Although Lorenzo looks like a proper farmer—covered in mud and hay, a stoic look on his face, a cigarette in the corner of his mouth—I suspect that deep down he's a foodie, just like these people at Gabriela's dinner party.

*This story is based on several months of ethnographic fieldwork with the Slow Food Movement in the hills of the Langhe, located in the Italian province of Piemonte. It is a story of tensions: tensions between the local and the global, tensions between the Slow Food employees and the Italian farmers, tensions between farmers and foodies... This fieldwork, conducted in 2014, was the basis for my BSc thesis in Cultural Anthropology at Utrecht University. As such, it was my first real encounter with empirical research—specifically ethnography—and it solidified my interest in qualitative research about people and their meaning-making practices. The full thesis (in Dutch) can be found in the Utrecht University thesis repository.*

#### About the author

Maud is a PhD candidate in the Department of Philosophy. Her current research focuses on communication in the online public sphere, with a specific focus on climate change, sustainability, and food systems. Outside work, Maud is also passionate about food and nature—and books.

Marie Rickert

# Lifecycle of a Racetrack

I “Can you fix it real quick?” Louis asks his friend Pim while clumsily attempting to join two pieces of a toy car racetrack together.

Louis is lying on the cold floor of their preschool's corridor. Pim, who sits on a nearby chair, immediately jumps up and begins to repair the racetrack as per Louis's request. Meanwhile, Louis gets up from the floor and takes the seat that has just been vacated by Pim. Now it's his turn to observe! Together, the two bodies become a sort of seesaw. Louis goes down to the racetrack and Pim goes up to the chair, Louis down, Pim up. It is a delicate configuration of movement and speech; watching and being watched, requesting and reacting. For a brief moment, the busy schedule of their preschool day seems to be on hold while the two boys become absorbed in their play. Between circle time and fruit break, after crafting and before tidying up, there is just the racetrack and Louis and Pim.

It was surprisingly easy for the two boys to convince the teachers to let them play in the corridor today. Surprising, because playing in the corridor is, after all, reserved for the “big kids.” While the teachers supervise the rest of the group behind closed classroom doors, Louis and Pim surpass their previous achievements in the corridor. Some quick rearrangement of the racetrack from Pim’s side follows Louis’s request for it to be fixed, and then the racetrack is completed. What’s next? Where can the toy motorcycle drive? On Pim’s head? Yes?! Crazy! As soon as Pim starts moving back towards the chair, the boys’ embodied seesaw gets back into motion. “Can you fix it real quick?” Louis’s cranky voice resounds. This time, Louis points to another broken part of the racetrack. So here they go again: Pim up to the chair, Louis down to the racetrack. As if reacting to his own request, Louis leaps towards the broken part himself. “I will watch how it has to be,” comments Pim, making himself comfortable on the chair. “Yes, just watch! This one needs to go here...”

And so, on that cold morning in the preschool corridor, the lines blur between playing and organising, between watching and being watched, between requesting and reacting. In the corner of the corridor, long forgotten—yet approved by the boys—blinks a little red light. Three legs of a tripod hold a camera that records the scene as it unfolds. On and off, the little red light blinks and the camera—as if by magic—turns the boys’ free play into research data.

## II

“Can you fix it real quick?”

A couple of months later, Louis’s begging voice is directly channelled into my ear canal through my headphones. Again and again, I replay the video so that Louis’s and Pim’s seesaw comes back to life on my screen. At the same time, I am meticulously typing their words and movements into a transcription software. Where does Pim look when manoeuvring the motorcycle on his own head? Does Louis first point at the broken part, or does he start by physically approaching it? I catch myself yawning while I click on replay for what feels like the 100th time.

## III

“It’s amazing how much we can learn about friendship and play from such a short sequence,” a colleague concludes. The anonymised clip of Pim and Louis has been broadcast synchronously into colleagues’ offices around the world, followed by nitty-gritty analytical comments, excited associations with theory, and many recommendations of articles to add to my to-read-list. My notepad is overcrowded with scribbles that include “Can you fix it real quick?”, the boys’ gaze, what they say, their manipulation of objects, their use of space, and—of course—the racetrack. Finally, after ninety minutes of energetic discussions sparked by a video clip of a mere ninety seconds, we switch off our cameras and get on with the rest of our days.

## IV

A high-pitched “ping” notifies me of a new e-mail in my inbox. Over two and a half years have passed since I collected video data in the preschool corridor. By now, Pim and Louis are in primary school, and for all I know, they might not even be interested in racetracks anymore. The e-mail brings good news: “It is my pleasure to inform you that your paper entitled ‘Organizing peer relations in peripheral places in Early Childhood Care and Education’ has been accepted for presentation at the conference being held at the UCL Institute of Education in London.” A smile spreads across my face. Next, by means of my data, I will take the two boys with me from Limburg to London. I, at least, am still very interested in their racetrack.

Linguistic and social practices unfold in interrelation with the space(s) and places(s) in which they emerge, and children are sensitive to the social meanings and affordances of different places. In Early Childhood Care and Education (ECEC) centres, educators are often less present in peripheral places like corridors or side rooms, offering children the opportunity to extensively engage in peer relations with less intervention from adults than in central places like the classroom. In such peer interactions, children constantly (re-)construct their social organisation, including their moral and social order. One way of methodologically approaching such processes is the multi-modal analysis of video recordings. Video recordings can make stories live on as data, captured first in audio-visual clips, then transformed into detailed written transcripts, discussed in Data Sessions, and finally presented as part of a scholarly argument in conference presentations and publications. As a linguistic ethnographer working with multi-modal interaction analysis, I build connections with my research participants during fieldwork, and their stories accompany me as my research data throughout the whole project.

**About the author**

Marie is a Linguistic Anthropologist and PhD candidate in the Department of Literature & Art as well as in the Faculty of Dutch Philology at the University of Münster. Her research focuses on the intersection of language and culture. Marie enjoys running, good coffee, and unleashing her culinary creativity in the kitchen.

Inge Römgens

# Identifying the Trouble With Practices of Artistic Research

Friday February 21, 2020, very early in the morning,  
my bed, Kerkrade

Yesterday, I presented  
To an interdisciplinary audience at a research centre  
at the Faculty of the Arts at Zuyd<sup>18</sup>

I cannot stop thinking about it  
Therefore, I cannot sleep

It's funny

The Theatre Artist couldn't sleep either  
After receiving my work before the presentation  
He had been asked to prepare a response  
To my presentation  
He responded that my work had kept him awake

My preparation had kept the Theatre Artist awake  
His response keeps me awake

I take my phone from the bedside table to write  
down some thoughts  
The Theatre Artist argued that what's hyper personal  
is always interesting for other people  
Unsure what to do with this feedback, I start jotting  
thoughts in the most hyper personal way I know  
My mother tongue  
Kirchröadsj<sup>19</sup>

*'T sjpoeëkt miech vanal durch d'r kop  
Iech pak mienge telefoon um va ieëlend  
mar ens jet óp tse sjriev  
Iech bin heem dus iech dink in 't plat*

*Hyper perzeunlieg*

*Meent e dat noe wirkliëg?  
Dat wirkt doch nit  
Dat plat  
Dat versjteet ja jee miensj*

<sup>18</sup> Zuyd is the University  
of Applied Sciences in  
Maastricht.

<sup>19</sup> The local dialect spoken  
in Kerkrade in the Dutch  
province of Limburg.

This is how I start  
Questioning how to communicate  
what's hyper personal

Evidently,  
My phone doesn't know Kirchröadsj  
Therefore,  
It 'auto-corrects' the words I type into  
words it knows  
The words it knows, however, are  
completely different from those I try  
to type

How annoying

The Theatre Artist says  
He is in a crisis  
Of trying to understand artistic research  
and how it can be done

I also wonder what artistic research is  
And how it can be done

What might it mean to take the arts  
no less seriously than the sciences  
As modes of discovery, creation and  
enlargement of knowledge?  
This is what artistic research is about  
I think

The Theatre Artist enjoys his crisis  
He says it's a good thing

My presentation could be part of a  
theatre play  
He says  
However, it is written in a very realistic  
paradigm  
And realism is the least interesting  
form of theatre

He says

And also  
My work lacks the quality of the  
hyper-personal  
I hide behind the formal characteristics  
of my work  
He says  
And he wants to know who I am

Listening to the feedback  
I think I wrote a bad theatre scene

How embarrassing

In response to my presentation  
Next speaks the Philosophy Professor  
My presentation should articulate a  
clear claim  
With an argument  
That clearly answers a research question

That's what makes a work hyper-personal  
He says

My presentation doesn't have a clear  
question  
And what's more  
It lacks the qualities of a clear claim  
and argumentation  
He says

Listening to this feedback  
I think I gave a bad academic presentation

How embarrassing

What might it mean to take the arts  
no less seriously than the sciences  
As modes of discovery, creation and  
enlargement of knowledge?  
What might this mean for artistic  
research?  
And how it can be done?

Should my work  
Somehow  
Incorporate all the feedback?  
Can it?  
Somehow  
Combine all the qualities  
Important to both the Theatre Artist  
And  
The Philosophy Professor?

I dare not even think of the next  
question

How?

For the Artist the work should be  
non-realistic and hyper personal  
For the Professor it should have a  
clear research question, claim and  
argumentation

I still don't know what they thought  
of the content of my presentation  
We did not get to that part

Meanwhile, my phone stubbornly  
keeps 'correcting' my language  
It makes taking notes in Kirchröadsj  
impossible  
The "corrections" make no sense

For example: heem [home] becomes  
heel [whole]. Or dink [think] becomes  
dijk [dyke]

Almost ready to give up  
And abandon my hyper-personal  
language  
I suddenly realise that I cannot  
And perhaps should not

Discarding the language would be  
Discarding what is hyper-personal

Thinking in Kirchröadsj  
I suddenly realise  
Makes me think differently  
Somehow  
In these intuitive  
Short sentences  
For example  
That can later be recreated in diffe-  
rent languages  
More intelligible to wider audiences

In Kirchröadsj  
I suddenly realise  
My thoughts follow  
Somehow  
A different rhythm  
And with that  
Bring up different questions  
And arguments

I cannot really put my finger on why  
Perhaps different languages  
Not only afford different ways of  
speaking  
They also  
Somehow  
Catalyse different thinking and kno-  
wing processes

What are the languages of the Artist  
and the Professor?  
The conceptual  
Or disciplinary?  
Metaphorical?  
What would be the right term?  
Languages that underpin their feed-  
back?

With the stubbornness of my phone  
It becomes clear that  
"Correcting" one language in terms of  
another  
Makes no sense

<sup>20</sup> From the theater artists that I met during  
my fieldwork I learned that those terms  
are not the same. "Work" refers to a process  
of creation, whereas "a work" refers to a  
finished output of that process.

Could the Artist and the Professor  
learn each other's languages  
Somehow?  
And would they have to?

More patiently than I usually would  
be  
I respond to the stubbornness of my  
phone with a stubbornness of my  
own  
I continue typing Kirchröadsj  
Subtly convincing my phone that if it  
knew the language  
It would not "correct" the words

What might work  
Or a work<sup>20</sup>  
Be that exists  
Somehow  
Between the Artist and the Professor?

Work that  
Somehow  
Calls upon recognizable reference  
points for both  
And that  
Somehow  
Is relevant to both as artistic research

Work  
In other words  
That takes the arts no less seriously  
than the sciences  
And the sciences no less seriously  
than the arts  
As modes of discovery, creation and  
enlargement of knowledge?



With this text I aim to understand and share the trouble involved with the interdisciplinary practice of artistic research.<sup>21</sup> Artistic research combines artistic and academic practices in attempts at gaining new knowledge. Because it tries to exist between established disciplines in academia and the arts, artistic research raises a lot of questions and debate.<sup>22</sup> Think of discussions on how to manage categories that have traditionally been associated with either the arts or academia, such as the [assumed] opposition between personal experience and abstract, structured reasoning that my text brings up.

Artistic research raises the question of what work might look like that takes the arts no less seriously than the sciences. Vice versa, it builds upon Nelson Goodman's philosophical statement that the arts are a fundamentally different mode of discovery, creation, and enlargement of knowledge, yet one that must be taken "no less seriously" than the sciences.<sup>23</sup> When it comes to artistic research, the complex question is how this could be done in practice. In addition to raising this question, my text is also an attempt at formulating a (tentative) answer. In my research, I aim to understand how practices of artistic research could be done by engaging with some myself. In an attempt to incorporate the feedback from both the philosopher and the theatre artist, my text seeks to embody its content in its formal characteristics.

#### About the author

Inge is a Lecturer and PhD candidate at University College Maastricht (UCM). Her research focuses on practices of artistic research and education. Through participant observation in teams where artists and academics collaborate, she learns how artistic research is done, defined, and discussed in practice. Inge enjoys writing and theatre practices.

<sup>21</sup> "Trouble" here refers to the concept as introduced by Donna Haraway (2016) in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press).

<sup>22</sup> For further reading see, for example: Hannula, M., Suoranta, J. & Vadén, T. (2005). *Artistic research—Theories, methods and practices*. Academy of Fine Arts; Biggs, M. & Karlsson, H. (2011). Eds. *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts*. Routledge; Borgdorff, H. (2012). *The Conflict of the Faculties. Perspectives on Artistic Research and Academia*. Amsterdam University Press.

<sup>23</sup> See: Goodman, N. (1978). *Ways of Worldmaking*. Hackett Publishing Company. p.102

# Portrait of Here a Museum

Here it is! The palace of dreams, the home of treasures, the story box—my museum. I have been coming here since I was a small child. The temple-like space with its pompous entrance and its princess staircases has always felt like a place I shouldn't be allowed into; and yet, it is mine to explore. As always, my heart quivers with a defiant giggle when I enter. The familiar smells change from room to room, an invisible—yet intimate—track to follow: the musty dust of the cloakroom, the faint nutty smell of the café, the lingering scent of the creaky wooden floors as I go from one room to the next, the oil and varnish tang of the paintings in my favourite gallery, the rich earthy smell of ceramics in the dusty antiquity gallery. And always in the background, the low buzzing sound of the crowd, bursting with fragments of words and the relentless tip-tapping of

**Emilie Sitzia**

footsteps.

I always like to come early, when the guards are still trying to find the most comfortable position and stand shifting their weight from one foot to the other, when the cloakroom attendant still has lots of free space and a smile, and when the place is so empty that I feel I could run from room to room and no one would stop me. I also like it because I get to enjoy that unique moment when all is quiet, when it is just me and the object, eye to eye, with no one breathing down my neck and not a footstep to be heard; eternity in a marble hand. Only then can I hear how the objects whisper to each other, back and forth. But I also like it because about one hour in, all the children arrive: hardly contained boisterous school groups, dishevelled moms on their day off with their babies securely wrapped to their bodies, grandmothers resolutely leading the way, pointing here and there. And suddenly, it is a riot of excitement, of Oh's and Ah's,

of laughter and  
m u r m u r e d  
stories, slow  
deciphering of  
labels for the  
treasure hunt,  
t o n g u e - s t i c -

king-out colouring pages, hand-holding togetherness.

But the excitement rarely lasts. Little by little, I am too hot, a bit hungry, and I begin to feel like the rooms are all the same. The light is suddenly too bright. Also, where can I sit? Nowhere, and now my back starts to hurt. I can't focus anymore; I can't get lost in the works. The other people are just noise now. And the labels that should be my life-saving buoys are either boring—"born in Moldavia in 1647, the painter blablablablabla"—or too short: what am I supposed to do with "untitled, oil on canvas, 1832, 6 5/8 × 10 1/2 in | 16.8 × 26.7 cm"?!

I start thinking of all the untold stories—of women, of minorities, of the objects stolen by Napoleon and the many colonial French armies after him, about that silly educational touchscreen that does nothing but beep and flash in a corner, about how flat and dull history feels, about how irrelevant this all seems. I get annoyed. My legs feel heavy, I just want to close my eyes and sit in complete silence. I want to go home. I am disappointed, as always.

But today I am going to do something about this little bitter corner in my heart. I am going to write my museum a letter.

I go home, I sit at my desk, take a deep breath, and start writing:

*Dear Museum,*

*I've been coming to visit you for a long time now. We have spent long rainy afternoons together. When I am with you, the world stops and I feel absorbed in your stories and your objects.*

*But you must understand that the world is changing. You can no longer tell your stories without thinking about what you are saying. You can't keep repeating the same thing, in the same way. You can't let yourself be distracted by meaningless technological gadgets that prevent me from understanding what you are saying. You can't talk to me like I'm an idiot. You can no longer hog the talk and tell me who I am without letting me tell you (at least a little bit) what matters to me. You can't continue to hurt people by ignoring them or by telling them that their stories don't matter.*

*Well, you can, but then you're talking to yourself. And at your age, that might worry people.*

*So, I would like to help you. Let's look together at what you want to say. And maybe we could ask the others what stories they would like you to tell? Maybe you could also tell us some difficult stories that we don't all agree on. Maybe we could even talk about them together and all give our points of view? You could start to see us, your audience and your friends, as your intellectual equals and*

talk with us—with me—as equals.

Maybe we could also think about how you tell your stories? How about we stop with the big screens and the bombastic soundtracks and try something else instead, like playing, storytelling, a dance, a party, maybe even a dream? Come up with a story we can all tell together?

Well, if you don't believe me, ask the others what they think. I asked them, and they are as tired of your old stories as I am.

We love you, but we want you to grow up with us a little, and we're here to help you.

Best wishes,  
Emilie

I hope I will get a reply soon.

*The core of museology research work is threefold: 1) analysing the space and the way in which the audience's senses are triggered in the space and contribute to meaning-making processes, 2) audience research (this often translates into ethnographic observation of various types of audiences and the way they engage with the material the museum proposes), 3) analysing the museum's discourse ("voice" and content) as well as its relevance to contemporary audiences.*

#### About the author

Emilie holds a special chair at the University of Amsterdam and is Associate Professor of Cultural Education at the University of Maastricht. She specialises in the impact of art on audiences, museology, and word/image interdisciplinary studies. Emilie enjoys writing in trains, eating chocolate, and swimming.

# Going Crypto

Aneta Spendzharova

She misses the drama of it all, or at least the pomp: the speaker invitations, young leader awards, being called a female role model for the next generation of fintech entrepreneurs.

She had made it in The City. There she was amidst the arrogance and manspreading: Ruja, from Bulgaria. Her OneCoin business was doing splendidly for a while.

Now she finds herself on the run, at Dr. Lyras' Plastic Surgery in Thessaloniki. Befuddled from the anaesthetic and the painkillers, Ruja reaches for her phone. Hearing a familiar voice will soothe her.

"Don't make a scene now," Oksana says on the other end of the line. "Send me a photo. It can't be that bad! This is your ticket to moving about in the world, freely, you know."

But it can be that bad, Ruja thinks, looking at someone else in the mirror. The eyes are just about the only feature linking her to her old self. Outside, she will have to wear sunglasses. Ruja already knows which brand she wants, to go with her cropped hair.

Her Bulgarian interior ministry contacts have proven to be golden. A wise investment. They will mint new identity papers for her in no time.

Ruja met Oksana at a student party. Back then, Ruja was at the LSE, and Oksana studied art history at the Courtauld. Now Oksana runs an art gallery in Dubai. One foot in London, the other one in the Middle East. A solid plan B in case the geopolitical winds shift and staying in the UK is no longer an option.

Whenever Oksana was in town, they met up for dinner at Nopi in Soho. Oksana hated eating alone about as much as she hated cooking. “We are not some sort of gangsters, Ruja,” she would say, glancing at Ruja’s bodyguards tucking into their steaks.

Following her brother’s advice, Ruja never went anywhere without Rado and Drago. These two came in handy, and the mention of gangsters amused her. She pictured herself like an iconic female Kevin Spacey in *The Usual Suspects*; or, on second thought, maybe more like in *House of Cards*.

“I support causes I believe in,” Oksana said, “just like Gates and Bezos, and what’s his name—the sweet old guy with the investment funds?”

“Warren Buffett,” Ruja replied, remembering a case study she did a few years back on investment and anti-money laundering, and almost spitting out a chunk of radish.

Ruja pictured the Financial Action Task Force in Paris—the global hub for anti-money laundering rules. She had made Rado and Drago drive past that old Parisian palace one summer. An investment forum had invited her to give the keynote speech and she had had a few hours to spare after hitting the Louis Vuitton boutique.

While at the LSE, Ruja applied for an internship at the OECD, housed in the same building as the FATF. Just think of the irony. It didn’t work out—but that was all for the best. Instead, Ruja set up OneCoin, propelling herself to City stardom faster than she could have done at any dusty international bureaucracy. She was a fintech entrepreneur *avant la lettre*.

But the anti-money laundering due diligence got pesky and the City regulators were a major pain, showing up at her Head office for unannounced checks with increasing frequency. What they were looking for wasn’t on the books.

The nurse’s voice at Dr. Lyras’ clinic is discrete and reassuring. “It went so well! The doctor fixed that too,” she says, pointing at the now smooth skin between Ruja’s eyebrows. “As a token of appreciation.”

The deep furrow emerged as doubts began to surface about OneCoin, and business slowed down. Ruja’s contacts at the Bulgarian interior ministry warned her that the Americans were onto her too. Was that the endgame?

The art of the exit was in the timing.

Rado and Drago were adamant about doing it the old-school way: duffel bags stuffed with currency. Drago had worked as security at Sofia airport before making a move to finance. He had buddies there who could use some cash. “Like in the 90s,” they laughed, “hard currency under the mattress.” Ruja kept some bitcoin too; crypto transactions were, after all, *du jour* and conveniently anonymous.

Ruja steps off the Wizzair flight in Athens that ordinary Tuesday afternoon. She clutches a leather duffel bag in each hand and joins the passport check queue, alongside the seasonal workers and the families with boisterous little kids.

*Meet Ruja Ignatova, a Bulgarian fintech entrepreneur also known as the “missing Cryptoqueen.” She is the only woman on the FBI’s top ten most wanted list for her role in running a cryptocurrency Ponzi scheme, OneCoin. Her story showcases the challenges of regulating a new financial instrument/technology, such as cryptocurrencies, and ensuring robust investor protection in a global context.*

My research investigates the politics of negotiating and implementing global rules in the financial sector. This is how I came across the case of Ruja Ignatova's Ponzi scheme and the various international rules Ignatova has violated. Ruja Ignatova has been accused of masterminding a fraudulent scheme, which she ran from London, to steal more than \$4bn from OneCoin investors. A recent BBC podcast investigation led by Jamie Bartlett brought renewed attention to the "missing Cryptoqueen."<sup>24</sup> She was last seen boarding a flight from Bulgaria to Greece in 2017 and has been on the run ever since. Perhaps my curiosity about this case was further fuelled by some shared background—I too grew up in Bulgaria during the 1990s and moved abroad to study.

FBI investigators have established that the OneCoin cryptocurrency Ignatova set up was, in fact, worthless and was never safeguarded by blockchain technology. According to a top US prosecutor leading the conviction, Ignatova "timed her scheme perfectly, capitalising on the frenzied speculation of the early days of cryptocurrency."<sup>25</sup> In 2019, she was charged in the US with eight counts including wire fraud and securities fraud. Should you spot her at an airport or on an exotic holiday island, the FBI is offering a \$100,000 reward for any information that could lead to her arrest. FBI agents believe Ms Ignatova travels with armed guards or associates.

### About the author

Aneta is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science. She researches international regime complexity in the global governance of finance, looking at institutions, rules, and actors. Aneta feels at home in the mountains and, in her spare time, enjoys hiking.

<sup>24</sup> BBC. (2022). *The Missing Cryptoqueen*. [Podcast]. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p07nkd84/episodes/downloads>

<sup>25</sup> U.S. Attorney's Office of the Southern District of New York. (2019, March 8). *Manhattan U.S. Attorney Announces Charges Against Leaders Of "OneCoin," A Multibillion-Dollar Pyramid Scheme Involving The Sale Of A Fraudulent Cryptocurrency* Press Release. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/manhattan-us-attorney-announces-charges-against-leaders-onecoin-multibillion-dollar>

# The Long Game

Paul Stephenson

It had stopped raining. Which was unusual for a Tuesday. A Tuesday in January in Brussels. Brussels, a city famous for its frites and waffles, its beer and chocolate, its grey cloud cover. Yes, it had stopped raining, though technically speaking it might still have been spitting—sporadic drips trickled down the window panes. Window panes being looked out of. Looked out of by a woman in her late thirties, a woman from a small town in southern Germany, a woman who had been living and working in Brussels for 15 years, after a short stint in Luxembourg.



She had passed the notoriously difficult concours so was a “career official” now. Whether she liked it or not, she was here to stay. The conditions were good. Golden cage. She knew no tax. She knew but low cloud. And the traffic at rush hour on the Rue Belliard. And her own office, of course, three metres by four. The view of the small office just like hers through the glass of her window (too dark to make out anyone inside, though she always imagined a young stagiaire just starting out, full of ideals about the EU and European integration).

In 30 minutes, well, 27, exactly, there would be a unit meeting. A unit meeting. She was a unit within a unit. Like 14 others. They would gather to review the trans-European transport projects and their state of progress. The big priority infrastructure projects, not the smaller ones. What was the progress after all these years of planning, all these years of financing? These were large projects. We’re talking massive infrastructure. Tunnels bored through mountains. Long road bridges. High-speed rail sections.

Credit where it’s due, a few were finished. But most weren’t. What with them being costlier and more ambitious than any government could afford. And yet several governments had thought them a good idea. A good idea at the time. Back then in the 90s and 2000s. During an economic boom. Back then when the Commission was ambitious. When there was a permissive consensus in favour of it all, and people believed the spin about job creation, market growth, about all the benefits to be reaped.

The woman’s name was Eva. Her daughter was Heidi but Heidi was ill today and off school. Eva had had to call the babysitter. But anyway, 21 minutes to the meeting with the team and Head of Unit. The meeting in which they were to take stock of the projects (as they did the first Tuesday of each month) and identify the bottlenecks. Not the original bottlenecks to road and rail traffic, you understand, but the bottlenecks to the big building projects meant to overcome cross-border problems and encourage international transport.

What on earth could she at the Commission do to speed things up? She was one fonctionnaire. What could she alone do to give the 27 member states an incentive to finish what they had started? But more to the point, and closer to home, how could she and her unit, her department, work more effectively with colleagues in other departments? They also had an interest in the projects and wanted them done. Once and for all. No one had a magic wand. No rabbits were going to be pulled from top hats. But couldn’t they somehow get together and brainstorm a way forwards. Maybe they needed a team day somewhere out of town?

The spider plant on top of the filing cabinet looked forlorn. It didn’t know what to suggest. And the large poster looked faded, had curled at the edges. A famous painting by Magritte, “Time Transfixed,” a steam locomotive emerging at speed from the fireplace beneath a dining room mantelpiece.

Then there was Eva. With only 16 minutes to go, she still had to review the implementation reports from Spain and France and Portugal, on the road tunnel through the Pyrenees, and the high-speed rail line between Lisbon and Madrid. Why were some people less committed than others? Eva knew that political promises often don’t add up to much. She also knew her hands were tied. What could a desk officer in DG MOVE (the EU’s department for transport) do to speed things along? How was Heidi? Eva’s mind skittered home again.

## *Why did people romanticise the past so?*

There was a knock at the door. Eva kept her glance on the glass, beckoned the visitor to come in. It was Lukas. Only Lukas. Her colleague from the next office. From the other side of the partition. Also German. From Hamburg. Did she want a quick coffee? Lukas was senior, which is to say he'd been there longer. He'd moved around. He'd worked in other departments. Agriculture. Regional policy. Education. But he seemed to like it in Transport. Always chirpy. Still smiling. Even on a rainy Tuesday morning when a unit meeting loomed. Smart suit. Two

Yes, she did want coffee. Need coffee. And to run some ideas by him. But first she needed to check in with the babysitter. Two minutes and she'd join him at the machine. She had an idea and was keen to share it. Why not bring in people that people knew? High-profile people. Well-known politicians with experience. Politicians with clout. Politicians with a track record, who are charismatic and could convince others, use their skills of persuasion to spur people on. People prepared to meet local stakeholders. Former senior ministers and even prime ministers who might be looking for a new role. Politicians that could move things along. Eva wanted to move things along.

Eva grabbed her phone, her blue pen, and spiral-bound notebook, went to join Lukas for a latte.

small metal badges on his lapel: the EU flag and a steam train. Eva thought him a romantic. Why did people romanticise the past so? Slow, dirty, unsafe. An old means of transport that took forever.

<sup>26</sup> Stephenson, P. J. (2022). *The physical completion of the EU's single market: trans-European networks as experimentalist governance?* *Journal of European Integration*, 44(1), 99–115. [10.1080/07036337.2021.2011268](https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2021.2011268)

<sup>27</sup> Stephenson, P. J. (2010). *The role of working groups of Commissioners in coordinating policy implementation: the case of trans-European networks (TENs)*. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 48(3), 709–736. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-5965.2010.02070.x>

Since the European Union's 1993 White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment, the Commission has emphasised the importance of trans-European transport networks (TEN-Ts) for the physical completion of the "single market." Despite the 2004 and 2013 revisions to the TEN-T regulation which aimed at redefining and expanding the multimodal network, after 30 years many projects remain unfinished.

My earlier research explored the role of a high-level working group of Commissioners in monitoring and co-ordinating the implementation of TEN-Ts in transport.<sup>26</sup> It showed how formally institutionalised structures for intra-College co-operation provided important arenas for creativity, entrepreneurship and consensus-building. My recent research has explored the Commission's enduring role in EU policy coordination from the perspective of hybrid governance, focusing on the mediating role of high-level "European Coordinators," the use of stakeholder forums, recourse to policy evaluation, and the development of new financial instruments.<sup>27</sup> Drawing on recent audit and evaluations work by the EU institutions, it has explored reconfigurations of implementing actors, and engaged with notions from the literature on experimentalist governance, including networks, informalism, and deliberation. The analysis has suggested that the Commission demonstrates resilience as a coordination body in its commitment to "physically complete" the single market, while recognising limitations to its coordination capacity. Ultimately, the consistent and sustained political involvement

of Commissioners improved the Commission's administrative co-ordination and may, ultimately, have helped secure better policy implementation.

### About the author

Paul works as Associate Professor in European Public Policy in the Department of Political Science. His research explores the role of EU institutions and officials, particularly in the European Commission and European Court of Auditors, in the policy-making processes of the EU. He is particularly interested in the areas of transport and cohesion policy, as well as in the politics of evaluation. Paul enjoys writing and reading contemporary poetry.

# Bed- Sharing Practices in a Holy City in Senegal

Karlién Strijbosch

I wake up from my light sleep in the middle of the night in a dark room. The ventilator blows softly over my arms as I lie in the fetal position on a wooden bed that I share with one or maybe two other women. We are in a house with a big courtyard and rooftop. I am not sure to whom the house belongs, but my friend has assured me we are welcome to stay the night. The leggings I am wearing to cover my legs make the skin near my belly button itch. I do not dare to check the time on my phone, which is underneath the thin vest that serves as my makeshift pillow. The light from the screen might wake the others. As I shift my body a tiny bit to the right, I try not to move my weight too much. Denting the mattress too much might also wake the others.

I see the silhouette of a man sitting on the bed. I look at his back, which is leaning slightly forward while his backside rests on the mattress I am lying on. The thin curtain in front of the doorpost moves slowly. Who is this man that entered our room in the middle of the night?

My heart beats faster and I try not to make a noise. I turn around little by little, pretending that I am still asleep. The young woman I met yesterday evening is snoring softly beside me. Two or maybe more girls sleep soundlessly on cane mats on the floor. Thin veils cover their faces. As far as I know, there are only women in the room. Nothing happens. The man remains seated on the bed.

I hear the sound of approaching flip-flops. The curtain opens and someone whispers to the man sitting on the bed. Could this be Adoulaye? The night before, he gave my friends and me a big bowl of rice, white fish, carrot, and eggplant and a hot, strong but sweet cup of ataya, Senegalese tea. He showed us the rooftop, where we failed to set up a tent in the dark. Then he guided me to the room where I am now.

My thoughts wander back to the events of the previous days: the freshly slaughtered cow skins, stretched out on the yellow sand; the women and the big wooden sticks they used to stir freshly sliced onions in bowls so big I could probably fit in them. I remember how my toes burnt when I accidentally slipped them out of my flip-flops and touched the hot sand.

And I can still smell the last cigarette my travel companions smoked before entering the holy city, where smoking is forbidden. I remember the feeling of our car accelerating as it sped up the brand-new highway connecting the West African capital Dakar with the Senegalese city I'm in now, about 150 kilometres away. I recall the smell of diesel smoke coming from the stream of cars, minibuses, and trucks filled with hundreds of thousands of disciples coming from all over the world and moving toward the city of the Great Mosque in Touba. It is here where the founder of the Murid brotherhood, Cheikh Amadou Bamba, is buried. The signature image of him with a white scarf wrapped around his head is printed on countless t-shirts, caps, and painted on walls. During the yearly Grand Magal, disciples commemorate Cheikh Amadou Bamba's exile from Senegal to Gabon in 1985. French authorities were afraid Bamba would use his popularity to start an uprising against them. The uprising never happened. The highway opened especially for this occasion and is only free during the pilgrimage.

I think of the people singing, *lah, lah, lah, lah*, while slowly wal-

king together in small circles, some with patchwork clothes and dreadlocks. I think of the hand gestures I tried to understand from my friend while approaching a spiritual leader on my knees and keeping my head down. I remember my friend Fatou, who invited us upstairs to join her and at least twenty other men and women who were probably in their early twenties, laying on cane mats, sipping from small plastic bags of water and occasionally flirting. I think about how I tried to cover up my hair with my favourite blue shawl, something I never do in my daily life in Senegal.

After hours of walking around in the sun at 35 degrees and squeezing myself through the masses while avoiding horse-drawn carriages, I am grateful to relax on this wooden bed with mirrors in the shape of bee wings and fake flowers standing on the dresser. The man still sits on the bed, but my heartbeat has calmed down. He is probably a guest who has just arrived, just like we were

the night before. I roll back into my foetal position to catch some more sleep.

*Jèrejèf to all who shared their stories, food, and a place to rest my head, and who let me into their lives. In my PhD project, I investigate how return migration is related to ideas and perspectives about masculinities and the institution of marriage in Senegal. So far, I have conducted a year of ethnographic fieldwork mainly in Senegal. By participating in the rhythms of Senegalese life, I have tried to understand what kind of world Senegalese men who have lived in Europe find themselves in after they return. What does migration mean to them and the people around them? To learn more about the research and the stories of deportees and returnees and their social networks, you are welcome to read these blogposts in Dutch<sup>28</sup> or English,<sup>29</sup> and this article in English,<sup>30</sup> all of which resulted from this research project.*

<sup>28</sup> Strijbosch, K. (2023). Karlien Strijbosch: Blogger Faces of Science. Nemo Kennislink. <https://www.nemokennislink.nl/facesofscience/wetenschappers/karlien-strijbosch/>

<sup>29</sup> Strijbosch, K. (2021, November 5). Victims, criminals or heroes? Male returnees challenge the stigma of deportation. Euronews. <https://www.euronews.com/culture/2021/11/04/victims-criminals-or-heroes-deported-migrants-challenge-the-stigma-of-masculinity-view>

<sup>30</sup> Strijbosch, K., Mazzucato, V. & Brunotte, U. (2023). Performing return: victims, criminals or heroes? Senegalese male returnees engaging with the stigma of deportation. *Gender, Place & Culture*. 10.1080/0966369X.2023.2229056

### About the author

Karlien is a PhD candidate in the Globalization, Transnationalism and Development research group. She is broadly interested in how social structures of inequality influence people's lives in various intersecting ways. For her PhD research, she investigates how ideas about masculinities relate to return and deportation, mostly by connecting with male Senegalese returnees themselves.

# An Encounter With Amusement Hunters on Chinese Social Media Platforms

Yiming Wang

Lisa opened her Sina Weibo app before bed, as she usually did, and searched for her idol's hashtag. She hoped to see Felix-Lee Yongbok—the lead dancer of the group Stray Kids and her idol—captured in a moment of breath-taking charm and charisma, and to read the adoring comments from other fans.

However, as she scrolled through her timeline, she was greeted by an unfamiliar series of photos of men she did not recognise. Confused, she double-checked her spelling and clicked on the hashtag again, only to see more and more unknown muscular men—some holding a football, some striking poses, and others embracing each other intimately.

Lisa couldn't help but think to herself, "So gay, that cannot be real...They play football!" Lisa didn't watch male football, but common sense told her that it was not really a queer space, even though the blog post and comments referred to them as "love birds" or "a sweet family."

The same thin, young boy's face kept appearing, accompanied by strange and unintelligible names like "One-apostrophe Fei" (short for Felix) "Ungrateful Fei," and "Bernabeu Prince." Though Lisa didn't understand the content of these messages, she was all too familiar with this behaviour. It was like somebody had broken into her house and then blown it up!

Lisa was enraged by this invasion of her online space. She fought back fiercely, defending her turf like a loyal soldier. But she soon realised that the moderator of the fan topic had intervened and was urging fans to remain friendly and not to play into the hands of hostile groups. Lisa deleted her post and watched in silence as her enemies destroyed her home.

But she couldn't help searching for more discussions. Soon, the comments of a user called Annie appeared on Lisa's phone screen: "how ridiculous," and "how pathetic." After several clicks on Annie's retweets, Lisa understood: these football fans—Annie included—believed that the moderator of her Felix fan group had stolen the hashtag "#Felix" to boost his popularity on Weibo. After all, the World Cup had just ended, and João Félix had recently been loaned to Chelsea during the winter transfer window. This certainly explained why much of the content on the "#Felix" hashtag was now about the football player Félix rather than about Lisa's idol Felix. In retaliation, Annie—along with many other football fangirls—had seen this as an opportunity to reclaim their cyberspace territory. After all, as fans of a subculture, they had long been fed up with the behaviour of fans in the movie and entertainment industries, who only go online to praise celebrities and don't hesitate to use the "report" function to enforce the forum rules. "How lame," these fangirls thought. They had seized the chance to show their disapproval, eagerly responded to the call in the group, and started posting on the Weibo hashtag.

The guerrilla war had begun. And Lisa was told not to respond.



Amusement Hunters, or *lezi ren*, had become increasingly common in Chinese online communities in recent years. Annie was one of them. Similar to trolls in other contexts, Amusement Hunters lived up to their name by creating controversy online and enjoying the ensuing chaos from the sidelines. Annie and her friends loved nothing more than playing the role of an opposing group and provoking their enemies into a group conflict, then sitting back and watching the show.

The football fans who flooded the #Felix hashtag were also Amusement Hunters. Unlike the fans of Felix, who were concerned about their public images and restrained themselves, Amusement Hunters had no need for self-restraint. Annie did not care about negative feedback from viewers, nor did she care about the potential negative impact on her favourite player's career. In her words, "You can criticise the player I support; I don't care. I'll criticise him too if he performs badly." No greed, no fear. Just the endless amusement of chaos and others' pain.

Lisa bowed to social norms that evening, and merely put up with the ridicule. But while most of Felix's fans, like Lisa, showed restraint, their rivals—the fans of other Korean idols—took the opportunity to counterattack. "Watch more games before you post, don't pretend to be a football fan. João Félix is an Atlético Madrid player, and you're talking about Bernabeu Prince," they criticized, pretending to support the football fans.

The Bernabeu is the home stadium of Real Madrid, and Real Madrid and Atlético Madrid are city rivals. These idol fans thought they had found a weakness, but their confidence amused Annie and others even more. Amusement Hunters' words should never be taken literally. They are allusions within a specific context, often with multiple reversals. In football fandom, a popular narrative had emerged: João Félix was the son of Real Madrid legends Cristiano Ronaldo and Kaká, making him the Bernabeu Prince despite playing for Atlético Madrid.

When the so-called enemies dared to criticise this absurd tale, they were unsurprisingly met with brutal mockery for their supposed lack of contextual understanding. It seemed that while these idol fans were right in the literal sense, they were completely out of touch with reality. The two sides of the argument were not even on the same wavelength, and the Amusement Hunters were always happy to perpetuate this inconsistency. Encounters with the Amusement Hunters were often disheartening, for they seemed to hold all the power in these debates. After a gruelling two-hour battle, the Amusement Hunters left the battlefield victorious, having created 32 coded names for Félix through trolling practices designed to create new online myths.

Lisa was left feeling confused and bewildered by these relics of a false reality. In bed, grappling with disillusionment, she pondered the ceaseless battles in football fandom, feeling despair. Those tearing down online spaces ran rampant without consequence. She questioned the purpose of it all, adrift and uncertain. The facade of fandom had crumbled, leaving profound uncertainty.

*This is a small sample of conflicts and trolling practices in online Chinese-language fan communities. Thousands of conflicts occur every day, ranging from serious cases that result in punishment by platforms or even governments, to minor disputes that participants may not even remember. Often, these debates stem from misunderstandings because the two sides do not share the same context, which is particularly evident in fan communities. In the context of online censorship and community self-governance, fans have invented many code names to encrypt their conversations. These code names are collectively developed and circulated within the community as common knowledge that is frequently and quickly updated. This requires considerable attention and active participation to keep up with the trend. Fans use these code names to shape their identity and distinguish themselves from other groups. One such group, the Amusement Hunters, also deliberately create conflict by exploiting information asymmetries and making conflict a part of their daily lives.*

#### About the author

Yiming is a PhD candidate in the Arts, Media and Culture (AMC) programme at Maastricht University. She is focusing on participatory censorship and

fan communities in China. Her research interests include fan studies, popular culture, censorship studies, and gender studies.

# Do Engineers Dream of Electric People?

Jacob Ward

*I*t's 1951. You are a white, British, twenty-five year-old man, an engineer working for the British Post Office, the second-biggest employer in the country. But you don't engineer the postal service. You're a telecom engineer for the Post Office, which builds and runs Britain's telecom infrastructure, the copper cables and electromechanical exchanges that are Britain's nerves and synapses.

*You didn't always think of your telecom system as a living creature, but you've just attended a symposium at Imperial College, London, on a new science called "cybernetics." The cyberneticians there—physicists, mathematicians, neuroscientists, linguists—whispered of a world of pure information. Their equations, their "information theory," show that anything and everything—a telephone call, an infant's cries, a frog's nerves firing, a machine breaking codes—are all messages and loops of information. A robot mouse could learn to sniff out cheese just like a real one. Your mind buzzes with new ways of engineering a communications network of humans and machines.*

*Your name is Roy Harris. And you're going to set the agenda for British telecommunications for the next forty years.*

The historian of technology, Melvin Kranzberg, famously said that "Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral." What Kranzberg meant was that technology interacts with society in ways that are not fixed. What might be seen as "good" in one time or place could be "bad" in another. The same holds true for dreams about technology. Dreams hold mythic power, and engineers sometimes seem like today's myth-makers, titans of industry sitting on lofty mountains, far-removed from the foothills of daily life, snatching thunderous dreams from the heavens and hurling them earthward, turning them into new machines for energy, transport, communication.

But these dreams have a dark side. They do not spring up from nothing. Dreams reflect the mind—or minds—of their conjurers, and those minds inhabit people with backgrounds, beliefs, and bodies that might differ from the people—workers, users, citizens—who they want to share in their dream. In short, they're built on the experiences—the history—of the dreamers, and, as they dance with reality, they mutate and unfold into constellations of people and things that are neither good, nor bad, nor neutral. This is a story of engineers' dreams, where they come from and where they go, and how understanding that journey might give a chance for the people to weave some dreams of their own.

*You tell your father, Lionel, the Post Office's Engineer-in-Chief, about the lectures, about the futures that cybernetics shows. You're frustrated in your current role. Your boss, Tommy, is a smart, difficult, working-class man. You met during the war. You volunteered in 1943 to join the Army, but you, a Cambridge-educated engineer, a rowing club president, were deemed too valuable for that. Instead, you were sent to Tommy. You built machines together and sent them to mathematicians somewhere north of*

London. You don't talk about that work anymore. You're not allowed to. You can tell Tommy hates it, hates that he can't tell the world about these revolutionary machines, while the mathematicians go on to bigger and better things. One of the mathematicians, Alan, asked Tommy for help building a new machine, an "automatic computing engine." Tommy ignored him. He wants to build a machine of his own, here and now. He's not going to wait on someone else's ideas or your dreams of a digital, cybernetic future.

So you go around the country, lecturing Post Office engineers up and down Britain on cybernetics and information theory. You talk about how cybernetics shows that the human body is full of self-controlling mechanisms, from temperature control to heart rate, just like automatic machines. You tell them that cybernetics could integrate digital computing, neurobiology, and even industrial systems like the Post Office's telecom network. The world will have a second Industrial Revolution, an information revolution, in which, you tell them, "Human beings, used as sources of judgement, may also be replaced by machines."

Roy represents the archetypal modern engineer. He's a white, able-bodied man with a first-class education and, on top of that, he's got a job at the place where his dad is the chief engineer. Roy doesn't just represent an engineering archetype. He also represents a lot of what seems wrong about that archetype. Established, exclusive, elite. But, of course, Roy doesn't think like this. Why would he? He's brimming with optimism for a white-hot future of high technology.

For most of the twentieth century, the Post Office built and ran the UK's telecom infrastructure. The Post Office was Britain's AT&T, a national highways service for

communication. If you had a phone, you were already a cog in the Post Office's machine. And Roy was one of those engineers that dreamed of revolutionising that machine, swapping out its old, greasy mechanisms for digital tech. But one doesn't revolutionize a machine simply by swapping out some parts for others. Roy's cybernetic dream, which infected his colleagues, meant thinking beyond the physical components of Britain's telecom infrastructure. It also meant rethinking the people, the workers and users, who were part of that machine, upgrading them from analogue, physical humans into digital, informational, beings. In this dream, people became electric.

It's 1991. You retired after having heart surgery eight years ago, just before Margaret Thatcher sold off Britain's public telecom network, turning it into a private company called British Telecom. Now, the papers are all talking about BT's massive round of redundancies, more than 100,000 jobs cut over six years. If you'd hung on a little longer, maybe you could have taken one of these big redundancy packages. At least you've still got your state pension.

You decide to call Jim and joke about whether you could have hung on long enough. Jim was Engineer-in-Chief while you led systems development through the 1970s. He retired in 1976 and you still catch up from time to time. Jim had been your biggest advocate when things got tough for the dream you shared of turning Britain's telecom network into an information machine. You're proud that, together, you rolled out computer control across the entire network, using machines to manage technicians, operators, and even customers.

You can never remember Jim's number, so you call up directory inquiries. You don't get an operator, but instead a machine, still using a woman's voice, which you always found friendlier. The machine tells you to use the keypad to punch in commands so you can find the information you need. This was another cybernetic trick, turning the caller into a part of the system, getting them to follow a computer's instructions, rather than the caller giving instructions to a human operator. Like you said forty years ago: replacing human judgement with machines.

#### About the author

Jacob is a historian of science, technology, and politics. This piece was inspired by his forthcoming book.<sup>31</sup> Jacob is now researching a new project, "The Prediction Machine: Futurology, Technology, and Neoliberalism in British Government," funded by a VENI grant from NWO, the Dutch Research Council.

<sup>31</sup> Ward, J. (2023/4). *Visions of a Digital Nation: Market and Monopoly in British Telecommunications*. MIT Press.

Sally Wyatt

# Caring for Teeth

## *Scene 1*

I am reclining on a chaise longue of sorts. When I know I have to come here, I try to make sure that my clothes and shoes won't clash with the electric blue cover. It is a very special chaise longue, one that goes up and down, and sometimes I have to wiggle my way up to make it easier for my companion to do his work. His clothing matches the chair, as do all of the other accoutrements of his job.

The room is bright with windows on two sides. An even brighter lamp will soon be turned on and shone directly onto my face. When lying here, I nearly always have my eyes closed, so any colour clash wouldn't really bother me much. But I am thinking of my companion, as I know that aesthetics matter to him. I hope that his eyes are always wide open.

I cannot speak, even though my mouth is as wide open as it can possibly be. The texture of the rubber in my mouth is not pleasant. But it protects my tongue and the back of my throat from the sharp tools that my companion is using to poke around the inside of my mouth.

I am here because I am getting old. Sometimes when I eat something hard or tough I have the unpleasant sensation of imminent dislocation of my left jaw. My dentist tells me this is "internal disk derangement." To alleviate the unpleasant sensations and prevent the situation from getting even worse, he suggests that I start wearing a brace to keep my upper and lower teeth better aligned.

This will be different to the brace I wore as a child to correct the fact that my top teeth were behind my bottom teeth. That brace was placed discreetly behind my top teeth to push them forward. Apart from that easily fixed problem, my teeth are pretty good. I grew up in Canada, a country with good health and dental care, and my parents ensured I had regular check-ups and not too much sugar. I never acquired a taste for that popular brown fizzy drink. This all paid off, and I have no great anxiety about going to the dentist. Even though I wore braces as child, my early memories are of a curiosity for that place full of strange objects and kindly people.

## *Scene 2*

My dentist and I make a new appointment that we later have to reschedule because his electric blue chair is broken. We'll meet again when the chair is working and he can operate his remote control for making x-rays.

This is not only a high-tech activity. To make the measurements for the mould he uses a compass, similar to what I used in high school so many years ago to draw circles and measure distances on maps. This helps him to identify the correct grey metal mould that forms the basis for a more precise mould he makes with what I can only describe as medical rubber.

Weeks later, I go for my fitting. He pulls out a rather dull-looking plastic brace that fits over my top teeth, but not quite. He takes it in and out of my mouth, filing a bit here and there. Once he is satisfied, the object is sent away to be hardened so that it can later withstand hours (often an entire night) in my mouth.



More weeks pass, and the day of the final fitting arrives. A now shiny plastic brace is waiting in a shocking pink case. More final bits of filing, and of adjusting of the silver metal clips that are to hold it in place. To help him make these final modifications, I start practising how to insert it properly. When the brace is in my mouth, holding my top teeth in place, he tucks tracing paper between my top and bottom teeth and asks me to repeatedly open and close my mouth. The marks on the tracing paper indicate where he needs to file the brace.

### Scene 3

Every time I recline in one of these high-tech chaises longues, I admire the array of instruments, and wonder why my chosen academic field of science, technology and society studies (STS) does not devote more attention to dentistry. After this experience of having a brace fitted, I make the effort to check in some of the leading journals. Using “dentist” or “teeth” in a keyword search leads to just a few papers about the fluoridation debate—STS scholars love a good controversy.<sup>32</sup> There is also something about palaeontology, but nothing about contemporary human teeth or dental practices. Searching in the journal *Sociology of Health and Illness* doesn’t reveal much more, just a few articles about private medicine and social class, and a review article highlighting the absence of sociological research on oral health.<sup>33</sup> The most relevant article I find, in Tapuya, is called “Doing odontograms and dentists in the classroom. Materiality and affect in dental education.”<sup>34</sup>

Recently, there was a piece in the *Journal of*

Medical Internet Research suggesting that patients don’t really expect to find their dentists on social media, nor do they particularly want to be friends with them.<sup>35</sup> Not the most surprising of results. I like my dentist, though I wouldn’t describe him as a friend. Insofar as it is possible to chat with someone who has both hands and assorted sharp instruments in your mouth, I always enjoy our conversations. These range from the quality of the coffee in the nearby café where he sometimes sends me to wait if he’s running late, to his post-pandemic decision to spend more time doing research and less time with his hands in people’s mouths. That is another remarkable skill: dentists have to be ambidextrous, manipulating materials and instruments in a confined, dark space. Perhaps the darkness of the oral cavity explains their love of bright colours.

*This piece seeks to capture my long-standing fascination with teeth, a basic bodily infrastructure, and with the craft and practice of dentistry. Their absence in the STS literature needs explanation. STS (and sociology and anthropology) have long studied healthcare in the broadest possible sense: patient–practitioner relationships, medicalisation of the human condition, training of doctors, patient expertise, embodied skills of healthcare professionals, regulation of drugs and medical devices. The list is extensive. Much of this work is ethnographic—in the clinic, the hospital, the consulting room, the laboratory, and increasingly in those myriad online spaces where health and medical information are generated, represented and shared.*

*All sorts of bodily concerns are the object of the scholarly gaze, but rarely dentistry. Dentistry is about repair and care—of teeth and of dental chairs—and has a strong aesthetic dimension. Here I aim to highlight the range of materials, craft, and other skills and knowledge a good dentist needs to look after people’s teeth.<sup>36</sup>*

### About the author

Sally is Professor of Digital Cultures, and Associate Dean for Research. Her research focuses on the development and use of digital technologies in healthcare, and on what digital technologies mean for knowledge production in the social sciences and the humanities. The brace has worked; the feeling of imminent dislocation has faded.

<sup>32</sup> Martin, B. (1988). *Analyzing the fluoridation controversy: Resources and structures*. *Social Studies of Science*, 18, 331–363.

<sup>33</sup> Exley, C. (2009). *Bridging a gap: the (lack of a) sociology of oral health and healthcare*. *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 31(7), 1093–1108.

<sup>34</sup> Daza-Cardona, J. A., Vargas-Ramírez, J. & Guapacha-Sánchez, M. A. (2021). *Doing odontograms and dentists in the classroom. Materiality and affect in dental education*. *Tapuya: Latin American Science, Technology and Society*. 1968635.

<sup>35</sup> Parmar, N., Dong, L. & Eisingerich, A. B. (2018). *Connecting with your dentist on Facebook: Patients’ and dentists’ attitudes towards social media usage in dentistry*. *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 20(6), e10109.

<sup>36</sup> Acknowledgements: I am grateful to all of my dentists—past and present—for their good care of my teeth. Thanks are due to Maud Oostindie and Aneta Spendzharova for their careful reading and feedback on an earlier draft, and to Elsje Fourie and Christin Hoene for their work and imagination in initiating this project and seeing it through to completion.



Ragna Zeiss

# Big Brown Data

She feels tired and overwhelmed, although the day has just started. She worries about getting her work done. She has to write, to concentrate, but is continuously interrupted. In 10 minutes, her 4-year-old will have to attend an online meeting and, once again, she has been having trouble logging in. She will have to sit next to her daughter to help her pay attention to the screen, to the multiple faces of classmates she hardly knows, classmates who have equally low attention spans. Her older son keeps asking questions and has been distracted from his work. How will she keep the children quiet during her own online meetings? The lock-down is beginning to take its toll.

When the children are installed, hopefully at least for the next few minutes, the mother walks into the corridor. She squeezes between the stairs and the bicycles (parked there due to the lack of a shed in the garden), opens the white painted door and sees that the light is still on: her son, when will he learn? She shivers. It is a lot colder

here than in the living room. Unthinking, she pulls down her trousers and sits. She glances over the birthday calendar in front of her without fully registering it. A moment for herself. A moment of rest, a private moment, a moment away from home-schooling, work restrictions and expectations, from the Covid news that have dominated the headlines for months now.

She is sick of it all. She is unsure about the importance and effectiveness of the restrictions. She is unsure about the safety of the vaccines. She hardly dares to mention on social media when they have been out for a walk—is that actually allowed? She feels controlled and doesn't like it.

Her mind wanders to the first day her daughter

went to school, only a few days before the lockdown started. Her daughter was playing outside when she came to pick her up. She spotted her daughter only when she emerged from behind a little bush. The girl was pulling up her trousers. The mother saw the teacher's eyes widen and a frown appear on the

*She flushes  
quickly. Down it  
goes, taken by the  
flow of the water,  
into the darkness  
of the pipe.*

teacher's face. The teacher asked with a stern voice: what are you doing? The little 4-year old stared at the ground, not daring to make eye-contact with the person who would be her teacher for the next two years. Apparently, she had done something wrong, but didn't know what. The mother smiled apologetically to the teacher. She felt the need to explain that peeing "in the wild" had been normal during the family's recent camping trip to Iceland, remote from houses and wastewater systems. For the teacher, very likely, the toilet-wastewater system is the only possible and acceptable place to dispose of one's bodily waste. The teacher is fully socialised into commonly accepted sanitation practices and routines. For the girl, so many places can (still) be used as a toilet. She still has to learn the rules, to learn what is and is not acceptable.

Absent-mindedly, the mother reaches for the button. It is an old toilet with only one button, so she doesn't have to think about which one to press. She flushes quickly. Down it goes, taken by the flow of the water, into the darkness of the pipe. It has disappeared. Bodily waste. Out of sight, out of mind. Flush and forget.

With the stool out of sight and out of mind, we leave the mother to her stressful day and join the stool on its journey. It starts to change, is watered down. It joins the excrements of others. Slowly moved by the flow. Is it still stool? Does it still have an attachment to the bodies it came from now it has joined the flow? When does a person's bodily waste become sewage? When does this private matter become public? The flow moves. It is dark and cold. The walls are slimy.

Then, suddenly, there is some daylight. It has arrived at

the wastewater treatment plant. The mixture is squeezed through a large grid, which takes out the large parts that have joined the mixture: pieces of plastic, sanitary napkins, diapers.

A machine scoops up a bit of the mixture and adds it to a bucket in a cupboard. The bucket collects samples over a period of 24 hours. The cupboard is opened. A hand with a green glove on stirs the material. Here, we meet a new woman, on the other end of the mixture's journey.

The woman attached to the hand wears a bright yellow safety jacket. She pours the material through a funnel into a pot of white glass. She picks it up carefully and places it in a small fridge in the boot of a van. She closes the car door, turns on the radio to listen to the news: the number of hospital admissions of COVID patients, the announcement of yet another press conference, the protests against the restrictions, the need to get tested.

Before she enters the lab, she carefully washes her hands and puts on her white coat. She is in the public health lab, where she has been analysing wastewater samples since the beginning of the pandemic. With help of her lab instruments, she filters out the virus parts. Not to treat the wastewater, but to turn it into numbers. Into data, important data, data that can help combat the pandemic. Big brown data. Data that can show where the coronavirus is most present, in which region, in which city. Data that will inform policy-makers whether the lockdown can be eased or needs to be extended. Her heart starts to beat faster, her cheeks flush, her eyes glow with an inner light. She feels a rush of energy. She knows she is doing important work. Work that helps to protect public health. People may be asymptomatic and will therefore not get tested, but the virus is still visible in the sewage. And the data is aggregated, the virus is not traced back to individuals. There are no confidentiality issues. Who could object?

While waiting for the results, she goes to the loo. In the privacy of this cubicle, she thinks about how her private bodily waste, together with that of many others, leads to public big brown data and informs public health measures. Her mind wanders. Would those who oppose the restrictions, the testing, the lockdown realise that they don't just flush waste, but also data? Have they given consent or would they consider this a privacy flush? She wonders: if we have to select and accept cookies for each website we visit, should we also have a toilet button saying: yes, my data can be used or no, my data cannot be used? Does the wastewater infrastructure allow for providing consent? Is there actually a possibility to opt out? How else can one dispose of one's bodily waste?

*This piece is based on preliminary research on wastewater surveillance, which can be regarded as a COVID pandemic innovation. How do innovations develop during a crisis context? How do innovations happen in a rather fixed, obdurate wastewater system that is largely invisible and taken for granted? “Big brown data” can be explored in relation to academic and societal debates on ethical issues such as privacy and consent with regard to the use of data. The topic raises questions about boundaries between private and public, about who defines “the public good,” about how to conduct ethical societal discussions about something we consider dirty and we (like to) flush and forget, and about how to understand the social and material construction of bodily materials.*

*How, when and by whom does something become valued (e.g. human tissue) or considered waste (e.g. stool)?*

**About the author:**

Ragna works as Assistant Professor in Science and Technology Studies in the Department of Society Studies. Her research interests include the classification and governance in/of science and technology in the domains of water, sanitation, and nature/environments. She enjoys reading, writing, teaching, photography, the outdoors, and spending time with her children.

