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The Pleasures of Academic Life

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SLAM THAT #ETHNOGRAPHY! – IMAGINE FURTHER

The Pleasures of Academic Life

by *Eileen Moyer* (<http://allegralaboratory.net/author/eileenmoyer/>)

The pleasures of academic life are many. Getting paid to read books I like, to hold conversations with people from life worlds radically different from my own, and to contemplate creative modes of sharing what I learn in the process: writing, filmmaking, photography. I really do think it is amazing that such a profession exists, and I try to remind myself from time to time to be grateful that I get to live this life. There are moments, however, when no reminder is needed, when I'm simply overwhelmed by the joy of what I do.

In

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

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



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Having previously taught a course on ethnographic writing that was cut due to budgetary constraints—despite students rating the class highly and asking that it be taught again—I was truly pleased when Tanja and Silke approached me to organize ‘something’ to address their desires to improve their writing. Although I was not thrilled that we were expected to do this ‘extra-curricularly,’ in our own time, I was happy to hear that there was a small fund we could draw upon to invite external lecturers. Together, we drew up a proposal that was eventually funded, we identified and invited two great writers of ethnography known for their generosity toward students (Julie Livingston and Robert Desjarlais), and began to plan the workshop. We knew we wanted to keep the class size small, so that we could workshop the writing in the way creative writing courses do. Given the great demand (more than 30 people signed up in a week!) we decided to offer plenary lectures in the morning and work in three groups of 10

(even [redacted] the desperate to attend) to workshop ideas [redacted] late morning and afternoons.

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

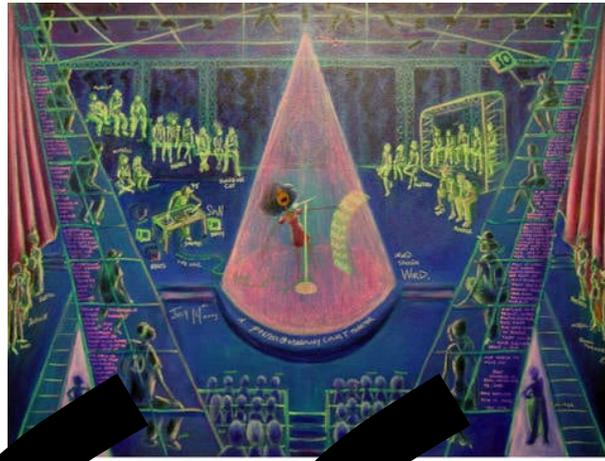
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listened with wide open ears as students talked about their struggles to write up the densely packed ethnographic research [redacted] they had collected.



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

Nothing, however, prepared me for the greatest pleasure of all: The Friday morning Ethnography Slam Event! Although we had conceived the event as a way to get people to experiment with writing styles and to practice *performing* rather than simply presenting their research, the truth is, we didn't really think too much about it. Or at least I didn't. I rather suppose that Tanja and Silke did a lot more work on this front. I remember that on the morning of the event I drank a triple espresso before leaving the house, assuming that I was going to have to work hard to appear attentive during the four hours of scheduled back-to-back presentations in front of me. The night before, most of us had had a bit too much to drink at the closing social event of the week, and I was certainly a bit foggy brained. I'd been warned in advance from several participants that I should not expect much. I was told some people were even angry at me (at me??) for insisting that they perform publicly, that they didn't feel safe. Also, they didn't have time to prepare; the night before over drinks nearly everyone said they weren't at all ready.



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Yet, from the moment she was enthralled as writer after writer got up and performed her ethnographic theatre piece. Poems, multi-media presentations, and stories delivered with grace and aplomb. Who ARE these people, I wondered? As the day unfolded, my colleagues and I were struck by the people I pass in the hallway and nod at? The people I chat with about their machine about methods. Before the first hour was up, my phone and Cloud storage was full. No more room for videos and photos. Devastating. Devastating beauty, that is. When the performances came to an end, Tanja asked me if I or one of the other lecturers/teachers would say a few words, to reflect on the day.

But

there were no words. We all agreed. It was impossible to follow such

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



The pleasure did not end there. In the days and weeks following the workshop, I was regularly approached by participants and their PhD supervisors. It seemed the effects of the workshop were already visible in dissertation and article manuscripts, that students who had been blocked before the workshop were finally writing again. Many were even enjoying it. Recently, I had the chance to watch one of the workshop participants deliver a paper-academic style. I felt deeply proud (even had a tear in my eye) as she opened with a vignette that she had begun crafting in my workshop a few months earlier. She'd honed it to perfection and everyone was on the edge of their seat. How grateful I am to have played a small role in helping an amazing woman find her voice and gain the confidence to use it. The definition of pleasure.

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