



EXERCISES IN INVERSION  
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During my year in Berlin, I learned to stand on my head. I achieved this challenging pose during the yoga classes that I attended regularly at Savignyplatz. Yet there were other ways in which my time at the Wissenschaftskolleg was an exercise in inversion. One of the goals of Wiko and its sister institutions is to think in new ways about the movement of knowledge, particularly through North-South collaboration. For me, after nearly twenty-five years of devoting myself to scholarship in the “South”, this year was a re-encounter with the North.

My Northern encounter began with the German intensive course, in which I returned to the language I had learned as an undergraduate student in Vienna. In my work as a historian of East Africa, I had often used German archival sources in my research on the German colonial period. Yet my knowledge of German remained superficial: despite my

undergraduate training, I lacked what Eva von Kügelgen calls “Sprachgefühl”. With Eva’s help, I began to read German historical sources in new ways. I was no longer interested in using them merely as sources for “factual” evidence, but wished to delve deeper into the language itself. I was able to apply my growing language skills to new research on the Maji Maji War that took place in German East Africa from 1905–07. My research project developed, appropriately, into a study of narrative and memory that used both German archival and Swahili oral sources. I began to see for the first time the way that German and African accounts of war – from the time of the conflict to the present – had been interwoven. Our reading group on Experience gave me valuable insight into the use of materials – both oral and written – that drew from lived experience or the “witnessing” of events and then reconstructed them into different narrative forms.

The *Schwerpunkt* group (Infections and Societies) that had brought me to Wiko was slow in forming – which gave me the perfect opportunity to devote myself to Maji Maji for several months during the fall and winter. I arranged to spend at least one day a week at the library of the Humboldt University, poring over German colonial newspapers that were published in the early 20th century. It so happened that my Wiko year – 2005 – was the centenary of the Maji Maji uprising. Yet I discovered to my surprise that while many Germans were aware of the Nama-Herero war that had taken place in Namibia during the same time period, almost no one had heard of Maji Maji. And in the midst of Germany’s commemorations of the end of the Second World War, most of the discussions about Namibia were framed in the context of German responsibility for the Holocaust and its possible African genesis. With support from Wiko I was able to organize an international conference in March that brought Maji Maji into wider discussions in Germany about German colonialism and colonial war.

My encounter with the North continued as I attended colloquia by Wiko Fellows who were specialists in European Studies. And I realized early on that there was an East-West axis to the scholarly interests of our Wiko group. This was played out in fascinating discussions about the history and future of Europe, in which narrative and memory played a role. Debates about the boundaries of European identity after the Cold War, post-socialism and Islam were part of our ongoing conversations. As I explored the city of Berlin (and parts of the former East Germany) these themes resonated with the landscapes that surrounded me.

In our reading group on Globalization (“the Globalization Girls”) these familiar axes and compass points were challenged and sometimes dissolved – or as Lydia Liu helped us

to see, “reoriented”. This kind of reorientation was at the heart of my second project, on the history of the TAZARA railway in Tanzania. This project took me into an exploration of East-South relationships during the Cold War. I was interested in the way development assistance from China was experienced by rural communities in East Africa, during the period just after independence in the 1960s. At this time China was developing a unique approach to African development that diverged from what they termed the “hegemony” of US and Soviet aid. The TAZARA railway was China’s flagship project in Africa and embodied the eight “principles of development” that guided Chinese assistance. I sought to understand the way these principles were expressed in development practice and how they were received by the local villages that line the railway corridor.

In the end, our group on Infections and Societies was able finally to come together to consider the intersections between biological and socio-cultural factors in disease transmission in Africa. My part in this group was to think about the relationship between mobility in the TAZARA railway corridor and HIV/AIDS. Together with colleagues from other institutions, we considered concepts of vulnerability and resilience in disease transmission and how these might be associated with socio-cultural factors as well as poverty and inequality.

My year at the Wissenschaftskolleg was therefore more than a re-encounter with the North – it was a reorientation that opened new ways of thinking about my work. My Wiko year allowed me to develop entirely new ways of reading and interpreting sources, and fresh vantage points from which to consider historical questions. I made new scholarly partnerships with colleagues from diverse disciplines and geographical locations. I therefore come away from my Wiko year with a rich store of ideas and inspiration that will sustain me in the years to come.