



TONGAN TIME
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Many this year have likened life at the Wiko to a bubble; all your needs are catered for and if you prefer to do so you can spend the year within the 1-mile radius that connects the villas of this establishment, catching up with life outside via the daily supplies of newspapers in the reading room. As an anthropologist, I may be excused for introducing a different analogy to communicate my experiences of this year. For what struck me most was a peculiar sense of time reigning in this great instauration that can be likened to Francis Bacon's Bensalem, a scientific island civilisation devoted to experimentation and the manufacturing of objects and machines that bring health and well-being, not to say opulence, to

human life. Everything about life at the Wiko appeared oddly familiar to me, and suddenly I knew: A Tongan would equally do so. Uncovering the connection between this place and this other, quite different one may reveal the secret of what makes Wiko such an enchanting place to be.

1. Looking forward to the future means looking behind you to the past

Living for the first time in twenty-five years in my own country provoked reflections that I am only gradually coming to sift through and comprehend; I have learned from others that I have an English accent when speaking German and that I have become more English than I would have dared to admit to myself – insights that played heavily on my mind when deciding whether or not to follow a call to a German University. Writing in German for the first time again in years, I rediscovered the clarity and precision afforded by this language. I was attracted to likening my effort at making my thoughts materially resonant in different languages to the concept of “va” in Eastern Polynesia, which denotes the space-time in between two points that needs to be captured in materials as diverse as food and string to make things happen in life; and, like in Tonga, turning to the future began to mean looking back in time.

The calm, protective and helpful ways of the staff at Wiko made it very clear that I had not gone to a new place at all, but had arrived back home, almost exactly twenty-five years after leaving Berlin for the wilderness of England, New Guinea and America. This sense of returning home was crucially important to me, as we had arrived not even four weeks after the recent bombings in central London where twenty-four-hour helicopter noise and sirens and the near escape from the second bombing had scarred our nerves. The frequent visits of my mother, a 1920's vintage from Berlin who had left the city during the war, gave our explorations of the city a very personal, but also temporally offset feel, as we began to see the city through her eyes, encountering buildings and places that are no longer.

The feeling of arriving in an extended family that anchors you in your own past also enveloped my two daughters, who continued to see life at Wiko as a refuge from the ups and downs at the John F. Kennedy School. Sheer luck had provided them with likeminded and same-aged compatriots who made family dinners at Wiko a treat. Isabelle grew up in every sense and Josephine took to attending evening lectures and made full use of the library, reading as many works of poetry and literature as she could and discovering Walter Benjamin. The library staff kindly allowed her to work on the top balcony during the hot

month of July and made her feel like a Fellow. The unusually icy and long winter as well as the unrelenting heat of the summer provided their own challenges and joys and the marked seasonal changes made a fitting backdrop to an intense year. For the girls, the year was as much a juncture as it was for me, and “doing” the year with them alone created a very special bond between us.

2. Time appears to stand still, but do expect surprises

One of the most frequently heard outcries during our last few days at Wiko concerned the imminent loss of time. What had happened to all that time we thought we had in front of us when we first arrived? It was surely not just our imagination that time at Wiko obeys a different order, instilling in us the hope that it would last longer, perhaps forever? The lack of mobile phones (I did not possess one for the first time in years) and the daily rhythm of lunch and dinner with nothing to disturb time other than enticing the mind to wander across pastures never encountered before, created stillness that seemed a sacrilege to disturb. But paradoxically, time seemed to go faster in the outside world, overtaking us all the time. We were reminded of this other time ‘out there’ through the frequent arrival of messages prompting us to resentfully, if only momentarily, assume bodily postures suggesting a semblance of speed.

If you ever thought life would be dull in a place that can be likened to Bensalem, you would be surprised. As evening lectures and seminar engagements mounted week by week, considerations of what to wear, what to read in preparation and with whom to discuss the proceedings easily took over any spare moment of the day. It was this sense of being busy plotting life’s interminable happenings that instilled a common sentiment and style of engagement, seemingly pervading everything touched in its wake.

3. Possible futures and the mapping out of time

I had arrived at Wiko like everyone else with high hopes and even greater expectations to finish existing work, but also to start a totally new project. Finishing work was one thing, but the starting of the new project was to be the real adventure of this year. My worries about being able to source the literature quickly turned out to be unfounded, as every single new lead was followed by the arrival of every single book ordered, with awesome efficiency. The Wiko is a perfect place not just for finishing, but also for starting a project with

the necessary intensive library research. The library research also showed that I had fallen victim to my very own prejudice, as I had assumed that there would be more literature on the subject of materiality in the English language than in German. In fact, the subject of materiality is well established in Germany across disciplines, and a number of the books and articles on the subject written in German have become very important to me.

The task I had set myself was to complete the background research on the potentially vast topic of artificial intelligence, concentrating on the question of the material framing of notions of mind, while approaching this question from a historical and comparative perspective and with reference to cutting-edge materials science and electronics research that finds its output in wearable computing. Covering theory of knowledge, cognitive science and neurology, theory of technology and history of science, the task of sourcing was enormous and I set to it with great enthusiasm (my apologies to the hardworking library staff and the driver, who must have broken his back carrying all these books in and out of the White Villa). My sense of the historical depth I had to give to the perspective that I tried to carve out grew as the weather got colder, and spring finally saw a new dimension emerging in the project, of which I had previously been blissfully unaware. Thanks to the inspiration of my colleagues, in particular Monika Wagner and Barbara Stafford, I realized the importance of chemistry in shaping the concept of materiality we are faced with today, and a new trail led to the history of the chemical revolution and its bearing on the notion of affinity, which became a working concept in approaching a critique of the notion of agentic materiality. Reading all hours of the day was a decadence I had not experienced in years and the writing that followed surely benefited from it.

My peaceful solitude was punctuated by frantic activity all the same, and the mapping of time onto interlacing patchwork sections became ever more important as the year progressed. I was editor in chief of the *Journal of Material Culture* and section director of a large EU project on sustainable diversity that demanded overseeing the work of two researchers in the field and coordinating the work of others.

A hugely important segment of time that provided much of the stimulus for ideas that attached themselves to my own work was the image seminar, known as *Sense and Style*. The reading of classical texts in the history of art and philosophy in this small and friendly seminar group led to lively and engaging discussions on perception, materiality and image that complemented my own research in an always surprisingly productive manner. It can be seen as a sign of the success of this group that a second group, known as the material girls, crystallized late in the year around the notion of materiality. No other place can be

as productive for brainstorming and the nurturing of ideas as the Wiko, where electric intellectual ambience is met by quiet, but efficient support that extends through all levels of care and provisioning.

4. You never truly leave paradise once you've been

Writing these last words on the final day of our stay in Berlin, I realize that this is not like any other ending of a time spent someplace else, something I am well used to from doing repeated fieldwork. The year certainly bore many similarities to fieldwork, such as living in an idyllic place while pushing life and work at all edges in a close community of people whose thinking and ways of being one is trying to make sense of; but also the sense of living in a place that you know will be with you forever. Learning to communicate in ways quite new was clearly going to be part of the experience of living at Wiko, but it was made easy by a group of Fellows who could not have been more kind-hearted, generous and open as well as sheer fun to be with. Most supporting and a wellspring of inspiration and energy was the circle of *femmes sauvages* whose lively and enchanting meetings punctuated life at Wiko as much as the many informal gatherings and shared activities that joined the women across the Fellow/spouse divide. I certainly have never laughed as much and had as interesting and memorable conversations! And here was the real difference to fieldwork; for while fieldwork is always a lonely experience, this year was without a doubt the most sociable and enjoyable I have ever had. Making hidden connections come to the surface and cementing them through the many, often daily, small exchanges of references and books is commonplace here at Wiko, and time passed can be measured more accurately by the increasing density of information flow than by the calendar.

The Wiko is one of the few places in the world where a sense of the miraculous and of wonder can be experienced in its full. How else could you explain the providence that among the Fellows of the year were colleagues, known and unknown to me, whose presence was so “right” in so many different ways? How did the divine committee responsible for our selection manage to coordinate our complex lives so that we all ended up here together in the same year? The care and attention to detail that quite evidently had gone into the selection and grouping of Fellows is, like all management at Wiko, discrete and invisible. We never ceased to be amazed at how our thoughts and needs appeared to be picked up and met with an attitude of selflessness and attentive care. I have not felt so well taken

care of in years. The resulting feeling of wellbeing showed in our faces as the year progressed and our faces became more rounded and animated.

How can one describe time spent in a place like Bensalem? We know we will realize what we have had only when we have left – but then again we know that we never will.