



EMBRACING IDLE TIME TINE DESTROOPER

Before coming to the Wissenschaftskolleg, Tine Destrooper was a Scholar in Residence at the Center for Human Rights and Global Justice at NYU's School of Law. She also worked as a post-doctoral researcher with the Law and Development Research Center at the University of Antwerp and at the Center for Governance and Global Affairs at the University of Leiden. She obtained her Ph.D. at the European University Institute, Florence, where she studied the relationship between armed conflict, social movements, and gender. She holds a Master's Degree in Conflict, Security and Development from University College London and an undergraduate degree from the University of Leuven. She worked for several government agencies in Belgium, as well as for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Her work has been published in, among other journals, *Human Rights Quarterly* and the *Journal of Human Rights Practice and Development in Practice*. – Address: New York University, 139 MacDougal Street, #514, New York, NY 10012, USA. E-mail: tine.destrooper@nyu.edu.

When announcing to my colleagues at New York University that I had been offered a one-year fellowship in Berlin, I was invariably asked, “Humboldt or Freie?” I knew then that coming to the Wissenschaftskolleg was going to be a blessing: the frantic New York crowd was not going to be looking for me here. Another advantage of being here in Berlin, I assumed, was going to be the six-hour time difference, which, I figured, would allow me to be disconnected most of the time.

Upon arriving in the beautiful Grunewald, I was welcomed by one of the most cheerful and hospitable people I *ever* met and was shown my flat and office – both with a view

(not of rusty water towers on Greenwich Village roofs, but of foxes and herons entertaining themselves in the garden and by the lakes). The tranquility of the place seemed to support my assumptions about being undisturbed and disconnected for ten months.

To some extent this was indeed the case: things slowed down, the two bright red exclamation marks next to e-mails became less frequent, and – eventually – I even had the impression that I had become the master of my own time.

I belong to a generation of young academics who became entirely accustomed to having our agendas shaped and defined by institutions and demands that sometimes have rather conflicting relations with our own actual research and ambitions. I would even argue that most researchers of my generation never knew anything else. Eat. Sleep. Grade. Repeat.

And I dare say that experiencing the dissolving of these structures and routines here at Wiko has been disorienting. Very much so. 5:30 am: no alarm clock – 6:30 am: no hour-long commute – 7:30 am: no endless list of e-mails that require an asap reply – 9 am: no teaching – 11 am: no faculty or departmental meetings – 12:30 pm: no student meetings during lunch – 1:30 pm: no staff meetings – 3:30 pm: no dozens of e-mails that accumulated in the last eight hours and make you feel as if you had been out of the office for days – 5:30 pm: no grading no teaching preparations – 6:30 pm: no compulsory network events of questionable use – 8 pm: no talks to attend or to give (unless you want to). None of that. So, what *was* left? I started to get worried.

In addition to belonging to that generation of academics that only knows this kind of high-paced routine, Wiko made me realize that I *also* belong to that group of academics that copes difficultly with a *lack* of high-paced routine. “Being busy” served as a kind of existential reassurance, a defense against emptiness, a guarantee that we are on the right track, and, most importantly, that we are important and sought after.

This belief had become so strong that I felt resentful, yes belligerent, when I drank my very first cup of Yogi tea at the Wiko and noticed that the little label attached to the teabag haughtily professed that “a relaxed mind is a creative mind”. This was not *at all* what I felt, and I spent most of that day having an argument with my tea cup, as its label stared back at me from across a desk on which no exams, briefs, or reports were piled.

(*Post facto* I can admit that the teabag was right and deserved to win that argument.)

Nevertheless, the absence of institutional demands, teaching, meetings, and distractions more generally – something that I had so yearned for – initially left me restless. “Busy” had become my natural state of being, and the “important” people I knew never

missed a beat in replying “busy” when asked how they were. And so, I found ways to keep myself busy – something I tend to be rather good at in any case, and even more so when what is on offer are interesting talks on topics as varied as the basic income, the meaning of life and death (no less), or Islamic feminism. Keeping myself busy felt more useful and inspiring than ever: during my fourth morning coffee, exploring with one of the biologists how their use of algorithms could be relevant for me as a political scientist is something quite different from what people usually refer to as “keeping myself busy”, and these inspiring encounters with other Fellows were the rule rather than the exception. They became part of my new daily rhythm, and – in some form or another – had an influence on my writing and future research projects.

Yet, here at Wiko, “keeping myself busy” also came to mean something altogether unique: I granted myself entire mornings of unstructured time, which I used for everything from marveling at the wonderful flower compositions in the buildings or sitting on the deck by the lake to read to chatting with writers and filmmakers whom I admired, and from inviting NGO leaders for the delicious Wiko breakfast or lunch to learning from the musicologist what her fellow musicologists were doing that was relevant to my own work.

I purposefully created idle time, time for distractions, time to be surprised, to appreciate the absence of institutional structures, and I found that having this kind of unstructured time was not merely indulgence or idleness (although sometimes it was), but that it was indispensable to my thinking and writing, that it constituted the necessary condition for making new connections, learning new things, and finding inspiration. As my idle time became an integral part of my working day, I started to feel more relaxed about my work – and even slightly less anxious about publishing and applying for jobs (though the “attaques du futur”, as a fellow Fellow called them, did not altogether vanish). Finally, I was getting work done. Finally, I saw that “being busy” was not inevitable and that it was hardly more than a self-delusion to be busy all the time.

I could – and should probably – stop there. This insight seems like more than what one could hope to take back from a year like this.

Yet, I want to return for a second to my assumptions about being undisturbed and disconnected for ten months. Just like I had not foreseen that idling would be what I would come to prioritize during the one year when I could finally “get some work done”, I had not foreseen that being disturbed and being connected would become two of the things I most appreciated about Wiko, because, after all, disturbing one’s thinking process and creating connections is what Wiko has been all about.

I was – quite fortunately – not living the blissfully tranquil monk’s life that I had imagined before coming to the Wiko. However, knocking on my door here were not the usual stressed students, but, instead, new ideas that challenged and reshaped my own thinking about my project – and sometimes about more than just my project.

Not having to defend a new probe or endeavor to some committee, supervisor, or grant-maker, and just being able to experiment with new ideas, put things together in new ways, and learn new methodologies – irrespective of whether they “fit the departmental profile”, “produce an immediate output”, or “contribute in a direct sense” to this or that agenda, has been liberating and enriching beyond imagination: early on, I embraced the idea of throwing most of my initial research proposal over board, in order to make space for other things that I had not imagined when I wrote the proposal. After dealing with the guilt and regret about not achieving what I had set out to achieve, I found new (and invariably more exciting) goals and enjoyed the steep learning curves inspired by some of the disruptions of my thought process.

Unlike any other professional experience I ever had, the rhythm at Wiko seemed human, focused on research and researchers, rather than on bureaucracies and institutions. Because of that, I can, for the first time in ten years, say that this year has genuinely been about research, about asking a question to which one does not know the answer yet, and about trying out different strategies to try to answer it. As a junior researcher, having an experience like this is invaluable – and, unfortunately, also quite uncommon.

Having time not just to do one’s own research and find new ways to answer new questions is crucial, but so is having the opportunity to reflect on the larger question of what this research is supposed to contribute to – on a personal, professional, and societal level. Or even, to quote Wendell Berry, to ask the questions that have no answers. Thinking about these questions does not usually happen (or at least not very well) between the fifth phone call, the seventh student meeting, the xth hour of teaching, and the last paper to be graded.

Moreover, unlike what I had expected, this year has also not been a year of beatific *disconnection* from the outside world. Despite being a perfectly inspiring environment to read, write, and do research, the Wissenschaftskolleg is so well connected that it almost felt as if the entire transitional justice community had relocated to Berlin with me. With the kind and enthusiastic support of the academic staff, I met some of the most prominent and inspiring people working in my field in Berlin and established connections and collaborations that will endure well beyond this ten-month stay at the Wiko, connections that will also be vital in shaping my future career path.

It is not only through these connections that my stay at the Wiko has had a decisive influence on my career. Having access to a wide range of interdisciplinary and prominent scholars and an excellent library service and having the time and (mental) space to ask myself what I want to be when I grow up has had a tremendous influence on the formulation of my next research project.

Reading as broadly as I was able to do here (from theater studies to programming in R and from social movement studies to an in-depth case study of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia), discussing both general ideas and finer points with colleagues, and finding the time and the energy to put all of this together in a creative manner – this is not something that commonly happens during the marginal bits of time we normally have left as modern academics.

Moreover, having a natural tendency to go into overdrive, I also agreed to give various talks and attend various conferences (most of which I accepted reluctantly: Wiko, after all, had soon become the kind of place one does not want to leave if one has a choice), all of which Wiko kindly facilitated; I went back to my academic home once (only to get immediate and unhealthy peaks in my cortisol level); I ordered several books per day from the library (from the *International Encyclopedia of Women Composers* to a handbook on social and economic rights and from the *Diary of Aung San Suu Kyi* to the *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*), all delivered within 24 hours by a remarkably kind and efficient library staff that never asked questions even about the oddest requests; and I decided I wanted to learn a new language and ended up learning three: German (admittedly not a new language for me, but I needed every bit of Eva's generously offered encouragement to learn to speak even a few decent sentences), R (admittedly not a language at all, but I approached it as one), and music scores (admittedly something that I should have started twenty years ago; but now, for the first time in my life, I had time to learn the difference between  and ).

I cannot speak for people who have been in academe for much longer than I have, but for me, this is the first time that I have really been allowed to be a scholar, that I have been allowed, to further quote Berry, to do one thing every day that won't compute. This is exactly what I signed up for.

Activities 2016/2017

Talks, Presentations, Conferences

Co-convenor of the North-South TJ Network.

Co-founding member of the emerging network on the Practice of Human Rights (with Sally E. Merry and Koen De Feyter).

Collaboration with the UN Special Rapporteur on Truth, Justice, Reparation and Guarantees of Non-Recurrence (Pablo de Greiff) on various reports to the Human Rights Council.

Co-organizer of the Human Rights and Tax in an Unequal World International Conference (CHRGJ, September 22–23, 2016).

The Participatory Dimensions of Accountability: Examining Transitional Justice Paradigms and Praxis (Clark University Center for Genocide Studies, April 7–9, 2017).

The Invisibilization of Social and Economic Rights in Transitional Justice Interventions (NYU School of Law, April 3, 2017).

North-South Dialogue: Bridging the Gap in Transitional Justice (UC Berkeley School of Law, March 17–18, 2017).

Tuesday Colloquium: The Future of Dealing with the Past (Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, December 20, 2016).

Workshop participant: Human Rights Activism in Cambodia (Brot für die Welt Berlin, October 16, 2016).

Theatre and Transitional Justice (Re-Moving Apartheid Conference, September 29–30, 2016).

The Future of Transitional Justice (expert meeting Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, September 28, 2016).

Victim Participation in the ECCC and Accountability for Economic and Social Rights in Cambodia (Human Rights for Development Conference, September 14–16, 2016).

Mobilizing for social and economic rights in post-conflict societies. Examining the legacy of the ECCC (AHRI Conference, September 2–3, 2016).

Publications

- Destrooper, Tine (2016). "Interest Representation in Belgium." In *Lobbying in Europe: Public Affairs and the Lobbying Industry in 28 EU Countries*, edited by Alberto Bitonti and Phil Harris. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Destrooper, Tine (2017). "Uprooting the Curious Grapevine? The Transformative Potential of Reverse Standard-Setting in the Field of Human Rights." *Journal of Human Rights* 16, 4.
- Destrooper, Tine and Antonry Pemberton (2017). "Transitioning from Injustice: the Role of Embodiment, Imagination and Play." *Journal of Law and Society*, under review.
- Destrooper, Tine and Stephan Parmentier (2017). "Gender-Aware and Place-Based Transitional Justice in Guatemala: Altering the Opportunity Structures for Post-Conflict Women's Mobilization." *Social and Legal Studies*, July 2017, SAGE Publishing. DOI: 10.1177/0964663917718050.
- Destrooper, Tine and Pascal Sundi Mbambi (2017). "A Praxis-Based Understanding of New Duty Bearers Examining Contextual Realities in the DRC." *International Journal of Human Rights* 21, 2: 142–166.
- Destrooper, Tine (2017). "The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia and Accountability for Social and Economic Rights Violations." *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, under review.
- Destrooper, Tine (2017). "The Invisibilization of Social and Economic Rights in Transitional Justice Interventions: New Evidence from the Extraordinary Chambers of the Courts of Cambodia." *Pacific Review*, under review.
- Destrooper, Tine. "The Participatory Dimensions of Accountability: Examining Transitional Justice Paradigms and Praxis." *International Journal of Legal Discourse*, under review.
- Destrooper, Tine (2017). "Victim Participation in Transitional Justice: a Scenic Anthropology Perspective." *International Journal of Law, Language and Discourse*, under review.
- Destrooper, Tine (2017). "Performative Justice? The Role of Theatre and Performance in Facilitating Transitional Justice." *South African Theatre Journal*, under review.
- Destrooper, Tine (2017). "On Travel, Translation and Transformation." In *Human Rights Tax in an Unequal World*, edited by Tine Destrooper and Sally Merry. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, forthcoming.
- Idem. "Localization 'Light': The Travel and Transformation of Non-Empowering Human Rights Norms." In *Ibidem*, forthcoming.

Contributions to the Public Debate

Destrooper, Tine. “Cynisme verandert niets in Saudi-Arabie dialoog misschien wel.” [Cynicism won’t help Saudi Arabia, dialogue might]. *De Morgen*, April 30, 2017.

Destrooper, Tine. “Para. Een oefening in luisteren naar wat niemand zegt.” [Para, or an exercise in listening to what nobody is saying]. *MO Magazine*, December 4, 2016.

Destrooper, Tine. Dossier: “Trump en mensenrechten.” [Trump and human rights]. *MO Magazine*, October–November 2016.

Grant Proposals

Mobilizing for social and economic rights in societies in transitions. Vidi Grant proposal, NWO.

Victim Participation in transitional justice processes. Starting Grant proposal, ERC.