



MAJOR TRANSITIONS  
AMANDA KYLE GIBSON

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Amanda Kyle Gibson is an evolutionary biologist. Her research focuses on the maintenance of genetic variation, rapid adaptation, and the evolutionary ecology of infectious diseases. She studied Biology at Amherst College, then moved to France on a Fulbright Fellowship to continue her research on the evolutionary ecology of fungal parasites at Paris-Sud University. In 2016, she earned her Ph.D. from Indiana University. Her dissertation research addressed a major problem in evolutionary biology, the maintenance of sex, and allowed for months of field research in New Zealand. Amanda then moved to Emory University on a Fellowship in Research and Science Teaching to study rapid adaptation of parasites, train in science pedagogy, and teach at Spelman College. She received the 2017 John Maynard Smith Prize from the European Society of Evolutionary Biology and the 2018 Theodosius Dobzhansky Prize from the Society for the Study of Evolution, both given to recognize an outstanding young evolutionary biologist. She has also received awards for her efforts in education, including the Thomas Henry Huxley Award from the Society for the Study of Evolution. In 2019, Amanda became an Assistant Professor at the University of Virginia. – Address: Department of Biology, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA 22904, USA. E-mail: [akg5nq@virginia.edu](mailto:akg5nq@virginia.edu).

My time at the Wissenschaftskolleg fell in the midst of a major transition: I arrived in Berlin a week after finishing my postdoctoral fellowship. Two weeks after departing Wiko, I found myself in yet another new office, as an assistant professor. My four months at Wiko filled the yawning gap between these career stages.

In some ways, this timing was unfortunate. I hold all of you, Fellows, management, and staff alike, responsible for giving me the wrong impression of the daily life of a professor. I thought professorial life, at Wiko and beyond, would be an endless parade of lunchtime cakes, friendly faces, stimulating conversation, dedicated librarians, and fizzy water. I realized my mistake on my very first day as an assistant professor, when I found myself lugging a large computer monitor for what felt like miles from the IT desk to my new office. How far I had fallen. I have come to understand that Wiko's same-day delivery of extra computer monitors to my apartment door was the exception. I have not even been offered a bottle of chilled fizzy water yet.

In more fundamental ways, however, the timing of my Fellowship at Wiko was critical. As the end of my postdoc loomed, anxiety began to cloud my judgment and chase off the simple pleasures of scientific pursuit. Though it's exciting to fledge and open one's own lab, I felt mounting pressure to churn my scholarship into currency – papers in fancy journals, accolades, and grant dollars. What's worse, it seemed that I'd have to do this all on my own.

Wiko put me back on track. The Fellows, in their questions, their colloquia, their curiosity, and their conversation, generously shared with me not what they do, but how they do it. They reminded me that scholarship is a process, not a product. Within our Fellow group, we defined one another by the questions we asked and the approaches we took to tackling them, not by the answers we got.

No event single-handedly inspired this reset, but I can identify a few moments that struck me. Yvonne Owuor, in her colloquium, revealing that central plot lines and characters, on which she'd spent months of research and thought, might be cut from the story as it grew and transformed. I understood from Yvonne's colloquium that she didn't fear these radical shifts, but welcomed them as necessary to the crafting of the story. Continual questioning from the humanities of the rather weighty words that we evolutionary biologists use casually (e.g. cooperation, altruism). These word choices define the way we think about a problem, in ways that we rarely reflect on. Gordon's obsession with open science and the need for transparency from the earliest stages of a project, because the way we approach a problem defines the answers we get (and the answers we choose to give). Sarah Richardson urging me, during a time of writer's block, to block out the voices attacking my as yet unwritten paper and just write, trusting my own thought process. Heidi Tagliavini struggling with which part of her inspiring story and practice to share, and how best to share it.

Now, post-Wiko, in my new life as an assistant professor, I see that, if I let it, my scholarly life could quickly morph into a quagmire of e-mails, politics, diverse distractions, and dehydration. In the moments when this clamor grows too loud, those four foundational months at Wiko continue to give me the perspective to step away from this checklist of tasks and minor accomplishments. Those months reading and conversing obsessively – on the latitudinal distribution of aphids, scale insect reproduction, nematode host range, dispersal of rust fungi – remind me of the focused daily work I seek and the commitment to taking time, going deep, that I hope to convey to my students.

I am grateful to all the members of the Wiko community for this experience. I would like to specifically recognize a handful of folks who contributed directly to my work: Ulrike Pannasch, who corralled, encouraged, and advocated for the junior Fellows. Anja Brockmann and Team Library, who hunted down and digested obscure agricultural texts that I never would have found. Thomas Lewinsohn, who shared his wealth of natural history knowledge, taught me how to measure host range, and never missed a chance to tell me that I was on to something. Mike Wade, who has, since I was a first-year graduate student, furnished me with a theoretical framework with which to structure my thinking and given me the confidence to push on. I have Thomas Lewinsohn and Mike (as well as a visit from former Fellow Janis Antonovics) to thank for the first publication to come out of my Wiko stay. Gordon Feld, who put me on to open science ideas that changed my approach to an ongoing meta-analysis and motivated me to pre-register my study. Sarah Richardson, who shared my enthusiasm for arcane reproductive terminology, as well as its strange subtext, and who, in her introduction to my colloquium, made my work sound much grander than I could have imagined. And finally, thank you to Debbie Rush Wade for keeping it real, to Siobhan O'Brien, Hassan Salem, and Alex Duff for collaborating with me to bring the intellectual maturity of Wiko down a notch, and to Jered Wendte for adventuring with me.