



OURS ARE WATER BODIES, TOO
BHRIGUPATI SINGH

Bhrigupati Singh studied at Delhi University, SOAS (UK) and completed his Ph.D. in Anthropology at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore in 2010. He is currently an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Brown University. His recent book *Poverty and the Quest for Life: Spiritual and Material Striving in Rural India* (2015) was awarded the Joseph W. Elder Prize in the Indian Social Sciences and the 2016 Award for Excellence in the Study of Religion from the American Academy of Religion. His articles have appeared in leading social science journals including *Cultural Anthropology*, *American Ethnologist*, *Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory* and *Contributions to Indian Sociology*. He is the co-editor of *The Ground Between: Anthropologists Engage Philosophy* (2014) and serves as a Series Co-Editor with Clara Han for the Fordham University Press book series *Thinking from Elsewhere*. He is currently working on a book titled *Waxing and Waning Life: Investigations at the Threshold of Mental Illness and Health*. This draws on ethnographic research that he has been conducting since 2015 as a Visiting Faculty member of the Department of Psychiatry, All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS, Delhi) with research grants from the Wenner-Gren Foundation and the American Institute of Indian Studies. – Address: Department of Anthropology, Brown University, 128 Hope Street, Providence, RI 02912, USA. E-mail: singh@brown.edu.

For reasons hard to recount, 2018–19 turned out to be among the most difficult years of my life. Fortunately, I was at the Wissenschaftskolleg. What kind of fortune was this, if I am not just to call it a luxury? As yet, with only a few days of distance post-departure, as

I readjust to the harsher light of the world outside, I can try to gather some of the more specific reasons for my gratitude and what the milieu of Wiko meant for me.

In my colloquium, I compared Wiko to a sanatorium, for recovery; a sanctuary, a space where thought might grow wilder; and a sanctum, with the rare possibility of intellectual communion. But these descriptions are still in the realm of abstraction. Let me focus instead on specific instances and imprints that will stay with me. The balcony of my apartment, at the edge of the Grunewald forest, overlooked a lake, my Walden for the year that expressed the seasons and offered a form of constancy, companionship, and a way of thinking about Wiko and ourselves within it, as a network of interconnected water bodies in this forest that exchanged some currents. As humans, we are differently mortal than lakes and were bound to our dispersal and return to our respective habitats, although thankfully there are still memories and currents and future exchanges to hold on to.

When I first arrived at Wiko, I was coming to the end of a three-year cycle of ethnographic fieldwork, which involved following patients, healers, and caregivers across three sites for the treatment of mental illness in India: the psychiatry ward of a leading hospital in Delhi, the All India Institute for Medical Sciences (AIIMS); a community psychiatry and Opioid Substitution Therapy (OST) clinic run by AIIMS in Trilokpuri, an urban poor “resettlement colony” in Delhi; and a leading north Indian Sufi Muslim shrine, five hours from Delhi, renowned for the treatment of mental illness. As I argue in the book, this movement across ontologies and spaces, across hospital, home, and shrine, constitutes the circuit of mental health care in India, for good and for ill, since some argue that this dispersed and uncertain ecology of care remains more beneficial for patients than what is often available in advanced industrial contexts, while others argue just the opposite, as is often the case in genuine empirical puzzles.

At the beginning of the year, there were two quite different books that I could potentially have begun. The first one, much safer, which I will still hopefully write in years to come, is a monograph focused on forms of psychic distress and wellbeing, set in the low-income urban neighborhood of Trilokpuri in Delhi. This would have been a logical continuation of my first book, which sought to understand modes of aspiration and ideas of the quality of life among a community of indentured laborers, set in a particular district of contemporary rural central India.

Quite different from the prospective book on urban poverty and mental health, there was another, much wilder book that I also wanted to write, one that responds to issues in

anthropology, psychiatry, philosophy, and literary theory in relation to questions of mental health and illness and concepts of psychic life. My Socratic interlocutors at Wiko, Daniel Schönflug, Lorraine Daston, and others among my cohort, encouraged me to leap toward that second, wilder book, which I have tentatively titled *Waxing and Waning Life: Investigations at the Threshold of Mental Illness and Health*. This book is structured around three concepts – vitalism, skepticism, and an ecology of mind, but more on that in a moment, since this note is not so much about that book as it is an acknowledgement of what this year at Wiko meant to me, in terms of intellectual life and selfhood in relation to the kinds of proximate others I met.

The first weeks passed in getting used to the sanctum's rites of initiation and in understanding the specific efficacy of each ritual, such as the vibrant Tuesday Colloquium, the bacchanalian Thursday dinners, the weekday lunches that provided a space of continuing conversations, and the other little channels that slowly joined our respective and collective eddies and flows.

In what ways and forms do our flows intersect? In university settings, invocations of interdisciplinarity are usually between relatively known neighbors with whom we have a shared vocabulary. My first unexpected traversal or leap, specific to the intellectual ethos of Wiko, was when a senior biologist in my cohort, Michael Wade, asked me to introduce him for his Tuesday colloquium, early on in the year, in October. Rituals can be performed with more or less sincerity. We wanted to do our best, although at the time we weren't quite sure why. Given the disciplinary distance, introducing Michael involved taking a crash course in the history of evolutionary theory, understanding a basic two-pronged bifurcation within this history, learning as much as I could about Michael's specific contributions within this genealogy of thought, and absorbing some of the key concepts and questions within Michael's corpus, for instance epistasis, kin selection, the ways variation arises from seemingly similar starting points and the consequences this has for our understanding of species, the threshold at which newness can be said to have emerged, and the point at which differences may be said to be differences of kind rather than of degree.

Rather than reiterating the commonplace dismissals with which the sciences and humanistic social sciences/social theory often accost each other ("reductionist!" "anecdotal evidence!"), we found that this initial channel of communication opened up a year of continuing conversation, which will now take a textual form in a short essay that Michael and I hope to co-author on how "context" is demarcated and stabilized in the life sciences and the social sciences and the ways contingency and internal variation are suppressed in

particular forms of demarcating context within our respective disciplinary histories. I take this to be one of the gifts of Wiko, namely, to rediscover forms of cohabitation and concern with more distant branches of inquiry, at a time when the branches have hardened enough that the possibility of unexpected entwinements and cross-fertilization feels much more difficult than it might have, say, a century ago.

Equally crucially, a very different sort of gift was to inhabit the different kinds of encouragements specific to one's own project. I watched my book slowly emerge from non-existence, in the form of talks and chapter excerpts and conversations with Co-Fellows and co-habitants at Wiko, who participated as midwives and shared in the pleasures and anxieties of intellectual labor, as it moves from speculation to actualization.

In November, I had to present the first extended portion of the book in progress, on skepticism (in the sense of the term associated with Stanley Cavell and Cavell's reading of Wittgenstein) as a concept for mental health and illness, to a Wittgenstein seminar in Paris-Sorbonne with an audience that included those perhaps best-versed with Cavell's work at present in Europe, one of whom, my primary host, had even translated Cavell's *The Claim of Reason* into French. Many among my cohort shared in my (hopefully healthy) anxiety as I prepared this paper, one or two of my Co-Fellows read a draft of the talk, and others shared in my excitement after I returned from Paris with what felt like a satisfactory presentation and at least a basic sense that the conceptual leap between anthropology, philosophy, and psychiatry that I was trying to make was not entirely misplaced.

In the winter, starting roughly in mid-November, a crisis broke out and I tried to take refuge against uncertainties by writing what turned out to be the longest and most unmarketable of book proposals, summarizing what this book would entail, overall and chapter-wise, ending at about five times the length of what this genre usually ought to be. Rather than censure this fruitless labor, I received, thankfully from within Wiko, almost immediate support for a book workshop in February that our academic coordinator, Daniel Schönplflug, helped me to put together, where I had the good fortune of having a historian/philosopher of science (Lorraine Daston), a historian (Daniel himself), a cultural psychologist (Andreas Maercker), and a literary theorist (Karin Kukkonen) read and closely comment on this anxiously lengthy book proposal.

In March and May, in talks and conferences, within and around Berlin, I tried to solidify the second of the two major concepts of the book, vitalism. Geographically, the proximity of Berlin to other intellectual communities in Paris and Rome (in particular the

Forms of Life group involving Sandra Laugier, Estelle Ferrarese, and Piergiorgio Donatelli) allowed me to present significant portions of the book in sustained interactions with them over the year, such that by the end of the year, the book felt much closer to reality than when I had first arrived (and as with mental illness, so in thought: for reality to remain believable, it often needs to be confirmed by determinate, proximate others).

In slowly bringing this book manuscript to birth, a key aspect of the good fortune of Wiko was having a set of interlocutors among the library staff, in particular Stefan Gellner and Anja Brockmann, who were rigorous, indulgent, and immediate in their help. In what did feel like somewhat of a luxury, they never refused or shortchanged a bibliographic request, however obscure or intimidating or specific or global it might be. For instance, over the course of the year, Stefan created an astonishing range of chapter-wise resources for me and, more than that, arrangements of texts that responded to specific puzzles. Seemingly within the week, he would have produced a rigorous reading list, no matter how strange or varied the question or theme, ranging from the concept of the hero to geographical variations in the consumption of heroin in different parts of the world, arguments on the proximity and distance between Wittgenstein and the phenomenological tradition of psychiatry associated with Jaspers and Husserl, and, further, seemingly disconnected rabbit holes that this book dives into, in inhabiting the “wonderland” of the psyche, in ways distinct from the dominant traditions of psychoanalysis, psychiatry, and the anthropological or cultural critique of psychiatry.

My own Colloquium in April, which had initially felt daunting, felt almost festive after the initial anxieties, with an affectionate and rigorous introduction by my Co-Fellow Andreas Maercker, who prepared for the event Wiko-style by interviewing me, reading my earlier book and articles, and returning to regions of my past and literary and (thankfully non-Oedipal) mythological habitations, as one ought to, in considerations of psychic life. I was presenting a book chapter that had felt almost complete, and to my own surprise (inasmuch as it always remains a surprise to receive genuinely constructive suggestions), I received comments that helped rework key portions of it, particularly in the course of a ritual that a subsection of our cohort had initiated, an optional follow-up Monday lunch, a few days after the Tuesday Colloquium, in which the afterthoughts one received would often be at least as interesting as the first thoughts and questions that had emerged during the colloquium.

An account of this year would be incomplete without the sense of excitement that Berlin provided us at this historical moment, when the lack of corporate hubs (which still

allows regions of the city to subsist with relatively low rents), a few supportive civic cultural institutions, and something unnamable about the spirit of the city create conditions of hospitality for artists, cultural workers, and intellectuals from across the world to imagine a home here and to inhabit a relatively non-competitive but still stimulating environment. I remain deeply grateful for the ways the Wiko leadership and my cohort of Fellows enthusiastically shared in my forays into Berlin. Early on in the year, at my request, a small group from Wiko, including our Rector, accompanied me to the Gropius Bau, where a friend and interlocutor had recently taken up the Directorship, to imagine what kinds of conversations and collaborations might take place between these two institutions, given the variety and depth of scholars, artists, and musicians who annually populate Wiko. Similarly, my Co-Fellows were joyful companions and co-travelers to other Berlin adventures that were the result of older and newer friendships, a friend who has opened an independent bookstore called Hopscotch in a less upscale part of the city, and other events I did at Görlitzer Park on drug addiction with a group of artists from Kreuzberg, and a May Day rally, which turned into a kind of political “party” (in the festive sense of the term) in Grunewald, where our little group from Wiko was able to inhabit both sides, if we may even call them sides, and to understand how much and how little is at stake in the differences today, in the forms of life that once upon a time would have found themselves on different sides of the divide called capitalism and communism.

Staying specifically with Wiko, the hospitality I felt traverses the realm of the personal, but exceeds that, extending very much into what we might call the professional, the rigors of science or art, so to speak, and the conditions under which this can be sustained and grown. Wiko also helped me host a number of guests, including graduate students of mine and a psychiatrist interlocutor from India, Mamta Sood, who heads the Severe Mental Illness Clinic at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in Delhi. My Co-Fellow Andreas Maercker and Daniel Schönplflug helped arrange a meeting with a leading Berlin psychiatrist, Meryam Schouler-Ocak, who most closely matches Mamta Sood’s profile in terms of research interests in social psychiatry. In what was hopefully the beginning of a longer conversation, Meryam Schouler-Ocak met us for what was meant to be an hour-long meeting but trailed into an hour more, which ended with the suggestion that perhaps she would bring her team from Berlin Charité to interact with students and psychiatry faculty at AIIMS Delhi.

The hospitality I speak of, as I experienced it, was expressed in various ways, ranging from help with scholarly labors such as book manuscripts, to the exploration of institutional

links, and further, to more ephemeral moments of speculative connection, exceeding the realm of official necessity, as with the initially daunting but once known then gently patrician former Rector Luca Giuliani's request to me to introduce him to the work of the philosopher Stanley Cavell, whom I had cited at different points in the year. I spent a few days thinking about how to put such an introduction down in writing, and Luca Giuliani's delighted response made the labors feel more than worthwhile. I mention this because, for me, more than any professionally citable achievements, such interactions perhaps best characterize an ethos of continuing education.

As we circle closer to home within Wiko, from the main building and the Weiße Villa to the Villa Walther, among the richest memories of this year will be the kinds of learning that this year at Wiko made available for my daughter, Uma Jaan, who turned five just before we came to Berlin and will turn six soon after our departure. I will remember Koenigsallee as the street on which I first managed to teach her how to ride a bicycle. In times to come, I and hopefully she will remember the friends she made in the *Johannisches Sozialwerk Kindergarten* just behind Wiko, and the affectionate tears that the teachers shed, as did her classmates on our last day in school, where we hope to return to visit once in a while. I will also remember the first few months, when she didn't yet speak German, and the kinds of integration exercises that the schoolteachers and Wiko helped with, including finding us a German tutor, Sabrina, who would come home on a weekly basis, and various other kinds of encouragement that my Co-Fellows offered.

At our end-of-the-year party, where we put together a children's song and dance, as I thanked Wiko for their child-friendly policies (quite unlike other institutions, which has been a source of protest, for instance in several artistic residencies), multiple Fellows tried (and thankfully managed) to photograph my daughter's expression during my speech, in which I described how, when we first arrived, my daughter spoke not a word of German and how much better she now spoke than her father. Visiting friends would remark how enjoyable it was to see the children of Villa Walther playing together in the evenings and to witness the ways the kids, too, were part of the Wiko community. A few nights before we left, minutes before she slept, my daughter longingly asked, "Can't we become Permanent Fellows here?"

As crucially, care is enabled by a combination of policies and by a community willing to carry those words into deeds. In this regard, my memories of Wiko are also indelibly marked by the "prepare your stay" team, Andrea Bergmann, Vera Pfeffer, and Nina Kitsos, each of whom helped, but help is a somewhat inadequate term, since it does not

express the spirit and the hue of affection with which their efforts were colored, the small gestures of kindness, and the immediacy of help at hand.

As I have tried to indicate, these hues and currents extend from the personal to the intellectual, into the very question of what kind of a vocation or labor ties together the idea of *Wissenschaft*. What joins us? I arrived at one possible answer in one of the concluding evenings, in the course of a conversation with one of my Co-Fellows, the composer Beat Furrer, whom I found inspiring initially, for reasons I couldn't quite name. Thankfully, the inspiration grew as I got to know his work better. That said, even after knowing his work, that initial mysterious inspiration still remained. And then one day I caught it. Or at least I could name it. He exuded a feeling of depth, which came not from posture or pretension or fame, but from years of what a particular body, our water bodies, do, in this vocation, namely, hours of stillness, immersive absorption that may or may not occasion acts of creation, however modest these may be. In the time I was at Wiko, it was and I hope it will remain an ecology in which such bodies can be nourished, sustained, and connected anew.