



## UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTERS MALLORY MATSUMOTO

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The first shock came at the first group meeting during orientation in September. I was horrified when the Rector – an imposing figure who seemed both bewilderingly warm and incredibly intimidating – announced that, in the spirit of true academic freedom, we did not actually have to complete the project that we had proposed in our statements. In fact, we didn't even have to start it. We could spend the whole year reading broadly, undertaking a disciplinary transition, developing an entirely new project, or burrowing into intellectual rabbit holes. We were, in essence, free to do whatever we wanted. I had arrived in Berlin a few weeks earlier with no idea of what awaited me. But that disorienting declaration was the indication that, no matter what, this year would end up being different from anything I could have imagined.

If I'm being honest in this report, which I've been told I should be – it took some time for me to adjust. I felt out of place on more than one occasion: disciplinarily, as the sole

archaeologist and (I think?) the first-ever Fellow from the field that the Germans call *Altamerikanistik*; socially, as an introvert overcome by the intense togetherness; and professionally, as the youngest and only untenured member of the yearlong cohort. I lacked the experience, perspective, and organizational know-how to take full advantage of Wiko's perks, like organizing workshops or enlisting library staff to pursue obscure research tangents. I was intimidated by – afraid of, in some cases – my new colleagues, all of whom clearly, in contrast to me, knew what they were talking about. It took me a good two months before I had memorized their names. It took even longer to get used to the carousel of unfamiliar faces (academic guests, Permanent Fellows, former Fellows, family visitors...) at mealtimes. I was overwhelmed by the prospect of writing my own humble manuscript alongside dozens of established scholars who were composing much more ambitious, influential tomes. I was convinced that I had slipped into the cohort due to some clerical error that would soon be found out, at the latest when I gave my Colloquium.

I had also arrived in Berlin wary of the interpersonal drama that inevitably arises (or so I thought) when you throw together fifty-odd academics, all rigorously screened for research acumen but not for social competence, in an idyllic Grunewald villa for a year. So, I trod cautiously at the beginning. Weeks turned into months; tree branches turned bare; temperatures kept sinking. Until one point, deep into our fellowship year, when it suddenly occurred to me that mealtime conversations, informal hangouts, and Colloquia discussions continued to be strikingly... unremarkable. Boring, even, at least in terms of social drama. Maybe it was luck; maybe it was Wiko magic. But despite unevenly distributed social skills and an eclectic mix of personalities, we actually got along pretty well as a group. Surely, it helped that we were surrounded by caring, attentive staff who seem almost absurdly good-humored and sincere, all the time – quite a contrast to the no-nonsense, harried vibe of greater Berlin's workforce. By the time my Colloquium rolled around in January, I knew that even if someone at Wiko had realized that I didn't belong there, they were far too kind to kick me out.

That's not to say that our interactions were always normal. After almost ten months, my chest still tightens anxiously every time I enter the restaurant and survey the half-populated tables, knowing that I have to find a seat at one of them. But since the initial stranger-danger subsided, I've learned to appreciate the lottery-esque quality of each mealtime. Not just when it comes to non-random constellations of tablemates – itself a phenomenon worthy of anthropological inquiry – but also in terms of conversation. Every encounter is a box of Wiko chocolates, and there certainly have been a variety of flavors.

Adventures outside the Grunewald bubble (thank goodness for the M19), lab rats (they'll do anything for chocolate milk), the climate apocalypse (it's already upon us), nude beaches (a glimpse of humanity's physiological diversity), trust (society needs more of it), chemically engineered meat "goo" (our unappetizing but unavoidable future), K-dramas (do they count as a guilty pleasure if they teach you something?), police archives (it's all about having the right connections), Dian Fossey (and the sticky politics of fieldwork), mathematicians (they're so much more collaborative than they get credit for), Immanuel Kant (no one deserves such a protracted birthday celebration), local wildlife (the cute owl in the tree at the bus stop!), AI (can I ask ChatGPT to write this final report?)... Not every conversation was equally absorbing, of course, and social anxiety got the better of me on more than one occasion. But I've never laughed so much or thought so hard, day in and day out. Those interactions made it easier to return to my desk because even if I was alone in work, I wasn't alone at Wiko.

This year was my first opportunity to take research leave since starting an academic job. The physical and metaphorical distance from campus allowed me to focus, in a way I hadn't been able to since late grad school, on the very reason why I had wanted to enter academia in the first place: research. But as I realized at some point in the depths of winter, the distinction between campus life and Wiko life can't be measured only by time rescued from teaching and service. Over the last nine-and-a-half months, I've spent fewer hours than I would've liked actually working at my desk or in the reading room of the Ibero-American Institute, my institutional co-sponsor for the year. Yet I surprised even myself with how productive my writing was this year. It's no coincidence, I think, that it was the first stretch in recent memory when I woke up every morning with a deep sense of gratitude simply for being right there where I was – no matter what kind of day awaited me.

Wiko has often felt like an adult version of summer camp, albeit with gourmet food, ample wine at dinner, and unnervingly erudite conversation partners. At other times, it's been a flashback to student life: spontaneous late-night ping-pong matches, multigenerational football/soccer watch parties, washing dishes together in the shared kitchen, lingering for hours over dinner knowing that you're only a five-minute stroll from home. Only that it's better this time around. Unlike during my actual student days, even the most social in our cohort are trying to get some serious work done, and I'm never judged for wanting to do the same. I've always been a solo runner, but after I reluctantly dragged myself to the running group in late October, I found myself wanting to go back, morning

after morning. Then there was the June evening when I found myself surrounded by more than a dozen Fellows in the lobby of the Philharmonic, after a concert by the community orchestra that I'd stumbled into during late winter. They clapped and cheered and showered flowers and macarons as if I'd just performed Mahler's Symphony No. 5 all by myself, and I wanted nothing more than to sink into the floor. But awe overpowered my mortification – and my flight response – as I took in the familiar, smiling faces who had been complete strangers to me just nine months earlier. This academic year was the first time that I experienced, in a visceral sense, what a difference contentment can make for productivity.

Some colleagues have already told me that this year at Wiko has been the best of their careers, if not their lives. I worry that I may have peaked too early. But as daylight stretches well into nighttime, the trees are heavy with lush foliage, and the countdown to the residency's end is almost finished, I still wake up every morning in Villa Jaffé thankful to be here.