

# THE UNFAMILIAR

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## Unfamiliar Edinburgh: Being & Becoming In The City

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'Unfamiliar Edinburgh: Being and Becoming in the City'

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# Credits

## THE UNFAMILIAR TEAM

### *Executive Editors*

HAKON CASPERSEN completed his undergraduate degree at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology before moving on to graduate studies in anthropology at the University of Aberdeen. He is currently a PhD Candidate in Social Anthropology at the University of St Andrews, with a project titled 'Becoming an Artist: Creativity and Self-formation within Higher Fine Art Education'. Research interests include: individual agency and self-formation, creativity, aesthetic movements, enlightenment, knowledge and learning.

INNA YANEVA-TORAMAN completed her BSc in Sociology at Middle East Technical University, Turkey and her MSc in Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh, UK. She is currently a PhD student in Social Anthropology at the same institution. Her research explores the masking practices and mortuary rites of the Baining of East New Britain (PNG). Research interests include: the anthropology of the body, personhood, masks, death, Melanesia, material culture, religion and ritual, and affect theory. Additionally, she is interested in modern art, Surrealism, Expressionism, Internet culture, role-playing games, prosthetics and science fiction.

### *Editorial Directors*

KRITI BAJAJ is a graduate of the MA Social Anthropology programme at SOAS, University of London. Her research interests include media and visual anthropology, immigration and citizenship, and mental health and psychology. She has experience in writing, editing and online publishing primarily related to arts and culture. She was previously the Managing Editor of Art Radar, and has also worked with the UNESCO Parsi Zoroastrian Project in 2010-2011 as a research and editorial intern. She is currently a freelance writer and editor, and lives in New Delhi.

BETHANY ELANOR HONEYSETT completed her undergraduate degree in Social Anthropology at Cambridge University, before undertaking an MA in Middle Eastern Studies at Exeter University. This was followed by a PhD in Social Anthropology at Edinburgh University, with a thesis that addressed

the passing of time and social change as mediated by families in Damascus, Syria. Her areas of specialism include kinship, the Middle East, generations, gender, temporality and the anthropology of food. She is currently working as a research assistant on a cross-departmental project exploring consumption, futurity and queerness across the GCC.

KATARINA OCKOVA has studied social anthropology at the Comenius University in Bratislava and the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, and is currently a PhD candidate in social anthropology at the University of Edinburgh. She has conducted her PhD fieldwork and is presently writing her doctoral thesis exploring the marriage practices among the Jewish minority in post-socialist Slovakia. Her research interests include kinship and relatedness, marriage preferences and practices, religion, memory and intergenerational relations.

SARA ASU SCHROER completed her PhD at the Department of Anthropology, University of Aberdeen, with a thesis titled *On The Wing: Exploring Human Bird Relationships in Falconry Practice*. She is currently a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the ERC funded interdisciplinary research project *Arctic Domus*, Department of Anthropology, University of Aberdeen, with a project centered on the domestic breeding practices of birds of prey.

### *Art Direction and Design*

CHRISTINE WU is a graduate of the BFA Fashion Design programme at Parsons The New School for Design, and the MSc Social Anthropology programme at the University of Edinburgh. She is currently researching Japanese consumer culture at Bunka Gakuen University in Tokyo. Her research interests lie at the intersection between design and anthropology, with a focus on fashion trends and luxury consumption.

### *Promotion and Outreach*

SHREYA ILA ANASUYA studied English Literature at Jadavpur University, Calcutta, before reading *The Social Anthropology of Development* as a Felix Scholar at the SOAS, London. She consults on gender for an advocacy organisation and writes poetry and fiction.

# A Letter from the Editor

HAKON CASPERSEN

*Volume 6, Issue 1*

Unfamiliar Edinburgh: Being and Becoming in the City

## A Letter from the Editor

Social anthropology can be defined as a mode of thinking that seeks to understand and articulate the social relations that define and shape our perception of the world. This, of course, is also an activity that we in our daily life as human beings are continuously involved in. This understanding of relationships and our own role within them is crucial in order to act intelligently in a shared world. If it is true, then, that 'we are all anthropologists', one might think that teaching anthropology should be a straightforward undertaking. However, in my own, and I admit, limited experience of teaching introductory courses to anthropology undergraduate students, I have often been left baffled by the challenge of getting students to 'think ethnographically' and to develop 'ethnographically grounded' arguments in their writing.

One of the challenges, perhaps, stems not necessarily from that students are unfamiliar with anthropology or ethnographic writing but from the lack of experience with the actualities involved in carrying out ethnographically grounded qualitative research. I do not want to claim that ethnographic sensibility cannot be developed without a practice-based familiarity with fieldwork. However, the contributions to this volume by second-year anthropology students at the University of Edinburgh, might exemplify some of the benefits of practice based exercises when teaching anthropology and ethnographic methods. On the one hand, the texts demonstrate the value of longitudinal participant observation when it comes to learning to learn to understand social phenomena. On the other hand, the students have become acutely aware of their own roles as individual interpreters and authors, making them to reflect on how their own perceptions and changing roles throughout the process have become part of and are shaping the final ethnographic texts.

This volume encompasses ethnographic snapshots of different aspects of life within Edinburgh, as perceived and presented by a selection of undergraduate students in the second-year course *Ethnography, Theory and Practice* at the University of Edinburgh. It also aims to exemplify how these anthropology students are taught to develop an ethnographic sensibility through 'fieldwork experience'. To contextualise the volume and its individual contributions the teaching staff, John Harries, Koreen Rice and Stephen McConnachie, have written an introductory essay that explains the pedagogical rationale behind the course while reflecting on the processes of learning and knowledge-making involved in being and becoming student-ethnographers in the city of Edinburgh.

*Hakon*





Social Bite – 4 characters © Issey Medd

ESSAYS

## Unfamiliar Edinburgh: Being and Becoming in the City

KOREEN REECE, JOHN HARRIES  
& STEPHEN MCCONNACHIE



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# Unfamiliar Edinburgh: Being and Becoming in the City

KOREEN REECE, JOHN HARRIES & STEPHEN MCCONNACHIE

How do we learn ethnography? How do we teach ethnography? What is the process of becoming an ethnographer like – and what might it tell us about the places in which we become ethnographers? In this special issue of *The Unfamiliar*, we explore these questions through a range of creative and critical ethnographic pieces generated by the students of the University of Edinburgh's second-year Social Anthropology course, *Ethnography: Theory and Practice*.

The course was conceived as an opportunity for undergraduate students in disciplines across the social sciences and beyond to explore what ethnography *is* – and specifically, how one *does* it (a puzzlement familiar to many a student of anthropology; Shryock 2016). In groups of three to four, students are invited to identify a space in Edinburgh in which to conduct a short-term ethnographic research project. After submitting a brief proposal and gaining ethics clearance, they spend several hours each week for the bulk of the semester hanging out, participating, observing, listening, asking questions, soliciting conversations, conducting interviews, taking photos or making maps. In short, they are spending time getting to know the space and the people who produce it in any way they can.

This special issue brings together samples of student work from the course for the first time. In it, we find student ethnographers spending time with people living in narrow boats on the Union Canal; joining walking tours and pole-dancing classes; letting themselves be transformed by drag queens; performing at poetry slam events, or having a go at ceilidh dancing and the ecstatic release of the five-rhythms; talking with men drinking quietly in an Irish bar, or with the elderly congregants of the Augustine United Church; joining in on the work of charity shops and cafes, or engaged in the 'creative reuse' of discarded material. Students were invited to submit pieces based on any aspect of their fieldwork, and were encouraged to experiment with form and style as they saw fit. An editorial committee, consisting of five students from the course supported by its teaching staff, supplied the creative vision and structure of the issue; and submissions were conscientiously peer reviewed by a select group of Edinburgh's MA Social Anthropology cohort, who helped to draw out and clarify the authors' perspectives. Together, the students who have driven this special issue have created opportunities to extend their course-based learning into hands-on experience with the process of publishing. What follows is a collection of fieldnotes, sketches, reflections, poems, profiles, and photos, as well as some longer ethnographic pieces, which give a rare insight into their learning trajectories, and into the city that shaped them.

## Teaching Ethnography

In the course *Ethnography: Theory and Practice*, we work from the premise that ethnography is more than a method, or even an array of methods, but is an orientation to the world – a particular type of inquisitive sensibility that allows us to question taken-for-granted assumptions about the way the world is. The main focus of the course is on cultivating this ethnographic sensibility, through actively mentored and peer-supported fieldwork. Inspiration and provocative research possibilities are suggested in weekly lectures. The course as a

whole, however, is predominantly tutorial-driven and practice-based, with class time divided between opportunities to practice key research skills, and guided group reflection on the perplexities of the research process. In hands-on, practical activities – often conducted in public spaces around the city – students learn how to take fieldnotes and how to conduct interviews, how to identify appropriate literature, analyse their findings, and build their work into fully-fledged ethnographic pieces. These tasks are oriented primarily towards learning to think like an ethnographer, and towards creating a different relationship with the world. Harry Wolcott has described ethnography as “a way of seeing”, explaining that it is “more than method” and that “it is the mindwork...that goes with it that is most critical” (Wolcott 1999: 66). In reflecting on and discussing their unfolding fieldwork with one another, in sharing and comparing experiences with their tutors, and in producing fieldnotes, interview transcripts, book reviews, and projects for assessment, students are given informal and formal opportunities to practice this “mindwork” collaboratively.

In particular, tutors on the course seek to foster ethnographic sensibility by encouraging an openness to “serendipity and the unexpected” (Konopinski 2014: 2) as a source of unique insight; and by challenging students to acknowledge and defamiliarise their own positionalities and assumptions, thereby cultivating reflexivity. In role-played interviews or the discussion of scenarios presenting ethical conundrums, we aim to show that both research and ethics are more a matter of sensitive, humane engagement than of following rules – more about attending, taking seriously, and improvising than about following scripts. While allowing the field to lead them and shape their investigations is often an unsettling, confusing, and frustrating experience for the students, over time, they learn the value of the accidental and unscripted, and find ways to turn these moments into unusual perspectives on their fieldsites. Similarly, students are often intrigued, perplexed, and unsettled by the notion of reflexivity, and attendant ideas about the appropriate place of the self in social sciences research – making for sharp learning curves. The results are evident in a number of the contributions to this volume, perhaps most strikingly in the piece on drag queens by Hannah Diry and Gaia Duberti; most innovatively in the piece by Isabelle Introna and Alexandra Dunn on what happened when they shared their final course project with two of their art school interlocutors; and most honestly and openly in the final article of the collection by Tannith Matthew. In these pieces and others across the issue, students ably demonstrate the ways they have made room for both the “unruly and systematic” dimensions of social sciences research (Konopinski 2014: 2).

### **Being and Becoming in the City**

There is no straightforward narrative logic or single, coherent theme to this ethnographic collection. The editorial committee explicitly chose to forego a specific analytic perspective, opting instead to preserve the multiplicities and mess of their learning trajectories – and of Edinburgh itself. At the same time, similar ethnographic notes are struck across the work of our contributors, sounding common preoccupations with and experiences of the city: preoccupations with self-making and becoming, reflected in the issue’s subtitle; with movement and stasis; with performance, conflict, and social responsibility, among others. The result is a gathering of arguments, descriptions and reflections, which may – or may not – find resonance with each other, which sometimes speak to similar issues but equally pull in different directions. We juxtapose pieces that share certain qualities, but are also sharply contrasting, discontinuous, and divergent. In this irresolution, we hope to have retained something of the feeling of being and becoming an ethnographer that our authors evoke so well.

Above all, what binds these pieces together – like any good ethnography – is an intense but partial intimacy, a kind of provisional closeness with people going about the creative, sometimes quiet, sometimes flamboyant business of living in the city of Edinburgh. Through these writings, photographs and drawings we get to know, fleetingly but vividly, people like Jen – who leads tours through the Grassmarket, telling tales of Edinburgh’s unseemly past; or Stephen, with his “background in logistics”, who now talks with passion about working for a café dedicated to helping the homeless; or the nameless group of travellers on a city bus to Clovenstone, who briefly find common cause in reprimanding an illicit smoker.

Perhaps this ethnography is a bit like the experience of being in Edinburgh, or indeed, any city: a cosmopolitan experience of fleeting impressions, strange associations, minor incidents; of people passing by, resting, doing, moving on, each with their own trajectory, their own narrative, all temporarily and inextricably entangled. And as we engage with this seemingly disordered but – as de Certeau reminds us – coherent movement, our attention is drawn from the “concept of the city” towards an appreciation of “urban practices” (de Certeau 1984: 93). This city is, notoriously, a place of surfaces and secrets, configured even in its curious topography, its streets built over and above other streets. There is a familiar Edinburgh, the Edinburgh that Jen presents to tourists, the Edinburgh known to students in the course of their everyday life; there are, in fact, many different familiar Edinburghs, depending on who you are and how you inhabit this place. Running beneath and alongside, often close by, is the unfamiliar Edinburgh, the pole-dancing Edinburgh, poetry-slam Edinburgh, canal-side Edinburgh, of which we are aware but in which we rarely pause or dwell. In their work, the authors of this special issue do just that: they seek out an Edinburgh unfamiliar to them, spend some time there, come to know a few people, and to know the city differently in their company. And they explore the ways their informants make the city familiar and unfamiliar to themselves as well, carving out community and anonymity, following routines while engaging actively in the creative, performative work of self-fashioning. This is a city of arts students, drag queens, solitary drinkers, kindly churchgoers and ‘ceilidh consultants’, as well as those on the bus to Clovenstone.

This is also a city of student-ethnographers who, through their research, are encouraged to self-reflexively consider the transformations wrought by doing ethnography. These are transformations in our understanding of other people and places, in which the strange is made familiar and the familiar strange, as the popular turn of phrase goes. But these are also processes of self-exploration and self-discovery. In the encounters with unfamiliar Edinburgh, the authors also describe encounters with an unfamiliar self, disclosed and revealed as they join in, participate and get to know ways of doing and being previously unknown to them. In reading this collection, we may come away knowing something more of this city; but in the company of the authors, to quote the concluding piece of this special issue, we also “come away from this project [having] learned something about humanity, something about [ourselves] and something about doing research”, which leaves us “inspired and excited about what else [we] can learn.” If ethnography is, at bottom, a willingness to learn by seeking out the unfamiliar and dwelling within it – even for just a few hours a week – then, as more and less experienced students of ethnography, we can hope for no better outcome than that.

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## LOCATIONS

## TITLES OF WORKS

- |                            |   |
|----------------------------|---|
| A Pleasance Cabaret Bar    | • Iamb a Poet: An Anthropological Study of the Art of Spoken Words                      |
| B St. Margaret's House     | • The Race of the Vagina Monster  |
|                            | • Anthropology: The (Re)creation of Female Bodies Through Pole-dancing                  |
|                            | • Check out those Double Ds!  |
|                            | • I'll be up in the Studio just Working on Accepting my Body and making Fergie          |
| C The Shrub                | • Image: Graphs/Illustrations of the Shrub  |
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| D Augustine United Church  | • An Afternoon with the Augustine United Church   |
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| F Grassmarket              | • Death at the Grassmarket  |
| G Malones Irish Pub        | • The Irish Bar: An Identity Familiar to All  |
| H 5Rhythms                 | • Letting the Rythm Move You  |
|                            | • There is No Me without You: Exploring the Self through Others in 5Ryth                |
| I Union Canal              | • Union Canal   |
| J Lothian Busses           | • Bussness  |
| K Pleasance Sports Centre  | • Yoga in Edinburgh: For the Mind or For the Body?                                      |
| L Social Bite              | • Image: Social Bite - Four Characters  |
|                            | • Image: Social Bite - "readers" and map  |
|                            | • Taste of Field notes from Social Bite   |
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| M PDSA Charity Shop        | • Multiple Motives: Selfishness, altruism and reciprocal exchange in a Scottish charity |
| N The Museum of Childhood  | • The Way I Saw Ethnography   |
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Map of Edinburgh and an accompanying descriptive list © Anna Thomsen

ESSAYS

The Race of the Vagina Monster: An Excerpt from Field Notes

CLARE ANSTOCK



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# The Race of the Vagina Monster: An Excerpt from Field Notes

CLARE ANSTOCK

**Monday 22/2/16. 7.35**

There are eleven of us at pole-dancing class on Monday evening, instructed by Jess, a short, young woman with blond hair long enough for some elaborate hair-flicking. We have successfully completed our five-minute warm up and Jess bounces around the room, excitedly telling us that we are about to do something fun. Now, I'll admit it: I've never been to a gym, let alone a pole-dancing class, and something about Jess' tone makes me feel more than a bit anxious. As I look around the room, I see shifty glances from my fellow pole-dancing beginners.

“We are going to do a new exercise: its kind of a relay, so divide yourselves up into four groups, two groups at each side of the room facing opposite the other two.”

We follow her further instructions until we are sitting down in lines, one behind the other, cross-legged on the floor. I've placed myself at the back of my line, so I can give myself as much time as possible to work out what to do. Jess joins the front of the group opposite my own, fiercely establishing herself as our competitor. She claps her hands, smiles broadly, and tells us that we are going to do:

“The Race of the Vagina Monster.”

The room echoes with nervous giggles as Jess shows us how to complete the race. I watch in awe as she lies on her back and begins to wave her outstretched legs in the air. Each leg wave moves her body about half an inch along the floor towards my group.

Not only does Jess glide across the floor while her legs are churning air, she also manages to chat to us, telling us about the places in our bodies where we should be feeling some strain. As she approaches the other side of the room, I worry momentarily that she will kick one of us, but she passes our group, spins round and yells for the race to begin.

“The first team to get all their Vagina Monsters to the other side of the room, one by one, wins!”

There is a lot of cheering and encouragement from the groups and a lot of confusion and surprise from the racers:

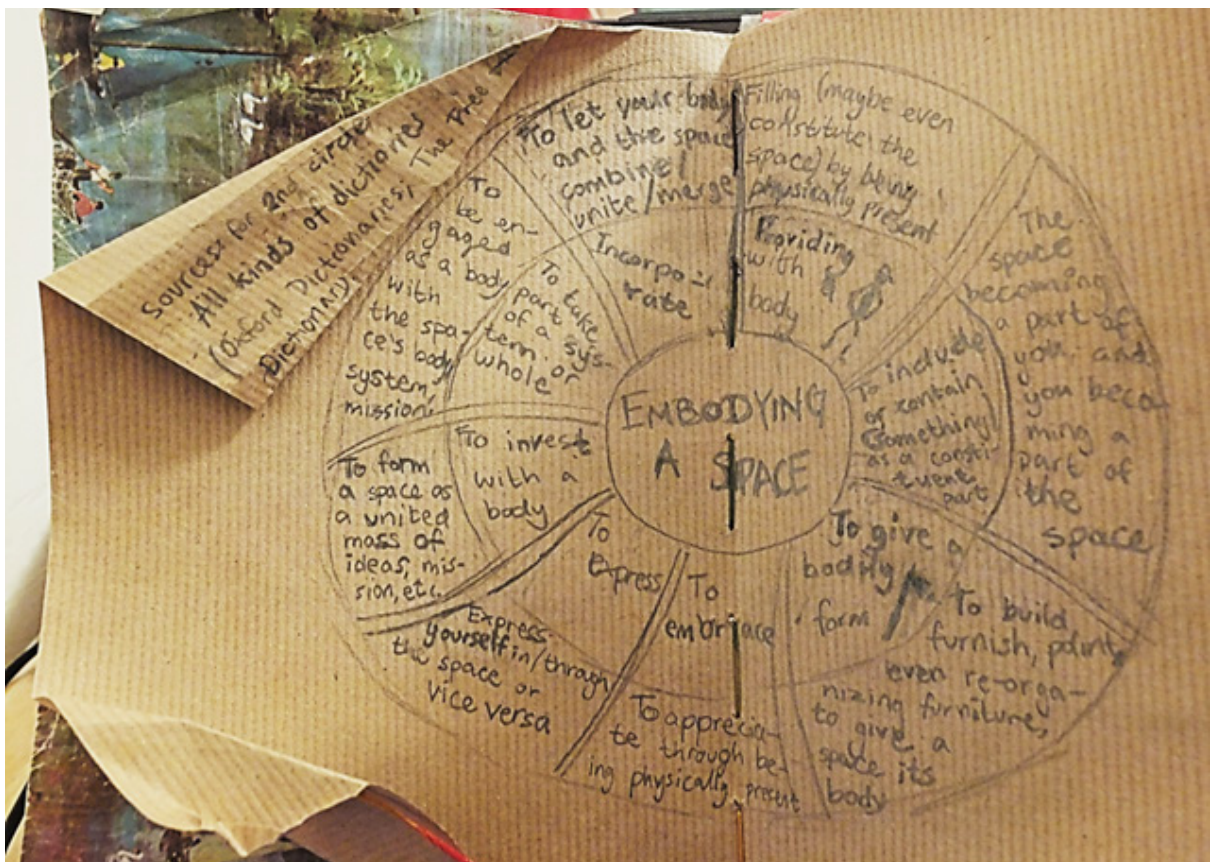
“C'mon! You've got it! Go go!”  
“AAAARARGGHGHGHG, THIS HURTS!”  
“WHAT THE HELL, JESS?”  
“Oh my god! ... Wait, can we use our elbows?!”  
“Yes! Absolutely! You should be on your elbows!”  
“Woohoo! You can do it!”  
“Show us the goods!”  
“You've got it, go for the wax on/wax off thing”

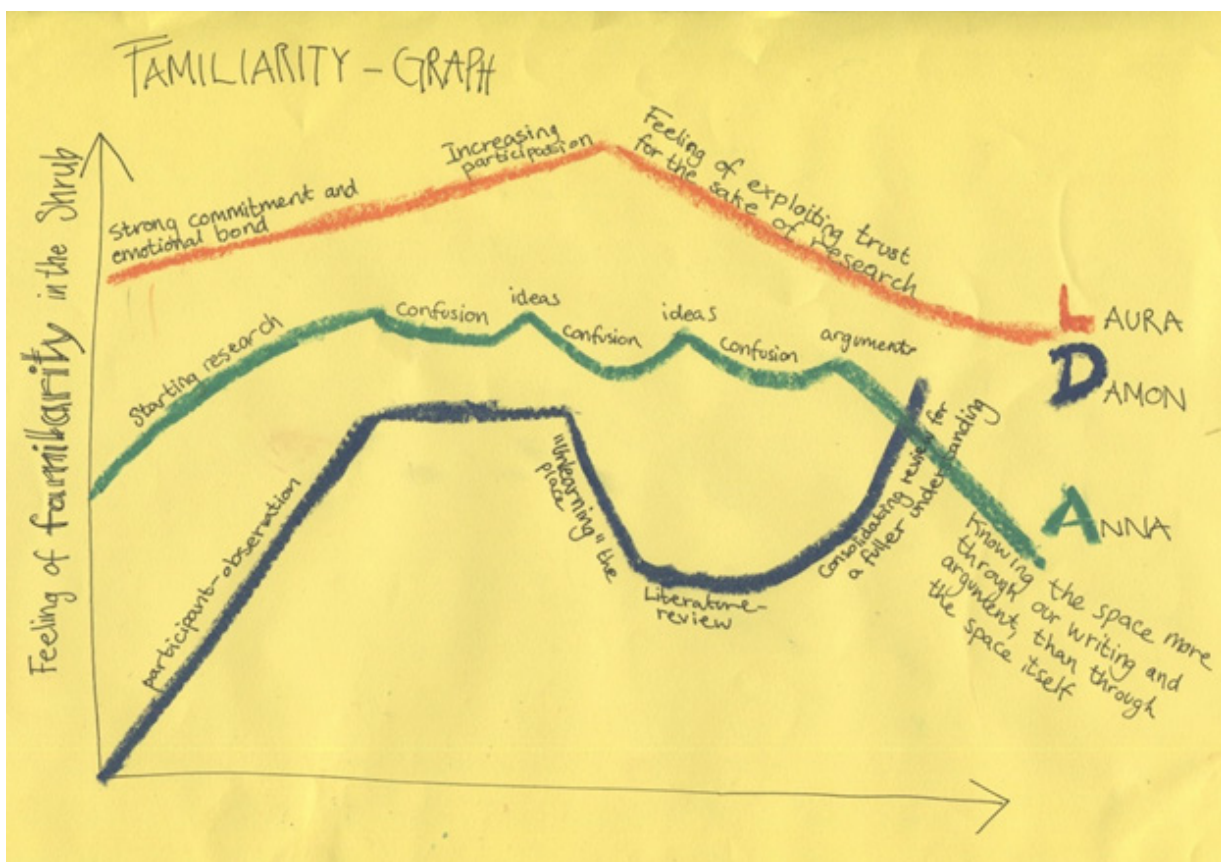
At last it is my turn, and my nerves are confirmed – I had not nearly expected how strenuous it would be, and I am a bit embarrassed by it all. But the other women's cheers make it much easier to laugh at myself; we are all laughing at ourselves, and each other. My legs – unable to straighten fully due to my own lack of flexibility – are now the focus of Jess's (well intentioned and positive) criticism, and I finally make it to the other side and snort with the team at how ridiculous this all feels. There is just one fellow pole dancer left inching across the floor and we turn to focus all of our cheers and encouragement towards her; Jess joins

her on the floor and they reached the other side of the room, Vagina Monsters together. The room bursts into applause and cheers for each other.

The Race of the Vagina Monster was one of the most bizarre things we did at pole class. Jess promised us it would be a challenge, and it certainly was, but the required stretching and flexing was a great warm up for pole-dancing. As we pushed ourselves across the floor we were learning how to become comfortable with our bodies, using them in ways that would come in useful for hanging on a pole with only grip from upper thighs challenging gravity. We gained greater understanding of the dichotomous relationship between sexual acts and friendship, in which we found we were using our bodies not as voyeurs engaged in performing for the pleasure of others, but instead as a group promoting female empowerment and bodily autonomy. We all felt uncomfortable at the start of The Race of the Vagina Monster, but then again, not everyone hopes for the chance to wave their legs about the air in front of near strangers while slowly and painfully inching across a squeaky, waxed floor.







Graphs/Illustrations of The Shrub © Anna Thomsen

“There is no such thing as waste”:  
Redoing concepts of materials and values in the Shrub

ANNA THOMSEN, DAMON DAILLY & LAURA ASSMANN



FIG 1: Shrub Swap and Reuse Hub  
© Laura Assmann



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# “There is no such thing as waste”: Redoing concepts of materials and values in the Shrub

ANNA THOMSEN, DAMON DAILLY & LAURA ASSMANN

## Introduction

The Shrub is a Swap and Reuse HUB, and its components are epitomized by an up-cycled chandelier placed in its ‘living room’. The chandelier is made through a creative reuse of ‘Shrub-things’; it is consisting of three bicycle wheel frames connected by a bar, and from each of them hang half a dozen light bulbs, as well as forks and spoons of steel, making it all shine. The wheels represent the Shrub’s free bicycle repair workshop. The cutlery represents the Food Sharing group that collects food which would otherwise be wasted. The reuse of things symbolises the swapshop, which facilitates swapping of ‘waste’. Furthermore, the Shrub runs many workshops to empower people in leading sustainable lifestyles. The aim behind all these activities is to challenge capitalism by creating a circular economy and create a waste-free society. Moreover, it is a co-operative run by volunteers as well as a few paid employees, most of whom are students.

In order to narrow down the focus of our ethnographic project we asked the question: in what ways are the Shrub challenging capitalist conceptions of waste, materials and value? To answer this we looked into the Shrub’s waste regime, ideas of materiality and alternative currency, called ‘Tokens’. In the following we will firstly discuss the politics surrounding how the Shrub classifies waste. Then, when looking at ideas of materiality, we examine how the Shrub conceptualises materials as things rather than objects, and how this is a way of redoing and rethinking capitalist constructs. We finish by considering Tokens as a ‘micro-political challenge’ to capitalism. Overall, we demonstrate how the Shrub creates tools that allow it to challenge capitalist conceptions. However, we also argue that a certain level of knowledge within the space is required to understand and navigate within the Shrub.

As in the Shrub, capitalism will here refer to the current predominant economic system. In varying contexts, we gathered that ‘Shrubbers’ (Shrub-members) largely consider capitalism as linearly ‘growth-based’ (Jackson 2009), and thus inherently wasteful and ecologically destructive. The Shrub aims to challenge this by working towards a circular economy, namely the circulation of resources for as long as possible by regenerating products, thus striving for a ‘prosperity without growth’ (Jackson 2009).

## Methodology

The Shrub is open for the public, but our accessibility was increased by the fact that we bought £10 year-long Shrub-memberships, and were students like the majority there. Before we began our research, two of us had already established some rapport through attending workshops and volunteering there. We all, however, came to feel the “ethnographer’s strangeness” (Emerson et al. 1995:36) – either automatically, or in a more cultivated way, in order to estrange the familiar.

When we asked for permission to study the Shrub, we were welcomed with the members’ symbol of shaking hands in the air, which is the agreed upon way of showing agreement or enthusiasm in The Shrub’s meetings. We thus comfortably observed and participated in workshops, swapshop open hours, meetings and more. For events we also assisted in re-organizing furniture which helped us embody the space. Overall, our interviewees were self-critical, but we are aware that they, as employed members, only represent a particular perspective on the Shrub. Furthermore, whilst we were interested in them both as persons and informants, they were interested in us as humans and researchers. This balanced positioning influenced our methodology; our semi-structured interviews were co-constructions and exchanges between interviewer and interviewee (Heyl 2001:370).



FIG 2 (left):The “Living room” of the Shrub. FIG 3 (right):The authors during their backstage process.  
Photos © Laura Assmann

Sharing experiences and developing thoughts and mind-maps together, as well as the writing process itself were essential elements of our ethnography’s backstage research process. When refining our themes we tried to be aware of not skewing information to suit us, but instead allow our argument to ‘grow’ from our data; sprouting. However, whilst participant-observation and interviews were co-constructions with Shrubbers, it became evident that our writing represents a further reconstruction (Heyl 2001:370) that is less mutual. This leads us to question what we can represent, and who we make this ethnography for. While we recognise that a report like this is standard in academia, we feel that we inevitably misrepresent the Shrub when we decontextualise our experiences to fit them into this written format. It therefore becomes important to emphasise that what we experienced and here present in writing are only “partial truths” (Clifford 1986).

### **Redefining waste**

Waste is at the heart of the Shrub, which wants to redefine waste as a resource, in a bid to create a world where there is no such thing as waste. It is worth looking at this project of revaluation through the lens of Douglas (1970), who asserts that dirt is matter out of place, violating some ideal sense of the ways things ought to be. This is applicable to the Shrub, where wasting is recognised as dangerous to the environment. The existence of waste, physically and as a category, violates a sense of how things ought to be according to the Shrub, that is, reusing rather than wasting. Thus, in promoting this notion of circular economy, the Shrub directly challenges capitalism and its prevailing conceptions of waste as something ‘inevitable’. However, we can also move beyond this and see how the Shrub is a political space often in opposition to capitalism, and how ‘waste’ is redefined to mobilise this opposition. Bearing these politics in mind, ‘the matter out of place’-logic at play in the Shrub is then a tool for challenging capitalism, which we will further demonstrate.

Categorisation of waste is important for political mobilisation. Reno (2015), for example, discusses how the category “toxic waste” has produced new international policies. This is in line with the Shrub’s definition of waste as something that can be measured in CO<sup>2</sup>. This redefines waste as active and consequential, where it has a carbon footprint. We witnessed this at an open meeting, where it was explained that the Shrub must measure the CO<sup>2</sup>-amount it saves, as per requirement of the primary funder, the Junior Climate Challenge Fund. This transforms, for example, three bags of old clothes into a weight in CO<sup>2</sup>. Beyond this redefinition of waste in order to navigate funding bodies, it is also a way of framing waste as a hazard, with CO<sup>2</sup> implying environmental degradation. The Shrub can then promote their agenda of waste reduction and circular economy. The ‘hazard-framing’ raises issues of scale for environmental activism (Moore 2012), as the redefinition of waste can be deployed across different scales of governance. In our case we can see the CO<sup>2</sup>-discourse applied in the Shrub’s activism, both on the national scale (when applying for grants) and on the personal, which refers to individual consumption measured in CO<sup>2</sup>. Thus CO<sup>2</sup> is used as a tool to keep individuals’ ethics in check.

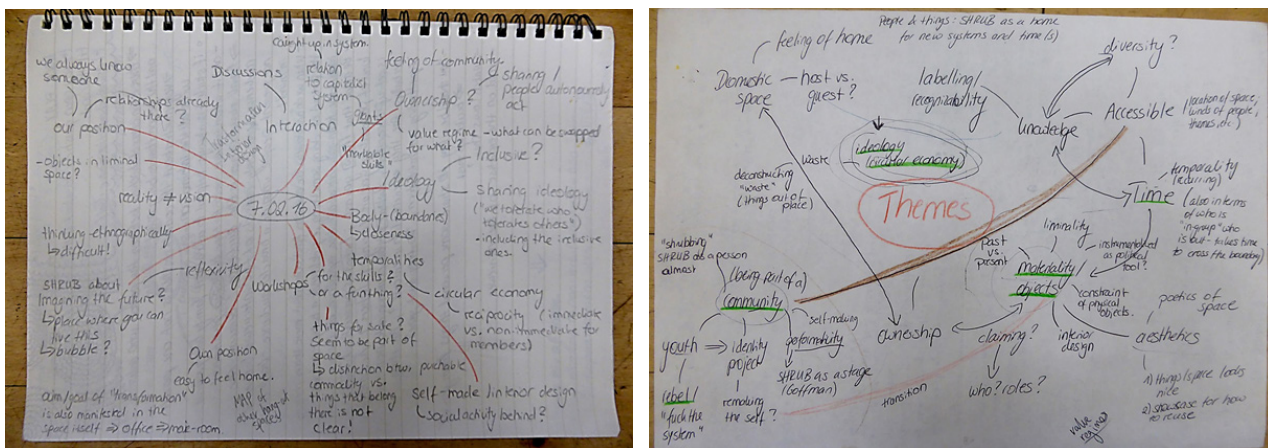


FIG 4 & 5: The Messy Process of the Shrub Ethnography: These mind-maps portray a little peek into the messiness of the initial writing and analysis. This is how our ethnography looked like the first days of the writing process. Photos © Laura Assmann

In summary the Shrub sees waste as matter out of place, when it should rather be in the Shrub where it will be reconceptualised, becoming a part of the swapshop. This ‘matter out of place’-logic is facilitated by a variety of constructions of waste. Waste is, for example, measured in and reconceptualised as CO<sub>2</sub>, allowing an engagement with the politics of climate justice in connoting environmental hazard, seen to incite change, while also acting as an effective tool for measuring individuals’ ethics. Revaluing waste thus presents tools, and is also a tool in itself for the Shrub to challenge capitalist conceptions.

## Materiality

Through having their own value regime the Shrub actively constructs certain ideas about what materials are and can be. The Shrub, due to legal national categorisations, is officially a ‘waste-handling organization’ and things that the Shrub gets or collects is first considered ‘waste’ by law. Nonetheless, the Shrub conceptually (and sometimes also physically) transform the ‘waste’ into reusable things. This highlights the changeability of material conceptions. However, ‘waste’ is only one of many categorisations that can be culturally attributed to things. In their so-called ‘social life’, things can change status several times (Appadurai 1986). Firstly, time might be a factor (Kopytoff 1986). A shiny blue handbag was, for example, bought as a commodity and later given as official ‘waste’ to the Shrub which then assigned it new value. Secondly, things can be understood differently from one person to another (Kopytoff 1986:78-79). While the shiny handbag is officially considered ‘waste’ when the Shrub first receive it Shrubbers would not talk about it in these terms; they would merely call it a handbag. Ellie (interview-transcript, 13/02/16), a Shrub-employee, framed it as “there is no such thing as waste, only stuff in the wrong place”. She explained it as a problem of unequal social distribution; if people have things they do not need, and discard them (which is socially fully accepted), it is legitimately waste, even if (less affluent) others could have used them. As the Shrub’s categorisations contrast the society’s, and critique social distribution, its value regime challenges capitalist conceptions, and redefines what things are or can be.

Through its workshops and do-it-yourself (DIY) interior design, the Shrub actively challenges conceptions of materiality, encouraging people to perceive materials as things rather than objects. This refers to Heidegger’s distinction between objects as static in form and function, and things as gatherings of changeable materials (Ingold 2012:436). Thinging, notifying engagement with things (ibid), is essential to the Shrub. The interior design, such as the wooden book shelves, and the bike-wheel-cutlery chandelier are built and upcycled from different materials, namely things. The Shrub also hosts several DIY-workshops that we participated in. Through actual hands-on modulation of things, participants learnt how sheets of papers can become books, and how to upcycle a picture frame into a blackboard. However, after these workshops, it is not merely sheets of paper and picture frames that we could now see as things rather than objects. It inspired a broader reconsideration process; what we deemed objects before, were in fact materials in movement. This is not to say that everything in the Shrub is upcycled. In fact, the newest feature for the Shrub is another chandelier,



FIG 6 (left): Self-made book © Anna Thomsen. FIG 7 (centre): Bag made of juice cardboard boxes © The Shrub, posted on the 'Swap & Reuse HUB "Shrub" Co-operative' Facebook page, Apr. 2016. Fig 8 (right): Self-made blackboard © Anna Thomsen

and the creator admitted, almost with a jokingly guilt, that the jars surrounding the light bulbs and adding a DIY-look, were bought new. This, of course, matters for the amount of carbon footprint that the chandelier 'costs'. However, it does not refute our argument; whether or not the jars are recycled, the builder engages with glass as things, finding new usages based upon the materials initial affordance. Conventionally there is an over-emphasis on the artefact and finished object (Ingold 2012:435), and therefore thinging, and considering materials as things rather than objects are ways of redoing and rethinking established conceptualisations.

However, it is not necessarily obvious to see how the Shrub challenges usual conceptions of things, due to the difficulty of displaying alternatives while keeping some framework recognisable. When walking into the Shrub it might easily seem like a charity shop and you can navigate within it as such; find a sweater, buy it and leave, without ever knowing that the Shrub is a swap-shop not a charity. This is possible because the Shrub has agreed to standardising criteria, for instance, giving everything a price tag so that things can either be swapped or sold. However, looking closer, a complexity is revealed. It is unknown whether the couch, and other furniture is for sale. Another confusion is the tea: as one of us walked confidently around in the Shrub, she was asked by newcomers, if she could make them some tea. A regular Shrubber would know that anyone may have tea, that they can make it themselves on their own initiative. These confusions show a discrepancy of knowledge and thus confidence between people in the Shrub.

## Tokens

After these rather broad themes, we were eager to explore a specific tool, namely Tokens that the Shrub has implemented as a challenge to predominant capitalist structures.

The Shrub provides the infrastructure for a more circular way of using things. I guess Tokens are just a part of that. They allow us to play with currency and make our own rules...

- Charlie, a Shrub-employee

Sam, a volunteer, described Tokens as "a very easy alternative currency, where one pound is equal to one Token". The Tokens are digital and Shrub-members can acquire Tokens through volunteering or in exchange for things.

Alternative currency networks are commonly depicted as a micropolitical challenge to capitalism as well as a tool in "building a more liberated economy and society" (North 2010:73), however, as it will be shown with regards to the Shrub, these structures come along with contradictions and tensions.

Through our research we soon realised that, despite the invention of Tokens, people within the Shrub largely make sense of material value in terms of pounds. Mette High (2013) contextualises this observation in emphasising that the value of things is determined by local sociocultural understandings; that is, in our case, capitalist understandings of value. Therefore, whilst we first thought that the Tokens were somewhat contradictory or pretentious as their value is shaped by the pound, we realised how our own perceptions are also pound-dominated.

The thing with Tokens is that it doesn't matter if we overvalue or undervalue things because that way we do not have any loss in pounds... We can't give out something that we don't really have [referring to pounds], but we have loads of stuff, so in a way we have endless Tokens but we don't have endless money.

- Charlie, a Shrub-employee

This quote illustrates that while the Shrub does not have money to exchange with, it is wealthy in things, and thus shows how it successfully challenges and departs from capitalist normative wealth. The Token-system is a safeguard to protect the Shrub from making economic losses within the system it has to operate in and at the same time a tool that drives people to spend their acquired value in the Shrub. Tokens are ultimately an instrument in experimenting with and facilitating an alternative exchange network that puts emphasis on swapping objects rather than buying them on the High Street.

Another aspect that stood out during our research is the attempt to keep things local and circulating within the Shrub. Alternative currencies are commonly portrayed as localising tools which simultaneously seek to build community and enhance social inclusion (North and Longhurst 2013). During one of the open meetings, a volunteer suggested to give out free Tokens to members of the public to get more people involved with the Shrub. This inspired us to think further about Tokens as a tool for community building.

During a group meeting, one of us realised that they did not know that they had acquired Tokens in the course of becoming a Shrub-member. Despite our attentiveness there clearly was a lack of knowledge. In one of the semi-structured interviews Charlie likewise emphasised the inaccessibility of the Token-system: "The entire system of the Shrub is already a bit confusing and Tokens are just another part of that. People

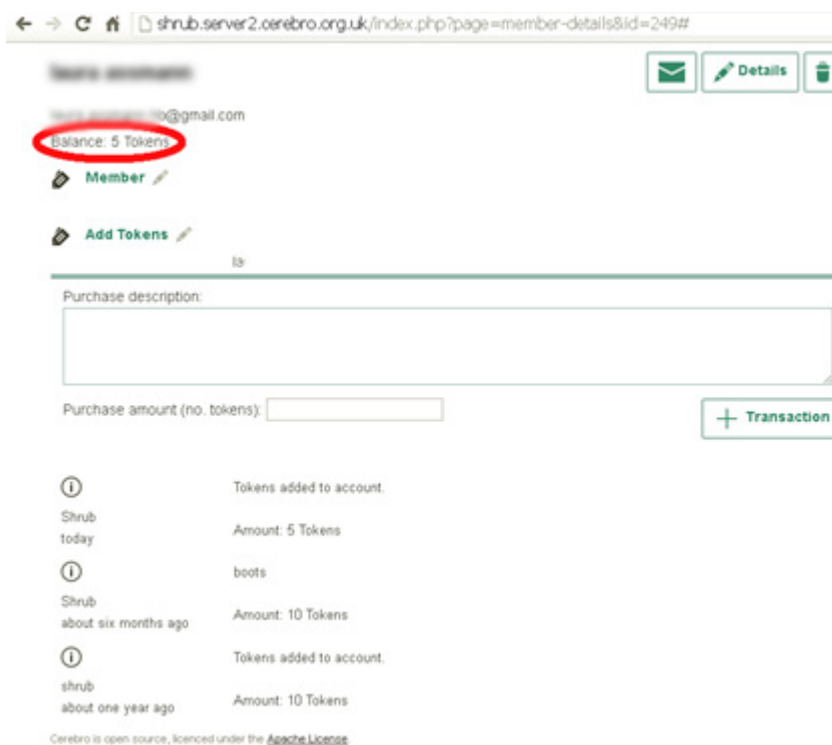


Fig 9: Screenshot of the Tokens  
Photo © Laura Assmann, Mar. 2016

are simply not used to it and it remains quite inaccessible”. In line with this, Gritzas and Kavoulakos (2015) highlight that knowledge discrepancies may lead to a loss of community feeling. This may be due to, even if not overtly expressed, perceived power relations between a knowledgeable core group and the rest of the members, despite the aforementioned democratic principles. This relates back to the former point that certain knowledge and experience is necessary to navigate within the Shrub and understand that it challenges capitalist conventions.

While we found that the Token-system is still shaped by the economic structures that it tries to deconstruct. It is an instrument that facilitates and promotes the swapping and reuse aspect of the Shrub, and thus challenges current capitalist norms and its waste production. In a broader sense they come to embody a “different kind of sociotemporality than that experienced in the world market” (Harvey 1996:237–8), thus, bridging the tension between rebelling against the system while having to survive within it. However, building on interviews and own experiences it has been shown that whilst accessible to informed members, the Shrub’s system remains somewhat inaccessible to a broader range of people due to discrepancies of knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

We have explored the ways in which the Shrub challenges capitalist conceptions of waste, materials and values, thus refocusing on the underpinnings of the Shrub. We have argued that the Shrub uses different methodologies and tools to reevaluate and redo what materials are, and how they can be circulated. These tools include, but are not limited to, the Token-system and the Shrub’s creation of a value regime which encourages people to rethink waste and materials as things. In doing so the Shrub succeeds in providing an alternative infrastructure through which things are reconceptualised, redistributed, and thus reused. While the Shrub seems to empower people, we experienced a discrepancy of knowledge between well-established members and new-comers; a knowledge that is essential to successfully navigate through the physical as much as the sociopolitical space of the Shrub. Nevertheless, we have realised that the Shrub is a ‘space of hope’ (Harvey 2000) where people can engage in an alternative place of social and economic exchanges.

At the end of our journey, and realising that our words can only reflect partial truths of the Shrub’s richness, we are still left with several questions. Does the Shrub’s virtue lie in being local, or could it find success in expansion? To what extent does the Shrub produce waste? Another aspect that would deserve further investigation is whether spaces like the Shrub actually work, in terms of potentially reaching its goal of abolishing capitalism and its wasteful procedures, or if places like the Shrub rather provides a space that can mitigate market failures, allowing people to endure within its structures, and thus even impede radical system change. Future research could also look closer at how the Shrub facilitates personal rebellion against neoliberal expansion in everyday life and how this might relate to change and the challenge of capitalism on a systemic level.

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ESSAYS

An Afternoon with the Augustine United Church

DARCY GILES



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# An Afternoon with the Augustine United Church

DARCY GILES

It was an extremely windy and rainy Thursday afternoon; a typical February day in Edinburgh. We were in the midst of storm Gertrude when my research group, consisting of Shannon, Araminta and myself, arrived at the Augustine United Church; a relatively large and tall building, situated on a busy George IV bridge. It was a relief to get inside the church where it was warm, bright and full of friendly faces. This was only the second time I had visited but I already felt vaguely familiar with my surroundings. Upon first entering the church there is a bright, unintimidating and rather generic welcome area. There are shelves with leaflets, as well as notice boards on the walls, informing visitors about upcoming events and about the church's work with various charities. The main area of the church, where services take place, is separated from the welcome area by double doors with large windows. It was through these windows that a man spotted us waiting and came to greet us. He was quite young, possibly in his late twenties, dressed in a casual outfit of a jumper and jeans. With a smile and an enthusiastic tone, heightened by his strong West Coast American accent, he introduced himself as Jason and asked us if we were there for the 'Coffee, cake and conversation' meeting. We said that we were and he led us into the main room.

I remember feeling apprehensive about entering the main room of the church, where services took place, when I first began my research, a week prior to this experience. I expected to be faced with cold stone pews and intimidatingly large stained glass windows; depicting images of Bible stories of which I had no knowledge. Given my non-religious background my preconceptions surrounding what to expect were a result of how the church is portrayed in the media; as well as limited first hand experiences of being in a church for events such as family weddings and christenings. This time, however, I approached the room with a more positive and confident attitude, knowing what to expect. I was instantly struck with the pleasant temperature of the room, drastically different to the cold outside. The warmth was coming from the heaters lining both the left and right hand side walls, which were also emitting a reddish glow giving the whole room a cosy and comfortable feel. There were many features to the room that I recognized as typical of a church, such as the large ornate cross on the far wall and organs in the left-hand corner. However, there were no pews like I had previously assumed there would be. Instead, there were rows of individual chairs, with cushioned seats and backs, like what would be found in a café or some other type of social space.

On this particular day, around half of the chairs in the church had been moved to accommodate for the tables that had been set up for the gathering. There were four tables set up towards the back of the room, near the entrance. Three of these tables were already full of people chatting. There was a pretty even mix of males and females but I still felt self-consciously out of place, as the majority of people were on the older side; made evident by the sea of white and grey hair. Everybody seemed to be settled in, with their coats, scarves and hats hung on the back of their chairs. After standing awkwardly for a few moments, we proceeded to sit at the only empty table, not yet confident enough to start mingling on our own. Jason politely asked us if we wanted something to drink and a short while later he brought back two cups of tea and a coffee to our table, along with a jug of milk, a pot of sugar and a plate of cakes.

Jason sat with us and, after he told us he was originally from California, the conversation naturally moved towards the weather. We were also joined by an older man named John, who seemed very happy and eager to see new faces at the church. As we were talking the minister of the church, Freida, noticed us and came over to welcome us. We had met her once before, but only spoke for a few minutes, so it was not surprising that she had forgotten our names. She sat down as we reintroduced ourselves and continued our chat about the weather. People continued to drink and eat whilst the exchange went on. Freida asked if anyone had seen the video of the panda playing in the snow after the East Coast blizzard, which brought on a queue of excited 'yes, it was so cute' and noises of our endearment. Our cooing was interrupted by an elderly woman who came over to speak to Freida. She was wearing her puffy winter coat and a woolly hat; a sign that she was on her way to leave. However, once a discussion was brought up about a documentary she had watched last

night she ended up staying for another half hour. Freida introduced this woman as Anne, who then told us at length about this documentary about a man called Nicholas Winton, who is known for organizing the rescue of over 600 children during the Holocaust.

This shift in topic got John pondering on his life before World War II. He told us how he remembers seeing a car for the first time, as they were not common where he lived in rural England. He also told us about how his mother used to take him shopping with her to Sainsbury's, which was extremely different all those decades ago. He explained how nothing was individually packaged as it is today; individual portions of butter were taken off a large stick of it, and biscuits were taken out of a large tin and put into a paper bag. Everything had to be weighed before you could pay, making the whole grocery shopping process take much longer than it does today. John's reminiscing also got another woman, Susan, talking about what life was like during her childhood. In her case it was in reference to this particular church we were in, which she had been attending since she was five years old, for over eighty years. She told us about how the church was originally much bigger; built for a congregation of one thousand people, whereas now it can only fit a few hundred. She also explained how there was a high pulpit up on the balcony, so that the minister could preach to the people. The church still appeared to be a huge part of Susan's life, as Freida told us that she helps make all the food for church suppers and lunches, as well as the cakes for charity stalls and for more casual social gatherings such as the one that was happening that day. I listened with interest to the various anecdotes the afternoon provided, glad that none of them seemed to center heavily on religion, which I'm sure would have left me feeling out of my depth. This lack of religious content was something which my group and I found intriguing and it lead us to focus our ethnography around how this particular church worked to make themselves relevant to people of all ages, genders and backgrounds.







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Anthropole-ogy: The (Re)Creation of Female Bodies  
Through Pole-Dancing

CLARE ANSTOCK, HAZEL GRANT & DIVA MUKHERJI



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# Anthropole-ogy: The (Re)Creation of Female Bodies Through Pole-Dancing

CLARE ANSTOCK, HAZEL GRANT & DIVA MUKHERJI

## Introduction and Methodology

Our research began at Madame Peaches: we signed up for a six week long beginners pole dancing class that took place in a rented studio in St Margarets House, Meadowbank, Edinburgh. Our presence and participation in the class helped us gain a better understanding of our own bodies, and the way pole dancing can influence understandings of one's body, which became the basis of our research. We studied how the class provided a space where women could use and create their bodies in new ways free from outside judgement and alongside other women. However, we also found that patriarchal power structures - even though it was an all-female class - retained its presence and effect on female body image. While it may seem like we were reclaiming our bodies, we largely still adhered to patriarchal ideals of the female body, which created a sense of pseudo-liberation. Our study discusses the tension between these contradictory concepts, introduces the inclusion of female autonomy within this discussion, and considers how individual choice allows women to reclaim their bodies from this phallogocentric "ideal" and gain sexual independence from the male gaze.

## Liberation of the Pole Dancing Body

Since beginning our fieldwork, we have encountered some general assumptions from friends and colleagues that all female pole dancers are "sluts", "strippers" and "whores". However, when talking with other pole dancers, whether in or out of pole dancing classes, the conversations expressed a sense of liberation, newfound self-confidence, a space for women to exercise, and a distinct separation from the 'ground level reality' that pole dancing is taboo for women and exists for the pleasure of straight male viewers. Sam, one of our informants, told us that she attends pole dancing classes for the fun of it, for fitness and strength, mostly to hang out and exercise with friends. As Das (2013) suggests, analysing the many ways in which pole dancing is understood can provide a greater understanding of the implications and assumptions surrounding pole dancing: who does pole dancing, the reasons why they enjoy it, and support the notion that pole dancing can be understood in a multitude of ways.

Despite previous assumptions and associations regarding pole dancing simultaneously stemming from and reinforcing exploitative ideals of the female body and sexuality, our experience was not contradicted by current feminist thought, which has "always been forthcoming and encouraging of women to develop more meaningful relationships with their own bodies" (Das 2013: 696). We found that over the course of the pole classes, our perception of our own bodies changed, which granted us bodily autonomy and provided a greater understanding of how to utilise one's body in new ways which, in turn, created a stronger sense of self. This bodily autonomy is, according to Sartre, a fundamental source of identity: the "body is what I immediately am" (cited by Synnott 1993: 32). Throughout pole dancing classes, participants were interacting with the pole and their bodies in a way which granted them greater confidence and a more meaningful understanding of their own body and identity.

We found that these pole dancing classes offered individuals the space to recreate their body through conscious acts of controlled movement. Thus, where there are changes to the body there are changes to the self; through our own experience of pole dancing, we found that in physically re-creating our bodies, we altered our personality. However, this transformation is not always immediate; we noticed that progress in one's ability to pole dance did not fully correspond in time with one's own confidence: Jess, our instructor, explained that, often, individuals required visual affirmation of their pole dancing techniques to produce confidence: "[Amanda] can't see herself, she can't see what I see or what everyone else sees...it was great!" To provide an outward perspective to students, Jess frequently took photos of the class to later upload to the

class's social media page, which could then be viewed and praised by classmates. In fact, what we saw was that one's confidence came from the visual affirmation of their progression combined with positive comments from classmates and the instructor, more so than successfully completing a difficult technique. It was not until after Amanda saw pictures of herself and her classmates' comments that she realised the progression she had made.

Rather than pole dancing requiring a certain body type, our informants told us that it offered a space for people with any kind of body to build confidence, strength, flexibility and friendships. The space was explicitly made private by locked doors and curtained windows, and also through the use of an invite-only social media page. Both these physical and virtual boundaries which surrounded the pole dancing group created an environment which excluded 'the male gaze' and patriarchal assumptions of the body; rather, all participants, regardless of ability or progression, were free to use their body in any manner, that was appropriate in the class, in order to express their thoughts, feelings, femininity and sexuality.

### **The Male Gaze and Commodity Feminism**

Despite our experience of pole dancing occurring in a closed off, bounded space with other women, we were still aware of the patriarchal systems at work in the UK and beyond, under which we have lived our lives thus far. Mahmood (2012: 157) points out that the male gaze is constantly creating and influencing women's desires: women's desires are fundamentally influenced by how patriarchal systems constructed idealised femininity. The general ideal is two-dimensional, yet unattainable. The paradox involves women being innocent, yet seductive; dependent, yet not overly attached. Established patriarchal systems work to pervert women's conceptions of their bodies, which in turn influences their desires:

Patriarchal ideologies work by objectifying women's bodies and subjecting them to masculinist systems of representation, thereby negating and distorting women's own experience of their corporeality and subjectivity. (Mahmood 2012: 158)

Mahmood goes on to suggest that women internalise patriarchal ideologies, and consequentially experience daily life from a heterosexual male perspective. We noticed this in pole dancing classes even when there was an absence of men. When we mess up a move and Jess tells us to "throw in a hair flip to cover it up", it isn't to increase the technical finesse of our routine. Instead, such a technique's goal is to continue to construct ourselves in alignment with feminine ideals in a way that would be pleasing to the male gaze. As well as witnessing pole dancing as a form of exercise and self improvement, it was continually influenced by established patriarchal systems. A common theme and source of motivation in our classes was Hollywood actor Tom Hardy. During one session, when I could not get the hang of a particularly difficult move, Jess told me to "pretend that Tom Hardy was watching!" While there was no denying Tom Hardy's appeal to our classmates, the internalised male gaze was evident in that Tom Hardy was presented as a motivational factor; we were motivated to perfect the move for a man. Though we joined pole dancing with the understanding that it was taught primarily for fitness, the sense of *wanting* to express ourselves more sexually for the approval of a patriarchal society. We learned and perfected the routines for ourselves, but there was an implicit and sometimes explicit sense of perfecting the routines for the pleasure of men, being motivated from classmates by expressions such as: "act like you're doing it for the hot guy in the club!"

Sexuality is socially constructed, and the phallogentrism of the social world configures female sexuality in order to appeal to the heterosexual male. Similar to Amy-Chinn's research regarding the lingerie advertising industry, which found that the advertising of women's underwear "restricts and undermines, rather than encourages, attempts to renegotiate the discourse that surrounds the representation of women" (2006: 155), we found that while the male may not be present, the situation is underpinned by a heteronormative narrative which involves the female behaving in a way which is sexually pleasing for the male. Even though the pole dancing studio is a space where women can express themselves and be freely sexual, there was an implicit sense that we were performing for an imaginary male audience. The lasting effect of the male gaze continues to linger largely because the feminine ideal has been commercialised and fetishised to the point where women are convinced that they can buy into being 'the perfect woman'. Goldman's proposition of commodity feminism (1992) enlists an understanding that women will willingly build themselves, and their



subsequent value, on a set of prescribed female ideals and images. However, progressions in feminism have allowed women to claim autonomous control over their bodies. Nonetheless, that control is used to manipulate their image in a way which fits into the prescribed construct; a construct which is created by the male gaze, and will perpetuate female objectification. Nonetheless, it is under the pretence that women still hold the power to create their own bodies. Within these conditions, the act of reclaiming sexuality as a female constitutes pseudo-liberation.

### **Female Autonomy and Reclaiming the Female Body**

The inclusion of commodity feminism indeed makes the liberation we found in the pole dancing community appear to be a hoax; just another method of coercion and oppression by patriarchal gender standards. However, we have found a missing factor in Goldman's (1992) proposition which is critical in the discussion of whether pole dancing is liberating or oppressing: namely, the agency of women. Women are no longer believed to be "the most inferior forms of human evolution... closer to children and savages than an adult, civilised man" (Gould 1981, cited in Synnott 1993: 52). Goldman's argument lacks the inclusion of free female thought and awareness of the ideals they are being fed by patriarchal views on the female body and the ability to freely respond.

As discussed in the previous sections, the reasons for signing up to pole dancing classes varied just as widely as the types of bodies which participated. Not everyone was chasing the "ideal" female body or form, rather they were using the pole in different ways to create different bodies. This is achievable, as the pole itself does not create women in only one form. Rather, we found that a combination of self-motivation, the pole, the teachers and fellow students constructed bodies. In the class we participated in, attendees used the pole to make their bodies fitter, stronger, and to reclaim the body for their own pleasure.

This is not to say that commodity feminism "ideals" did not exist in the class; as previously discussed, this "ideal" was accepted in the class, directing the class towards making our appearance pleasing to an outward audience. However, the acceptance of the ideal female body came with the inclusion of scrutiny of the image and the countering of it with humour and showing the reality of pole dancing. When learning certain moves, Jess told us to "make eye contact with a person, make it really awkward" whilst performing them. We were also provided with entertaining ways to remember steps, such as the move that required us to tuck our head down to begin a twist: we were told remember to "sniff your [arm]pits" The class was encouraged to see certain techniques in amusing ways and to laugh at what we were doing. We were also provided with honest and uncensored presentations of the body and of pole dancing. Upon arriving at class, Jess was quick to make the realities of pole dancing clear and how they worked against phallogentric "ideals" of female bodies. Jess declared there was "no shame" within pole dancing; girls got stuck on poles due to muscle cramps, others had exposed themselves in class and Jess told us that she "was spotting [helping] a girl last night and she farted in my face." She found humour in all of these incidents, and made sure everyone in the class accepted such occurrences as just normal bodily processes. Reclaiming of the body is a key feature in gaining identity and autonomy from established patriarchal systems. In social movements such as SlutWalks – which is a widespread campaign addressing victim blaming culture surrounding sexual assault – women are countering social constructions of the female body whilst presenting the reality of female bodies in these marches (Ringrose and Renold 2012). Women can be seen to do the same within pole dancing, critiquing the very image they are said to be creating, exposing the realities of female bodies, and manipulating their bodies to make them their own.

### **Conclusion**

Pole dancing class provided women with the space and method to recreate their body. It allowed the students to reconstruct their bodies and identities in a way which would nonetheless still be appreciated by the male viewer. Some feminist views frame this process as tricking women into conforming to phallogentric ideals of the female body and the commoditisation of femininity, which could be bought by pole dancing. However, such arguments do not take into account female agency and ability in these activities, to acknowledge patriarchal pressures and work against them to take back female bodies for themselves. As we were spinning

around the pole, being called strippers by our friends, aware that we were adhering to heteronormative ideas of sexuality; we were nonetheless claiming our bodies as our own and felt empowered by our pole dancing experience.

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ESSAYS

An Interview with David Roy:  
The Edinburgh Ceilidh Consultant

KIRBY FULLERTON



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## An Interview with David Roy: The Edinburgh Ceilidh Consultant

KIRBY FULLERTON

When I messaged David to arrange a time for our interview he replied: “Well why don’t we kill two birds with one stone, and you can come round for lunch!” I was very pleased, feeling that my first attempt at interviewing was well on its way to being a success. That being said, David deserves most of the credit for our budding friendship, as he greeted me warmly upon my first visit to the Edinburgh Ceilidh Club and eagerly invited me to the pub to join him and the other kilt-clad regulars afterwards. I was kindly permitted to record our lively lunch, and I have reproduced some of the dialogue here, combining it with notes and final observations collected as part of a larger study on gender and the performance of tradition at the Edinburgh Ceilidh Club.

As I arrived, he yelled from the kitchen for me to let myself in the front door. After entering his third floor flat, I was greeted, as I am every Tuesday night at the Ceilidh Club- with a warm hug, a kiss on both cheeks and a pat on the back. He took my coat and we sat down on barstools framing the small table in his cozy, yet comfortable kitchen. Jolly and at ease he joked and laughed as he talked about his experiences in the Ceilidh and Scottish dance world with the confidence of a self-proclaimed “Edinburgh Ceilidh dance expert”. Our interview ended up being more of a conversation that I prompted and ‘drove’ in different directions, focusing on my interest in the performance of gender in the tradition of Ceilidh dance.

Kirby: “It’s nice that people seem to change partners though, and ask different people to dance.”

David: “Yes, that’s significant. The nature of Ceilidh dancing is that it is a chance to socialize, a social occasion. A chance to meet up with so many other people. Some of the dances force you to, because you swap partners around the line. You get no choice.”

Kirby: “There does, however, always seem to be a few less boys than girls there...”

David: Well, yes, generally speaking, it’s only a few less boys than girls, which, compared to most dance scenes, is...”

Kirby: “Impressive?”

David: “Yes, very impressive.”

Kirby: “It seems that the girl can play the role of the boy in most dances, that’s the impression I’ve gotten.”

David: “Well, yes, if you’ve run out of boys. I do think, though, as society has gotten more and more accepting towards, ummmm, same gender relationships, it’s getting more acceptable for two guys to dance together...Which, for the heterosexual one...makes it, hmmm, interesting, when you get passed a dance partner down...”

Kirby: “Right. I guess as a girl I’m much more used to dancing with girls.”

David: “Guys, heterosexual guys, are definitely not used to dancing with guys.”

This conversation proved very fruitful for my later research on the performance of gender in Ceilidh dance. The simultaneous existence of a certain gender fluidity together with restrictive traditional ideals made for a very interesting point of inquiry in later interviews and conversations.

Kirby: “I know this is a broad question, so take it any direction you wish, but could you describe your ideal Ceilidh? What is characteristic of some of the best Ceilidhs you’ve been to?”

David: (*David pauses, contemplating the question seriously*)... “I think it is very important to have a good, bouncy wooden floor.”

Kirby: “Okay! I didn’t expect you to say that!”

David: "It just makes it softer to dance on if you've got what's called a 'suspended floor'. So, if you've got a concrete floor, that's very hard work. Ummm...and I certainly notice that because I've got osteoporosis in the knees, I can do about two hours dancing, then I begin to feel the strain in my knees. I can last longer if I'm on a suspended floor. Any dancer would say that."

Kirby: "So, a good floor. What else?"

David: "A band that can play at a steady speed. A band that can read its audience."

Kirby: "Okay, so is that in the calling of the dances?"

David: "Yes, but [a band that] can play at a speed that the audience can cope with. Sometimes, you get to the point where the band isn't playing the band, it's playing the audience. So they're really watching the dancers. It might be an age thing, a generation thing, if they [the band] can see that the dancers are up for something faster, a faster dance, then they'll play more dances up to speed, rather than, say, a waltz. You'll often find that at a Ceilidh with the older generation, they play a lot more waltzes."

Kirby: "What about Scottish identity and Ceilidh dancing, especially the way it seems to be interpreted by tourists as a cultural event, as opposed to another type of social event?"

David: "Well, I think there are two aspects to that. Yes, it is a traditional thing, and if you go to a Scottish wedding, well, it just isn't a Scottish wedding unless it's got a Ceilidh. If they only have a disco...it's not a Scottish wedding (*laughs*)."

Kirby: "Did you have one at your wedding?"

David: "We didn't have a Ceilidh, we had a live jazz band I think... I got married in Kent, you see. I hadn't found Ceilidh at that time, you see, or else we would have, no question."

I later discovered, after a bit of prodding, that David, although Scottish, was raised in England. After marrying his wife, they both moved to Edinburgh to start a family. Although David readily admits that his premier interest in dance was for exercise, his love of country is apparent in his passion for Ceilidh dance, something I suspect he already had prior to his move from Edinburgh, but found the perfect vehicle for in Ceilidh dance. After retiring, and what I have inferred to be the death of his wife, his Ceilidh dance schedule seems to have taken a dramatic increase, as he goes to as many as four Ceilidhs a week, traveling extensively to events and festivals.

David: "My son got married last year, and he did have a Ceilidh. He's Scots, born and bred in Edinburgh. He got married to a girl from Liverpool, and she had done the odd little Ceilidh. They're both doctors. Let me just check this..."

The oven buzzer goes off loudly, and he gets up to take an apple strudel out of the oven. The small kitchen is filled with an aroma of warm pie as plates clatter. He continues the story as he serves me a heaping portion of pie:

David: "The Ceilidh, that was fun. It was in middle England, you see, so the Scots half of the family, we get in full winter day dress, so tweed jackets, tweed waistcoats, kilts, all matching kilts, in my, in our, other family tartan, so that worked well. They had booked a Ceilidh band in Liverpool. The Ceilidh band had come from the south coast somewhere. I don't know why they chose a Ceilidh from the south coast.... but it was fine. The night before the wedding, they were discussing what to do as bride and groom, so I taught them the Rosa waltz. I don't know if you know it."

Kirby: "Hmm, can you talk me through how it goes again?"

David scoots off his stool, comes over to me, and we stand up, palms together. He takes me through the dance, holding my hands as we rock from side to side, then ushering me under his arm for an admittedly less than graceful twirl. I am very aware of the space in the small kitchen, and try to avoid knocking over the framed picture of what looks like his son's wedding. He does not seem to be concerned. Rock, rock, twirl. Rock, rock, twirl. I suddenly remember and exclaim, "Oh yes! I believe we danced this one a few weeks ago!"

David: "I would have probably forced it upon you! So the bride was very concerned that the band wouldn't be able to play the appropriate music, so I said "Don't worry, it's a waltz. The band will have waltzes coming out their ears", but to calm her nerves, I went up to the band, to the caller, and the first thing he said, bear in mind he's from the south coast, "I know you!""

Kirby: "So you knew him?"

David: "No, no, but he knew me. So we went round, and found that the common factor was that we had both been, for a couple of years, to the Whitby Folk and Dance Festival that happens every year!"

Kirby: "It's such a small world!"

David: "Yes, the Ceilidh world, to some extent, and the Scottish country-dance world...well, that's very small. He had recognized me. I'm recognizable, for looking like Santa Claus, and a red kilt that sticks out."

After hearing this, I couldn't help but laugh and confess that at my first Ceilidh, my friends and I had referred to him as 'Father Christmas', and it had stuck as far as him being called 'FC' in our fieldnotes.

An enquiry into the most recent Ceilidh he attended led to a half hour animated rant about the virtues of scouting, as David is an avid scout leader, and had recently attended a Sea Scouts event in Poland where he organized a Ceilidh for the troops. I eventually manage to veer him back to my neatly typed and printed questions, of which I had asked almost none...

Kirby: "Before I have to run, is there anything I didn't ask, that you think I should have asked?"

David: "Why do I go? My reason for dancing started off as fitness, and then became social. And I particularly enjoy taking up novices onto the dance floor, having a good time, because then they'll come back to Scotland, if they're on holiday, or whatever.

Kirby: "So you're kind of like a Scottish ambassador?"

David: "It seems so! A number of times, it seems, in the last year, a girl came up to me and said "Hey Dave, can I have this dance?" and turns out she was my dance partner five years earlier, when she was fresh to Edinburgh... Probably every couple of weeks, I get a message saying "Dave! I've got so-and-so coming over, and I can't find a Ceilidh!" So I've become a kind of Ceilidh consultant."

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ESSAYS

“Death” at the Grassmarket

JENNY BROWNLIE



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# “Death” at the Grassmarket

JENNY BROWNLIE

Taking a free walking tour within the old town of Edinburgh will, no matter how many times you visit, give you a new impression of the old city. As a Scottish student living in Edinburgh, I did not realise how much I did not know about the lives gone by in this city. Throughout several of these tours, where we were introduced to historical persons and places, with their own stories, I found that it was the characters and personas of the tour guides that interested me the most.

Visible from her blue ensemble, it became apparent that being on a tour with Jen, our guide, could be an experience. The matching blue jacket and hat seemed reasonable enough, but it was the bright blue hair peeking out of the hat that hinted towards the eccentric persona that was slowly revealed.

By this particular tour I had completed half of the eight tours with different guides. Out of all the guides, Jen was the most intriguing due to her particular style. She was the biggest actress using characters throughout to help bring the stories of the past to life. Within a large open space, which may daunt many performers, Jen would encompass it all; occasionally attracting the attention of tourists that were not part of our tour group.

Jen eagerly walked down Victoria Street and into the square of the Grassmarket with the tourists trailing slowly behind. From the keen enthusiasm displayed by the group at the beginning, the tour had now become rather more subdued as we neared the middle coffee break. It was a February morning, and although the skies may have been clear it was cold! However, as was noted by both Jen and some members of the group, at least it was not raining. Even with the cold people always perked up as we reached one of the walk's designated destinations.

Stopping just beside a large stone, at the east end of Grassmarket, Jen waits for everyone to gather round before she begins the next tale. From past experience I knew which story was going to be shared but somehow still found myself waiting in anticipation. As the group forms a semi-circle around Jen and the stone, she steps up and stands upon it; creating her stage. Addressing the group, she begins the story of Maggie Dickson's execution from the early Eighteenth century. Similar to other stories, Jen acts it out dramatically. From the outset she changes the pitch of her voice depending on which particular character she embodies and uses wild arm motions to keep the group's attention. The visual aid she uses here is Maggie Dickson's pub. When asked, a tourist suggested it might be named such because her husband or family had owned it at some point. However she did not have any connection to the pub, apart from being hung from the gallows outside. Being with Jen you were drawn back to the day of the execution. Her details were so vivid and life-like that you were able to imagine the excitement of the roaring crowds; little children annoying adults and pushing their way through to see; multiple classes all mixing with each other just to watch the murder of a young woman.

Maggie Dickson, we learn, was to be executed for concealing her pregnancy. After her husband ran away she moved to the Scottish borders and begun an affair with a local innkeeper's son. It was with this man that she became pregnant but, due to its nature, she had to hide it. Her crime was only discovered once she abandoned the baby following a failed attempt to kill it. Yet after her hanging, on the way to the graveyard, the funeral director was startled by a knocking coming from within her coffin. Upon opening it, Maggie Dickson was very much alive albeit complaining of a sore throat. He returned her to the gallows where chaos ensued, the crowds now believed they were going to see their second execution of the day. An exceedingly rare event! But one young lawyer spoke up for Maggie Dickson. As she had already been declared dead, in the eyes of the law her punishment had been fulfilled. She was thus allowed to walk free. By surviving her hanging she also escaped from her failed loveless marriage; at a time where divorce was not an option. Mag-

gie then lived out the rest of her life with her new husband in a flat close to the pub. When someone else was carried to the gallows she was known to lean out of the window and shout, “Don’t worry, it happened to me and I’m alright now!”, pointing to the scar around her neck.

The tale of Maggie Dickson is, in a sense, completely unbelievable. Yet, through the way that Jen told it, it made complete sense. Like an actress, Jen adopted the character of Maggie Dickson. Throughout the tale, the emotions and behaviour of Jen changed as Maggie got closer to what was expected to be her death. In the minutes leading up to her execution, Jen emphasised how quiet Maggie became by lowering her voice; later she moved towards the front of the stone, flaunting the fact that she had ‘survived.’

Although she took on the role of Maggie Dickson, Jen did not ignore the other people in the story. With the most extreme accuracy, Jen emphasised the shock and fear of the undertaker as he found a live body in one of his coffins. The most impressive part of her performance was the way that each of her multiple roles received the same pizzazz. Maggie Dickson may have been the focus of the story but Jen could have easily twisted the perspective of the tale and it would still have been believable. Having someone like Jen narrate your death nearly 300 years later coming back from the dead sounds entirely plausible, especially in the era of Maggie Dickson.



## The Irish Bar: An Identity Familiar to All

CLARRIE BAKER



Photo: Typical bar interior - aged wood and deep green interior displayed in Malones Irish Bar. Prominent Irish brand 'Guinness' is regularly featured in the bar's décor. © Clarrie Baker



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# The Irish Bar: An Identity Familiar to All

CLARRIE BAKER

Malones Irish Bar is a popular tavern nestled in the heart of Edinburgh. With a wide clientele, ranging from students to solitary patrons and a solid branding of being an 'Irish Bar', Malones has a faithful following. During my ethnographic research it became clear that it was Malones solid branding and identity as an 'Irish Bar' that stood out as one of the most important reasons for customers to visit the bar.

So why do Malones customers frequent the bar so regularly? For many it was simply the warm and welcoming familiarity of the dark wood interior, the deep green décor and the friendliness of the staff. A student informed me that when they visited bars on George Street in their first year at university they felt as if they "somehow shouldn't be there" in a way that they have never questioned their presence at Malones. In fact, the feeling that they could unapologetically be themselves without any judgement was a common response from patrons, something that seemed to reassure their sense of personal identity – making Malones feel like a safe space. Students reported not feeling like a secondary customer or stereotyped in the way they feel they are in other bars. Solitary individuals who came to watch sport said they enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere and the feeling that they could come alone without it seeming unusual. Sports such as rugby and football are regularly televised, incorporating supporters of both of Irish and non-Irish teams into the bar's identity through the unity of sport and promotes the Irish brand through this shared team spirit. This leads me onto the second component of how I determined identity to be the most prominent theme at Malones.

What is it about Malones that evokes this sense of security amongst clientele? Undeniably there is no 'us and them' mentality like a stranger entering a village pub; perhaps this is something that doesn't occur in a city? Through my observations and discussions with participants I established that the branding of an Irish bar is one of its selling points. Everyone I spoke to, regardless of their nationality has Irish bars in their country of origin. I even found myself in an Irish bar in Turkey last summer. It therefore appears that the Irish bar has gradually evolved into a brand that appeals to all as a symbol of familiarity with the recognisable wood and deep green interior, adorned with shamrocks and Irish flags. Thus, Malones has become familiar in Edinburgh because everyone can identify with it and relate it to the naturalness of home, and this is how the bar has established its persona. By playing on the idea of 'home' and comfort the bar attracts a broad clientele, which shows that the Irish bar brand is a successful one. Whether this feeling of comfort derives from the 'Irish' aspect of the bar or the familiarity of the brand of Irish bar is not something that can be answered from my research in one bar.

Ultimately, it looks like the identity and brand of the 'Irish bar' is widespread and that it promotes the feeling of comfort and familiarity experienced by its patrons. It is this brand and identity that is part in characterising Malones as a friendly place to spend one's free time. The 'Irish Bar' is not a place of 'self-discovery' but somewhere that patrons can go with confidence in their identity, without worrying about false pretences or how they feel they should be acting. The theme of identity therefore manifests itself in the idea that neither the bar nor its clients need to change in order to fit in.

‘Iamb A Poet’: An Anthropological Study Of  
The Art Of Spoken Word

HÖRN ARNARSDÓTTIR,  
NICOLE ANDERSON & PERRY NIMTRAKUL



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# ‘Iamb A Poet’: An Anthropological Study Of The Art Of Spoken Word

HÖRN ARNARSDÓTTIR, NICOLE ANDERSON  
& PERRY NIMTRAKUL

## Introduction

The lights start to dim. The hum of chatter quietens. All eyes rest upon the stage. The time has come for another monthly poetry slam:

“You’ve put a divider to separate the clean dishes and the dirty ones  
Oh, just kidding [Wagging her finger at the audience]  
That’s the white china and *everything else* [Shouts and cries of agreement]  
You know what would be more effective is if you built a *giant* wall [laughter]  
But I guess prejudices have worked pretty well this far.” (Jess Smith)

Jess Smith, a twenty-something female, organiser of Soapbox and prolific poet, is performing her piece on American politics. The audience is riled. There are shouts, laughter, and murmurs of agreement at each affront. The words are spat with venom, yet ridiculed with a smirk. It is the second round and five poets are battling to enter the final.

From January to March, we conducted fieldwork at ‘open mic’ spoken word and poetry slam events in Edinburgh. Our ethnography was based on investigating the function of spoken word and slam poetry as an art form, focussing on Soapbox – the open mic nights in the Pleasance Cabaret bar. We examined the atmosphere, the art of performance, and how the political is both created through the act of performing as well as inscribed in the space. As the poems are intended for an audience, they have become a platform to express identities and political nuances. Furthermore, the attributes of the performance facilitate the communication of political identities, views, and expressions.

During our fieldwork, we encountered colourful people, emotional stories, passionate performances, and enormous talent. Through interviews, weeks of ‘audience-dwelling’, and even performing on stage, we developed a sentimental attachment to the craft of spoken word poetry and the community that surrounds it. This article reflects on our emotional reactions and experiences, especially in relation to specific monographs and moments.

## Interviewing (and Response)

Interviewing in general was something quite unfamiliar to all of us. However, it seemed intrusive and almost rude to pry too much into some aspects of the performers’ poetry – for example, issues such as mental health or the emotional expression involved in writing and performing poetry. We found this to be the case with performances too – introspective pieces in particular – which felt too personal [profound?] to be recorded in scribbles mid-performance. However, these performances *were* being put into the public sphere, available for anyone to consume, and this publicity is often what makes the performance so powerful and therapeutic for the performer and audience alike.

Interviews proved to be very insightful in our fieldwork as they uncovered aspects of performing and writing that we had not considered before, changing the way we viewed the performances later in our research. For example, Jess Smith discussed the way in which audience reaction can change the meaning and therefore the performance of a poem. She shared the example of her own poem which she intended to be frightening, but while performing it, realised that it was funny at its core, drastically changing how she subsequently performed and understood it as the reactions changed.



FIG 1: Jess Smith performing her piece on American politics on stage. © Hörn Arnarsdóttir, Nicole Anderson & Perry Nimtrakul



We found that our interviewees were more than happy to discuss their poetry, and difficult topics were often easily brought up by our interviewees themselves. A particular moment that struck us was during an interview with one of the hosts, Chloe<sup>1</sup>. Despite it being one of our first encounters, she was incredibly open in her responses, especially when she spoke about her experience of spoken word and mental health. She revealed how, despite her struggles, being involved in such a close-knit, warm community helped her through her illness.

This was particularly interesting because it illustrated that behind the lights, stage, and performance is a network of people who work to support each other. Looking back, it became very clear that there were many regular poets who joked with each other and complimented each other's work. As the host, Chloe was particularly well-connected, introducing the acts with personal anecdotes and stories of the more well-known performers. The worth of the poetry extends far beyond the performance, having the capacity to empower, strengthen, and bring value to the individuals involved.

This community supports each other not only through their presence at events such as Soapbox, but also through their responses – whoops and shouts of encouragement during the anger-fuelled, politically inclined preaches; clicks of agreement during compelling and relatable ballads of difficult times; hoots of laughter and mocking heckles during pun-filled comedy pieces. Even during poetry slams where the performers were competing with each other, we never witnessed anything but mutual respect and encouragement from the competitors.

In a space where personal and taboo topics become public, it seems unthinkable to respond with anything but respect and encouragement, and we were pleasantly surprised by the level of support. Of course there were times when some responses were inappropriate, but this seemed to be intuitional [intuitive? unintentional?]. During quiet, introspective pieces, it would be rude to interrupt with a loud cheer, and applause and cheers were generally kept for the end, or at appropriate times during a particularly inspiring piece, much like one would display appreciation at a classical music concert or at a comedy show. One response in particular which caught our interest was the clicking of fingers during performances. Initially, it seemed odd, but soon we were clicking our fingers too, displaying our agreement without disrupting the performer and the poem with a cheer or clap.

## **Performing**

We soon realised that in order to be completely immersed in the spoken word scene, we must experience performing too. The stage in itself seemed terrifying. Raised above, basking in a white glare, it physically and metaphorically separates the performers from the audience. The superiority of the performer and their message is inscribed in the separation of the audience from the performer — in the blanket of darkness over the audience in contrast with the illuminated performer.

However, from the performer's perspective, the scene looks very different. You cannot see anything. The audience is invisible, made undetectable by the white glare and the heat of the stage lights. Strangely, it made us feel less exposed, anonymous even. The rush of applause that followed our performances felt warmer than the lights.

Rewarded for our courage with applause, we realised how performers become so passionate. Performing our pieces filled us with adrenalin and the audience reaction made us feel valued, leaving us with a sense of satisfaction that made us all want to perform again. Perhaps it was the initial fear that sparked that relief, but there is definitely something gratifying about being listened to. It felt as if, at that moment, no matter what you said, or how you said it, you would be given attention and intent.

The importance of this positive atmosphere was obvious to us when we considered the creation of a

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1. Some names have been changed for discretion. However, Jess Smith asked to be named in our final work.

‘safe space’ and a supportive network. However, its importance in performance only really struck us when we interviewed poet Jess Smith, and when we performed ourselves. The aim of the poet is, essentially, to change the mood in order to create a response. Between our three performances, we aimed to do just that, but with three vastly different performances. Varying from rude comedy and puns to deeply personal and emotional responses, each of our poems were of very different styles, reflecting the image we were comfortable depicting and responses we were comfortable receiving from the audience.

We noticed immediately that there seemed to be a ‘conventional’ style or rhythm to the poems — at least to the more politically charged poems. Through our interviews and observations, we gleaned the interest of many of the performers in North American ‘Button Poetry’ videos, who adopted the styles and rhythms from these videos to create their own poems. We decided to look further into these videos<sup>2</sup> since they influenced our informants so heavily. Soon enough, our own poetry emerged like a butterfly from a cocoon, transformed by the influence of these fast-paced, rhythmic, politically charged and hard-hitting poems.

## Political Expression

Heavily reliant on presentation, spoken word is different from written poetry. Its worth, purpose and life is created on stage. Somers-Willet (2005:52) emphasises this, stating that slam poetry “is written with the audience in mind”. This became clear to us when we spoke to Jess and while writing our own poems. We found this particularly important on a personal level in making sense of raw emotions in order to perform them for an audience.

The act of introspection involved in spoken word by a subjugated individual becomes an active form of resistance, and a performance of rejection in which they refuse to continue to be a subject of oppressive structures of power. Subjectivity is an innate and imposed performance by the subject in everyday life, done infinitely and repeatedly in a production that carries through generations (Butler, 1993: 95). The political was often discussed in poems at Soapbox, from direct challenges of American politics to personal accounts of sexism and racism. By dredging up these innate performances, and becoming conscious of subjectivity through reflexivity, the poet may be able to counteract this feeling of oppression, however briefly.

This is seen in the use of spoken word by American black inner city youth to create alternative teachings which dispute the negative stereotypes imposed on them by racist institutions (Biggs-El, 2012: 163-164). Furthermore, it can be seen in mainstream spoken word videos, such as those mentioned by our interviewees, where poets often focus on racism and sexism — such as police brutality cases in the US, and university campus rape culture. This creates moments of consciousness that allow the critique and deconstruction of structures of subjugation, by subverting normative representations that are part of oppressive structures of power (Butler, 1993: 3).

We also found that introspection was important in performances at Soapbox. One such performer is Laurence, winner of the March Poetry Slam and an experienced, striking spoken word artist. His final poem at the March Poetry Slam tackled the issue of male suicide, highlighting the underlying shame that contributes to the problem due to the stereotypical image of masculinity. This performance, we found, was the pinnacle of the techniques of tone, voice, and intonation, his words swelling and rising with his anger. Hard-hitting and frightening, the volume carried out the strength of his feelings. Some lines were quick, almost like rap, expressing his frustration towards the stigma of male experiences of mental health. The exertion brought out beads of sweat on his forehead.

The audience clapped as the poem peaked — an unusual practice in spoken word, as discussed

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2. “Dear Straight People” - Denice Frohman, Women of the World Poetry Slam 2013

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5fm8TAlew0>

“Black Girl Magic” - Shasparay Lightear, Woman of the World Poetry Slam 2016

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-XwhVnBoSVE>

“Somewhere in America” - Belissa Escobedo, Rhiannon McGavin, and Zariya Allen, members of the Get Lit organization <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OadZpUJv8Eg>

above, where clicking the fingers is used to quietly signify agreement. The style and performance created fear at the intensity of his words and the sheer force of his resentment. This performance, even now, resonates in our minds; Laurence's fists pummelling the air, the jump of his feet as the poem swells, his screams into the microphone. It exemplified, we felt, the true influence of spoken word poetry. Not only does it convey a message and a story, but it allows the listener to relive it and feel it along with the performer.

The realising of experience and ideas into a corporeal form is the transformative power of this art form. It empowers those who are constantly marginalised in everyday life, serving as a medium for them to challenge stigma and taboos through an introspective exploration of their lived experiences. Consequently, spoken word poetry prompts the listeners to do the same. Its emotional aspect is one of the reasons for its effectiveness in political resistance.

## Conclusion

At the end of each performance, as the buzz of chatter builds and the audience begins to leave, we are left, as always, feeling entertained, content, and renewed. After the last poetry slam in particular, we left in awe. This experience has not only made us realise the importance of spoken word and the power of performance poetry, but also how each poem is a work of art that has the ability to transform both its performers and audiences.

The very fact that the poets attribute their work with meaning (whether it is from their personal experiences or not), literary and poetic techniques, and the display of their poetry in this specific space proves that it is intended for artistic consumption. Slam poetry can be seen as an art form entered into a mutual exchange with its space of personal meaning, performative techniques and atmosphere. Each component creates and recreates each other.

A space and a community in which the performers are able to express their opinions, their experiences and themselves is created. This is a space where the political becomes art and where the subjugated can refute the roles created for them by society. This is a space where taboos become not only acceptable, but are even encouraged.

This fieldwork was not only valuable from an academic perspective but also personally to all of us. We have each discovered a new interest in spoken word and Edinburgh's spoken word community. In performing, we have all experienced writing and performing for an audience. In attending the poetry nights, we have seen through the performers' eyes, and glimpsed their plights and emotions through their poetry.

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## Letting the Rhythm Move You

ADEOLA ERIBAKE



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## Letting the Rhythm Move You

ADEOLA ERIBAKE

Stomp. Stomp. Stomp. Someone was having a ‘turn’. I turned slightly to my right and saw Karolina. She was stomping and grunting. Stomping and grunting. Her legs wide, knees bent, head engaged in a slow repetitive bang. This did not feel strange. I could feel the imaginary protective circle around her. I felt I understood what she was going through and it seemed everyone else could too. No one was looking askance. This is what chaos is for. Chaos is the middle of the five rhythms that we dance through – the most energetic one. The music urges your feet off the ground. A hard bop is usually the most natural way to move during chaos. I like to shake my hands loose as well. Compared to Karolina’s stomping my own movements seem tame. I aspire to be a stomper in the not too distant future.

I had a brief conversation with Karolina afterwards and she said that after three years of 5Rhythms, she had only in the last two weeks learnt how to dance through anger. I felt privileged to have witnessed her awakening, as it were. 5Rhythms describes itself as a movement mediation practice. Some people seem to glide through the two hours in a graceful swirl. Others gyrate, grunt and perhaps glide, by turns. The premise is to dance freely, without caring about the aesthetics of your movement, to disengage the mind and its obsession with self-image and let your body move intuitively. The five rhythms are always done in the same order and they are: flowing, staccato, chaos, lyrical and stillness. Dancing and moving through the different musical tempos is meant to eventually facilitate an emotional catharsis.

*This piece was written as a creative writing exercise for a tutorial during the Ethnography: Theory and Practice course. I was trying to create a compelling ethnographic hook to introduce our longer group project based on fieldwork carried out in a 5Rhythms class in Edinburgh.*

## The Union Canal: “Edinburgh’s best kept secret”

BECCA BOLTON, GIDEON LOVELL-SMITH  
& LAURA SILOVSKY



FIG 1: Construction on the canalside  
*All photos © Authors*



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# The Union Canal: “Edinburgh’s best kept secret”

BECCA BOLTON, GIDEON LOVELL-SMITH  
& LAURA SILOVSKY

The Union Canal runs from Fountainbridge to Falkirk, where it joins the Forth & Clyde Canal, and continues on to Glasgow. The mile-long stretch between the Lochrin Basin and Harrison Park is only a fraction of the canal but constitutes the sections in the heart of the capital.

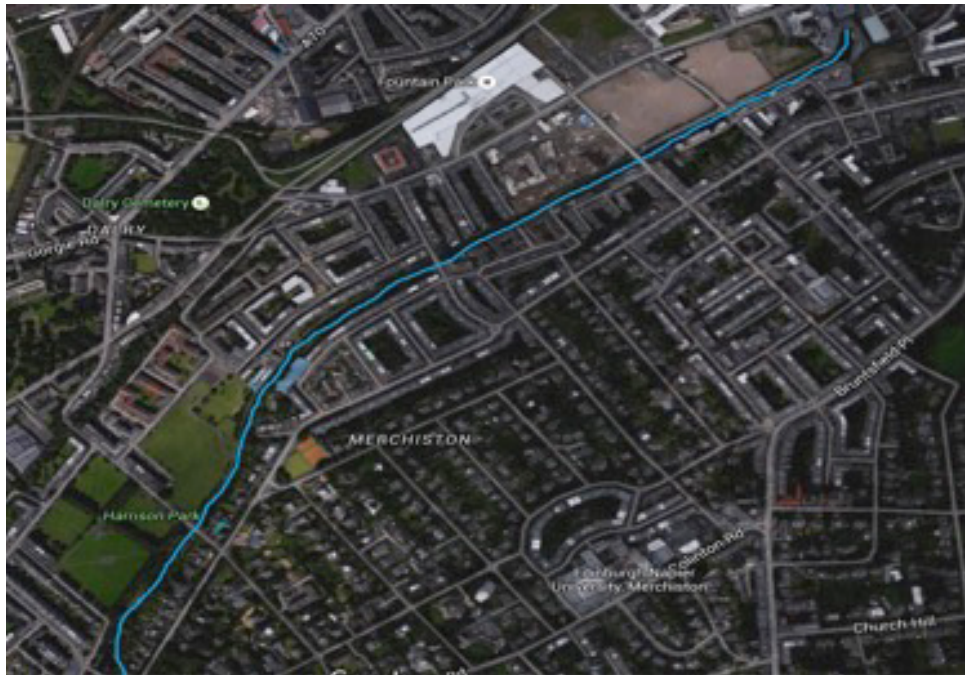


FIG 2: Union canal section from Lochrin Basin (top right) to Harrison Park (bottom left).  
Source Google Maps

Historically, the canal’s role in Edinburgh has constantly shifted according to its uses. It was built as a route for the people of Edinburgh to access cheap coal from the west, but was subsequently neglected and partially filled in for much of the 20th century. It wasn’t until the Millennium that the canal was reopened as part of the £83.5m Millennium link project. Since then, the canal has been used by a variety of actors, involving towpath users and boat residents. Furthermore, the Lochrin Basin is at the heart of Fountainbridge; a prime site for development, where rapid construction is taking place everyday. Yet, despite its multi-functional properties, the canal is still a space of little recognition amongst the majority of the people living in Edinburgh.

Our decision to work with this particular space was inspired by our initial interest in the people that live on the canal, and the choice to live on water within a city. The notion of mixing two lifestyles together seemed very intriguing. We found that there is an unequivocal love and appreciation for the canal, despite the contrastive groups that interact with it. However, it soon became apparent that this love came in many forms. We attempted to examine it from the different perspectives of the varying social and economic actors and explore the various users of the canal as a space. These range from the people who live on canal boats, to a social enterprise that resides on a canal boat, whilst also looking at Scottish Canals and the Fountainbridge Canalside Initiative (FCI), who represent its developmental and management aspects. By examining the way in which these varying groups value the canal we could discuss the disparate intentions that could possibly cause contention in the future.

## Setting

The Lochrin Basin is surrounded on all sides by a complex of new restaurants and offices. Almost like a towering fish bowl, the basin looks like an extension of the complex, and not the beginning of a 31-mile long canal. Around 200m down from this terminus, the canal narrows to be at a constant 3.5m wide (Scottish Canals 2015). The small building of the Union Canal offices is situated close to the water and run by two Scottish Canals employees. Nearby, the other canal boats designed for business purposes are moored. The sleek blue of the architecture firm's narrowboat is in stark contrast to the chintzy pastel green of the next-door "boatel", which charges £200 per overnight stay. Past the hydraulically-powered Leamington Lift Bridge, which was built in 1896, and restored in 2002, the disparity between residential and developmental sides of the canal becomes more evident:

There is also a contrast between the delicate homes and the wasteland construction site on the other side of the canal, behind an eight-foot high metal fence. The decor of the boats varies; some are ornate and feminine, some functional and minimalist. (Fieldnotes, 28/01/2016)

As said by Lewery, the canal is occupied mainly by 'pleasure boatmen' (1995:43). There are nine boats permanently moored opposite the towpath. They face the construction site, and are situated beneath a block of holiday-let apartments. Adjacent to the towpath, sits the Re-Union boat, the "Lochrin Belle"; a 40-foot, wide beam floating village hall. This area is referred to by Scottish Canals as Leamington Wharf, and is separated from the Lochrin Basin area, which links the canal to Fountainbridge, by the Leamington Lift Bridge.



FIG 3: Residential moorings at Leamington Wharf

These moorings are distinguished from the main canal by a low footbridge; beyond this there is no space for a canal boat to turn until you reach Harrison Park. Two miles further along, the canal transitions into the more residential and wooded setting more associated with canal life. There are additional residential moorings, a city park, and a derelict boat house. The rowing and canoe clubs still operate in this area.

## Methods

Our first impromptu meetings with residents, Pierre and Christine, proved invaluable to our research. They took place on houseboats, and our interview with Pierre, an unassuming leader of the Scottish Canals Boater's Group (SCBG), was even in the Ratho Basin, eight miles outside of Edinburgh. These meetings were more formal, but they allowed us to see a variety of different houseboats and areas. Residents were more than happy to give tours of their boats, and talk about their lifestyle and relationship with other boaters. Our relationship with Re-Union, a reputable community along the canal, also provided links to other boaters such



as Jen, a female resident, exceptional in a male-dominated space.

We first got involved with the social enterprise Re-Union, when two members of the group were invited to join their training programme, by “cold-calling” on some volunteers having their morning cigarette outside the Lochrin Belle. This programme involved a weekly six-hour workshop for non-residents, designed to make boating skills more accessible to the wider community with skills training workshops geared towards getting our Helmsman qualifications. We ‘participated in order to observe’ (1983:45) and spent extended periods of time with informants leading to high levels of rapport, and many hours of ‘deep hanging out’ (Geertz 1998:69). Many of our interviews were unstructured, random, and from ‘spontaneous informants’ resulting in rich, qualitative data, from an intimate group.

We also conducted a number of formal interviews with Re-Union crewmembers, councilors, and residents to gather information on the space from non-boaters. This gave us contrasting perspectives. However, given our research focus on the space of the canal, our data is proportionately weighted towards canal users, both residential and commercial. We are aware that such extensive participant-observation with canal users might have resulted in a bias towards them in our research. Still, becoming volunteers with Re-Union incorporated us into a very welcoming, and close-knit group. This provided links to the wider canal community. Our participant-observation culminated with a night spent on a houseboat at Harrison Park. Fully engaging in the residential lifestyle, even for such a brief period of time, demonstrated to us the romantic, idealistic rationale for living on the canal.

### **Gender and Security on the Union Canal**

There is a gender disparity on the canal. Pierre, a single father, had joked about this in our first meeting:

When we stepped off his boat, I asked if he knew any of the other boaters down the dock, ‘yeah, of course. We all know each other. This life attracts similar characters. People want to have their spot, their space, and a cocoon. Its funny over there (pointing to a boat down the dock) there is a man on his own, and behind him another man (he laughs). Sort of a bachelor’s club. (Fieldnotes, 02/04/16)

Contrary to Pierre’s statements about women on the canal many women use the space in a myriad of ways, with at least half the regular Re-Union volunteers identifying as female. Yet there does appear to be a difference between occasional and permanent use of the canal for women. Elaine, a Re-Union volunteer, told us that she appreciates the “slower pace of life”, and the ability to be “uncontactable” in contrast with her hectic work schedule. This sentiment was echoed by male volunteers, contrary to Bender’s idea of spaces having ‘differential uses’ in regards to gender (1993:170). But for those living on the canal, the space is still firmly gendered. Jen, a resident, agreed that she felt patronized, when we asked her about applying for residency:

“It’s quite a male dominated world and there’s not many young females. So it was a little challenging, but they were generally pretty encouraging, which was cool. They were like ‘well this is a novelty! There’s a little girl trying to get a boat, good for her.”

The canal has been a gendered space since it’s inception in the 19th century as a means of ‘cargo-carrying’ (Lewery 1995:43) across central Scotland. An element of this masculine skills-based domination persists. Still, Jen acknowledged that the men were actually “really encouraging” of her desire to engage with the space more permanently.

Many informants felt anxious about the lack of security along the canal; understandably considering it’s open and public nature. Anna, the volunteer coordinator at Re-Union, acknowledged that crime had reduced since she began interacting with the canal in the 1970s, when, “you could get mugged, or worse”. Nevertheless, the canal space is still felt to be unsafe by boaters:

“I’m on this little boat, I’m feeling vulnerable...this is not necessarily the best area.”



FIG 4: Hospitality training with Re-Union aboard the Lochrin Belle (top);  
FIG 5: We participated in crew member training every Monday for eight weeks (bottom).



FIG 6: The narrowboat that we stayed on during our fieldwork.

Jen described an incident where she was awoken during the night, by strangers running up and down the roof of her boat. The ‘fragile shells’ of canal boats do little to protect residents from external harm. In being ‘closer to nature’, boaters are more vulnerable (Bowles 2015:116). This vulnerability has been exacerbated by the increasing drug use on the canalside, which Jen also mentioned. The fear of being vulnerable is legitimate. Celine, who resides at Harrison Park, was a victim of arson, and her boat was burnt down two years ago. The canal might not be as ‘Eden-like’ as boaters would like to believe (2015:122), but those like Jen are realistic about the difficulties of the romanticized lifestyle associated with the canal

## **Residence and Management**

The canal space has been dramatically transformed since the Millennium Link project (Scottish Canals 2015), and is now a ‘remarkable asset for the community’ (Re-Union 2015). What was once a neglected backwater has been rejuvenated, becoming a cosmopolitan space for commercial and residential purposes. Yet, despite large investments from Scottish Canals, and the passion and care of boaters, the canal is still subject to misuse and degradation. The difficulty arises when a variety of uses intersect over the same resource (Church et al. 2007:213).

In the opinion of the boaters, there is an element of misuse or mismanagement of the canal by the council. Jen reported that they were “obsessed with property development along the sides of the canal”. This alludes to the general attitude towards the residents by, not only Scottish Canals, but the sedentary population. When looking at ‘boat dwellers’ in Southern England, Bowles suggested that sedentary people view the boaters as nomadic and ‘closer to nature’, and therefore separated from the surrounding societies (2015:116). Residents feel underappreciated by the Union Council; they don’t see them as residents in the same way that we are residents. As Lewery said ‘boat people should be regarded as a tough but respectable segment of society’ (1995:51) - they ‘are not a single political entity, but are self-consciously political’ (Bowles 2015:282). In other words, ‘social values and moral standpoints structure the debates over conflict’ and can therefore not be ignored (Church et al 2007:219).

Through talking briefly to the canal office at Lochrin Basin, and subsequently with Jen and Pierre, we found inconsistencies with the information given to us by them. One of the main issues appeared to revolve around its maintenance:

“Scottish Canals are failing miserably on their task of maintaining the canal.”(Pierre)

“There are so many issues with not dredging the canal... It’s really scary when you’re on your boat and you hear things scraping along the hull... and we’re paying! You have to pay a navigational license as well as your mooring fee.” (Jen)

Dredging involves clearing out the canal of all of the various rubbish and weeds in order for boats to travel through more easily. There is a machine designed to do this, that has sat unused next to the resident’s moorings since our fieldwork began. Anna, the volunteer coordinator of Re-union reported that Scottish Canals were supposed to use this every month but fail to do so as a result of the costs involved in using it. When we asked the canal office employees, both middle age men, whether the workings in and around the canal run smoothly, they responded with nods and positivity and said that providing diesel and water was their main responsibility. Dredging and proper waste disposal were not mentioned although they spoke about the canal festival in June which involved community groups surrounding the canal putting on performances and activities. This felt like evidence of a separation between the canal itself and what surrounds it; as if they see themselves as managing the canal for the people around it as opposed to managing it for the people on it.

The illegal disposal of bulky waste has become a serious problem, exacerbated by this inconsistent dredging. Special council collections cost a minimum of £21 (Edinburgh Council 2016), and our informants told us that many Edinburgh residents “fly-tip” waste into the canal instead. During one session aboard the Re-Union boat, we grounded to a halt to discover that a suitcase was entangled in the propeller. Attempting to wrestle the suitcase free was an arduous, forty-five minute process. Dealing with fly-tipping should be a



FIG 7: The Union Canal

shared issue, for boaters and management alike.

Pierre thought these were issues that must be addressed by Scottish Canals. As the unofficial repairman for the entire fleet of houseboats in this area, he is regarded as somewhat of a “celebrity on the canal” and a community leader. As a canal resident for over 13 years, Pierre had a long-standing relationship with the council and the local community, and said that, ‘the community was built around messy management’. At this time, prices were a big issue. With an influx of spending, the rent was rising as, “there was an incentive for the council to make money”. Pierre had been wary of the canal’s leadership, saying that no one at that time even knew who ran Scottish Canals. In recent years, Pierre has moved his boat to the Ratho area (3 miles west of the Lochrin Basin), where he doesn’t feel pushed out by Scottish Canals. But, like many boaters, he remains heavily engaged in community affairs in Edinburgh. Along with other residents, Pierre set up Scottish Canals Boaters Group (SCBG) in an effort to provide a collective voice for the resident boaters. With over fifty members stretching across the canal, the group tackles a variety of issues; at the moment, the rising mooring prices in Edinburgh have seen many residents trying to sell their boats, “it’s political, people are being kicked out of their homes”, reiterating Bowles’ aforementioned standpoint. 13 boats are now for sale in this area of the canal.

Another opinion on the issues facing boaters was needed. One group member spoke with Richard Allen, a board member of the Fountainbridge Canalside Initiative (FCI) – a group of activists trying to ensure a ‘viable and sustainable community’ around the Lochrin Basin in Fountainbridge. Richard was extremely informed on the canal’s history, and described it as a, “place of constant change”, which has had so many uses since its inception. With the increased development of the canalside, his group is, “working with developers and the council to create a unique waterside neighborhood”. So, when we asked about him about the issues some of the boaters had expressed, he was well informed:

Richard expressed concern over the dredging issues, but he remained adamant that Scottish Canals was trying to cut mooring prices. When I asked him about the boaters’ community though, he thought they considered themselves a separate entity. ‘They’re not Gypsies, but they are travelers though, so there is a hint of that, you know?’ Richard, who knew by name many of the boaters we had met, said that maybe their static boats, basically a ‘linear park’, was bad for the canal. ‘You know, they [SCBG] can have a good whinge, but they are going to get caught out. A lot more people are going to want to start to live here.’(Fieldnotes, 24/02/16)

Like many of the people we had met, Richard shared a love for the place that came out when we spoke about its historicity and unique ecosystem. “The pace of life on the canal calms you down. You notice things, the birds, the flowers”. Richard had stated that the FCI stance was that the more people who use the canal, the better. It was difficult for him to specify how, and who could use the canal, but without more money, through more boats, and “a new breed of boater” (i.e. second home owners) Scottish Canals would lose money for issues like dredging. “The world is coming in”, he said. Like other informants, Richard seemed to think this came with change, both good and bad, but inevitable nonetheless.

## Conclusion

It would be easy to conclude that there are diverging viewpoints concerning the canal’s current and future usage. As Church says, ‘sharing leads to conflict’ and if people are to continue to discover the canal, then this might proliferate (Church et al 2007:225). However, we do not believe this to be a black and white issue; all groups acting on the canal are interlinked and integrated within the surrounding society in some way or another, and it cannot be a case of one against the other. Action is already being taken to alleviate future problems. As recently as the 18<sup>th</sup> March, Scottish Canals released an article announcing that, they will “work with boaters to tackle areas causing navigational issues” by investing £250,000 towards dredging. Here, the issues which Jen and Pierre had both mentioned are beginning to be addressed.

This does not necessarily mean that the viewpoints of the council and the residents are in alignment

just yet. In the same article, Transport Minister, Derek Mackay, said that, “this work will help ensure the safe navigation of the Lowland canals by leisure craft, while enabling progress towards the Scottish Government’s aspiration of growth in the numbers of boats navigating these vital tourism assets” (Scottish Canals 2016). Whilst complying with the desires of the residents and improving navigational systems, are these amendments driven by ulterior motives? In this case, different motives can be harnessed effectively, as long as the best interests of the canal are at heart. It’s not necessarily whether one opinion takes precedent over another, but rather how the space is improved. Whether the canal is a home, an escape, a nature reserve, or a commercial entity, conflicts of interest should take the backseat to an appreciation of this overlooked space.

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ESSAYS

Business

BLYTH CRAWFORD



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## Business

### BLYTH CRAWFORD

Conducting eight weeks of ethnographic research on Edinburgh buses presented my team with a lot of opportunities for boredom. Sometimes this boredom evolved into social discomfort and, more rarely, into moments of genuine interest.

One particularly memorable episode of bus travel occurred on a punishingly early 9am journey to Clovenstone, and has gone on to become what will be for evermore referred to as “The Vaping Incident”. The warning signs were apparent as soon as I boarded the vehicle and, sitting near the back of the single deck, I was perfectly positioned to observe the troubling events unfold. The soon-to-be-vaper sat with his bird-like teenage legs outstretched, his feet resting precariously on the seat in front of him. Dressed in a risky double-denim combination with an e-cigarette resting visibly in the top pocket of his jacket, he was the picture of rebellion.

Trouble started around ten minutes into my journey when the culprit removed the cigarette from his jacket and, with one deep exhale, blew a pungent strawberry scented haze into the deck. After a few more puffs the smoke had spread throughout the bus, the lingering sweetness drifting into the airways of the remaining passengers. The scent, while not inherently unpleasant was somewhat stale and invasive. It seemed to somehow bind the other passengers together in our mild annoyance. We were no longer merely co-present, but were actively linked by our resentment.

Quickly the deck descended into chaos. Passengers towards the front of the vehicle began turning their heads and staring – in some cases glaring – at the villainous smoker. A pair of older women a few rows in front of me who, prior to this incident, had sat in silence, began muttering incredulously to each other. A middle-aged man sitting directly beside the perpetrator continued to stare resolutely ahead in silent protest.

This state of disarray continued for a few tense minutes, punctuated by frequent further puffs of smoke. I watched in middle-class horror as the muttering intensified to an audible murmur and the staring became noticeably piercing. Eventually, finally, the man next to the smoker gave up his tolerant attitude and accepted the burden of heroism with the damning words: “Do you mind not doing that?”

For a moment I thought the deck would explode with rapturous applause, instead, as the rebel obligingly placed his cigarette back in his breast pocket, a woman towards the front of the bus gave a thankful nod to our saviour, which, in the circumstances, is basically the same thing.

As the strawberry smoke gradually dissipated, so did the temporary air of community. Passengers returned back to their front-facing positions and the terse silence of the deck returned. Gone was any trace of our communal protest, and we reverted to our usual state of individuals, travelling alone together. I was left to reflect on how one individual’s act of rebellion had caused the vehicle to descend into disorganised ‘anarchy’ in a matter of minutes. His refusal to be shackled by the informal rules of British bus travel had shaken our sense of hum-drum familiarity and left us feeling uncertain and attacked. While it shook my sense of social decency to the very core, this was indeed the most interesting event of eight weeks bus riding.

## Yoga in Edinburgh: For the Mind or For the Body?

ALICE BURGESS



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# Yoga in Edinburgh: For the Mind or For the Body?

ALICE BURGESS

## Yoga in Edinburgh: For the Mind or for the Body?

It is hard to imagine a practice in which individuals might chant a sacred song from thousands of years ago; activate their quadriceps until their legs shake; send their feet soaring into the air, pressing their palms into the earth; observe flickering candles in every corner; or sweat profusely alongside high-tech ellipticals. Yet all these activities are possible components of the practice of yoga in the 21st century, as observed in Edinburgh, Scotland, over the past months. This diversity prompts questions as to why an individual would be drawn to one approach over another – what aspect of themselves are they attempting to cultivate? How does the practice enrich their mind, body, and soul?

In this ethnography, I aim to discuss the broader themes of spirituality and individuality that unite the practice of yoga<sup>1</sup>. However, I also aim to focus on the significant differences between yoga classes held in two different settings: the gym and the studio. These distinctions (described by the students and teachers who identify with these spaces) become apparent when considering:

- an individual's underlying motivations
- the variation found in the language used to conceptualise breath, along with the positioning of the physical body
- how all of these elements interact with the individual's lived experience of the practice.

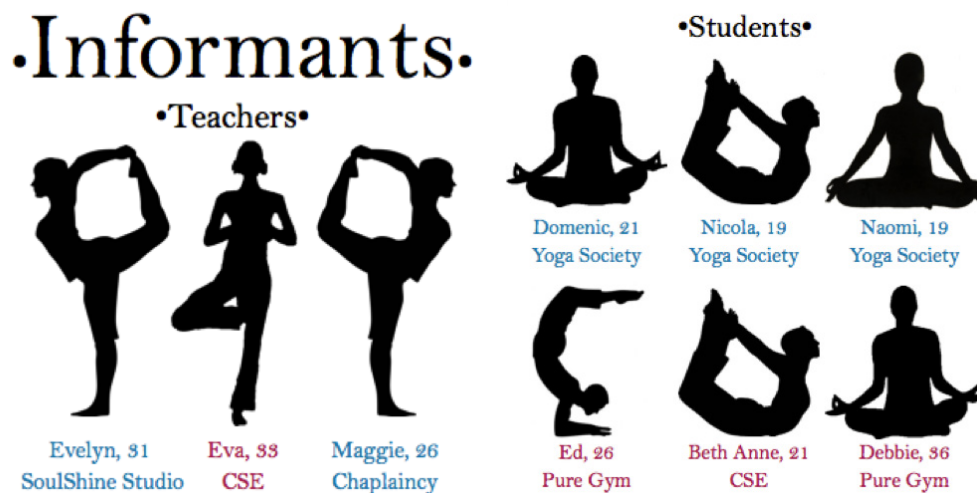


FIG 1: Informants 1 (left); Fig 2: Informants 2 (right)

## Context

We quickly realised that each yoga practice could be classified into two distinct settings or approaches: the “gym approach” and the “studio approach”. We chose to actively participate in yoga classes offered at two gyms (Centre for Sport and Exercise CSE, and the state-of-the-art Pure Gym facility) and three studios (SoulShine Studio, the upstairs rooms in the University-owned religious sanctuary named “the Chaplaincy”, and

1. This essay is based on a longer ethnography produced by Ellis Reilly, Lauren Durward (also students also enrolled in “Ethnography: Theory & Practice”) and Alice Burgess.



FIG 3: A Pure-Gym yoga space (left); an example of a studio class held in the Chaplaincy (right).

the Yoga Society's classes at "Gathering Essence").

With respect to spatial layout, gym classes were often held in sterile rooms lined with mirrors. In some cases, the yoga class was directly adjacent to other gym members using treadmills and free weights. Fast-tempo music and the sounds of nearby machines were constant. While the focus of the class was on the individual body (and its external appearance), the group setting in gym classes was one of rivalry – students were aware of others around them, their levels of ability, and their own appearance at all times. The studio classes included dim lighting, artwork or tapestries, and comforting elements like blankets, candles, or soft background music (either East Asian chants or instrumental). From the layout to the imparted lessons, being happy with oneself and making personal progress in a group setting was the guiding force.

### Universal Themes of Yoga

While we discerned these two distinct approaches to the practice of yoga, there were certain unifying themes that were the foundations of each and every class, irrespective of the setting. These included the sacred nature of the ancient practice, the body-mind duality, and modern trendiness.

The word "Yoga" is derived from the Sanskrit verb "yuj" which means "to unite", emphasising the union of the "mind, body and spirit" (Garrett 2011: 2405). For thousands of years in India, yoga referred to both "a state of cosmic consciousness and the disciplined practice" that led to a state of "ultimate spiritual union" (Swan 2012: ix). Studio and gym yoga teachers alike have embraced yoga's holy past. CSE teacher Eva stated, "The philosophy was created more than 2,000 years ago by people who were the rebels, the punks, because they didn't believe in the Brahman and all those rituals – they went to the forest and that's where yoga was born." Ultimately, the philosophy of yoga has endured over centuries because it has proven to be "amazingly effective at explaining how to live in accordance with nature for greater health, happiness, and wisdom" (ibid: ix).

The overriding goals of modern yoga are "to establish a balance between the internal and external self" (Garrett 2011: 2405) – although, as our field work indicated, the level to which the practice focuses externally or internally varied massively. The internal self (mind and soul) is thus intrinsically linked to the external (body) – a "duality". In fact, the physical activity aspect of yoga prompts higher fitness and "positive effects on brain chemistry", and the additional focus on "relaxation and personal integration" allows for "mindful awareness and personal acceptance" (Ibid: 2405). Furthermore, from a "biopsychosocial" perspective, yoga has positive effects on psychosocial functioning including "self-efficacy, coping, depression and anxiety" (Ibid: 2405).

As Hunt (2010) elucidates, there has been a huge increase in the number of yoga practitioners across Great Britain over the past two decades. By 2008, there were approximately 2.5 million (ibid: 17); a majority of yoga participants in the UK are female, white, college educated, and middle class, (Ibid: 223) which matched the demographic data revealed in our research. .

However, teachers in both studio and gym contexts feel that yoga has been somehow corrupted. Chaplaincy teacher Maggie says that beneath it all is a “deep emptiness and pressure” pointing towards “a collective need for deeper consciousness.” Meanwhile, CSE teacher Eva stated: “The Western approach to yoga is completely misunderstood. Now it’s all about selfies and expensive mats and having a good bum or nice legs – that doesn’t make any sense to me.” While the teachers from both the gym and the studio expressed similar sentiments, the two approaches had fundamental differences.

### **What Motivates Yoga Students?**

As Farmer (2012: 157) notes, “Yoga has never been a stable entity; it can mean almost anything to almost anybody”. Thus, we first considered why the individuals we encountered in both the gym setting and the studio setting chose to practice yoga.

Those interviewed within the gym setting placed predominantly more value on the physical side of yoga and fitness benefits as their main motivation. CSE student Beth Anne claimed, “I began practicing yoga at 16 because I was playing a lot of sports, and I thought the stretching element would be good.” Debbie described the practice as “one of the cool, hip things to do right now”, and initially felt pressured to get the “post-baby body that so many glossy magazines perpetuate”. Finally, Laura corroborated her approach to yoga as primarily a workout. She revealed, “Yoga is a far more intense, tiring form of exercise than I first assumed.”

Individuals who attended classes within the studio setting tended to place higher regard on spirituality and mental wellbeing. Domenic explained: “My goal for yoga is self-actualisation. It’s self-growth – I’m building growth as a person mentally.” For SoulShine teacher Evelyn, who suffered from anxiety for years, yoga offered a tangible solution: “Practicing yoga led to discovering mindfulness. Now I feel both physically and mentally healthy, and that has finally led to me having a good quality life.” Chaplaincy teacher Maggie sums up this concept eloquently: “I use the words yoga and meditation interchangeably. I haven’t graduated from the practice; I don’t think anyone ever does.”

Ultimately, participants’ motivations could be split into one of two models: the fitness model and the spiritual model, which aligned with whether the individual was participating in a class within the gym setting or the studio setting, respectively. This division is corroborated by Penman (2012), who reports that participants motivated by “increased flexibility/muscle tone” were a different group than those who aimed to “reduce stress or anxiety” (Ibid: 151). It seems that the desire for a better quality of life and to improve oneself unites all yoga practices, but whether this is done with a focus on the external or the internal differs.

### **Language of Breath and the Body**

Breath is an experience regularly taken for granted, yet is intrinsic to participants’ understanding and bodily experience within yoga: “In the accomplished yogi, mind, body and breath are brought (as part of deepening practice) to interact with each other”, highlighting the connection between our internal notion of breath and our external form (Hess and Napoli 2008: 337). It has been suggested that breath is the most powerful tool to quiet the mind, especially in our fast-paced modern world (Buckingham and Degen 2012: 333). While paying close attention to an automatic somatic function is just a concept at first, over time, students learn to consciously observe and control their experience of their own body – the essence of yoga.

Within the gym setting, breath remains very much a side note. While core poses often match those in studio classes, reminders to breathe were given specifically to deepen a stretch and get maximum muscular benefit. At the gym, breath functioned as a verb, while in the studio, it functioned as a noun – a tool that enabled an individual to “find their center”, an aspect of conscious agency. A studio teacher stated: “Let your breath travel to any areas where you might hold tension: your legs, your shoulder, your back.” Despite our first instinct to question the sheer impossibility of sending a breath to a specific area, in the position of participant observers, we found ourselves becoming more aware of our own breathing via embracing the “focused breath” (where the breath is a metaphysical object that can be applied, akin to a healing remedy, to the body).

In addition, the language used within the class addressing the physical body emerged as a key area of anthropological interest. Within the gym environment, we consistently found that terms were literal and directions were precise. For example, “Turn to face the purple back wall” was used to describe the positioning of a seated spinal twist. Common yoga terminology was used (such as “cobra”, “downward-facing dog” and “warrior II”). However, the authentic Buddhist, Hindu and Jain names were never used within this setting, and instead, appearance-centered language (i.e. developing abdominal muscles for “bikini bodies”, or holding a pose to create a “tight bum” or “toned legs”) was commonplace.

In contrast, in the studio setting, organic metaphors and nature-inspired imagery were frequent. Studio classes also focused on the inner organs of the body. Chaplaincy teacher Maggie constantly referred to strengthening the central nervous system, cleansing the digestive system, and activating the sex organs, ensuring all systems were in concordance.

### **How Do All of These Elements Inform the “Lived Experience” of the Practice?**

Themes of togetherness, individuality, competition, and self-care emerged when discussing participants’ opinion of, and emotions during, their practice. Whether students were affiliated with the gym or the studio, the group dynamic of the class was viewed in a positive light. Naomi of the Yoga Society stated that she found it crucial to “enjoy the presence of the other people around you – and let that help you focus”; the spiritual comfort of being surrounded by like-minded peers was what kept her coming back week after week. Chaplaincy teacher Maggie believed the studio approach helps people realise the possibility of existing amongst others and looking inwardly concurrently: “Once you see everyone has positives and negatives, you’ll have more compassion for other people who might do things you don’t necessarily agree with.”

While studio students reported closing their eyes and accepting their own bodily limitations, the gym students embraced the competitive nature of the shared space as an inspiration to push themselves physically. While he now finds yoga to be a relaxing way to keep his body in top condition, PureGym student Ed felt such worry about attending the class at first that he watched tutorials on YouTube so as not to “make a fool” of himself in the high pressure fitness environment. Despite enjoying the group presence, CSE student Beth Anne found classes at the gym to be far more competitive than her past studio experiences – she was aware of everyone around her, and their fitness level versus her own.

Yoga Society member Domenic found that yoga in the studio not only avoided generating a competitive vibe but presented concrete methods to deal with complex feelings of envy or self-doubt. Domenic stated: “If you don’t care how other people look at you or what they think about you, it’s so refreshing and powerful. If you’re happy within yourself, that’s what matters.” Nicola of the Yoga Society commented that her spiritual strength that has arisen from her yoga practice has allowed her to “keep a level head and show empathy – especially at work.” These sentiments are reflected in literature; Buckingham and Degen (2012: 334) state that yoga can offer deeper insights into humanity as it both “enables the expansion of one’s own bodily knowing, and heightens the awareness of the non-verbal knowing of others” .

Ultimately, the gym approach was more about the “trend” of yoga – a way to cleanse your mind while building a flexible, toned, strong body. Informed by ancient wisdom, the gym approach was centered on the individual, yet was fueled by a culture of comparison and competition. Far from stress-free, the environment was one of bright lights, constant motion, and an externally focused dialogue. In contrast, the studio practice aimed to embrace the link between the mind, body, and spirit. Chaplaincy teacher Maggie felt the key to yoga is the internal journey: “It doesn’t matter if you are bendy and can fold yourself up and stand on your head, or if you sometimes need to just sit in a chair. It is all about bringing yourself to the practice and meeting it wherever you are.” Studio students felt that yoga would be a practice that they used to ground themselves for years to come – a nourishment of the soul and a lens to view the self and offer crucial perspectives.

However, despite these differences in students’ and teachers’ “lived experiences” of the practice, self-care (setting aside valued time for simply taking care of oneself) was an aspect valued by both the studio and the gym approaches. CSE student Beth Anne said that she feels refreshed leaving the practice, and the





FIG 4: Yoga students lie quietly during the final meditation. (All photos © Alice Burgess)

complete zen can realign not only her spine but also her spirit. According to CSE teacher Eva, the busiest people are the ones who need the wisdom of yoga the most – for both the physical relief it provides and the meditative clarity. Though yoga is linked to a number of religions, there are many (such as our informant Nicola of the Yoga Society) who believe yoga is a religion for people who aren't religious. She commented, "You can bring yourself to the mat no matter what you are going through. It's just you and the mat." She feels that her newfound priority to come to the mat and practice self-care has made her a well-rounded and happy person. Across the board, we found that yoga helps people to attain happiness, either in the form of a healthier and fitter physique or greater mindfulness.

## Conclusion

There are universal aspects that unite all yoga practices (namely, the sacredness of the ancient practice, the body-mind duality, and the modern trendiness) yet there are components that differ dramatically in gym and studio settings. Those attending gym-style classes were motivated by the prospect of fitness, whilst those attending studio-style classes concentrated on improving their mental wellbeing. As far as the language describing breath and the body is concerned, in the gym, breath was an aerobic aid; in the studio, breath was a transformative tool. Finally, an individual's conception of their place within the practice illuminated their "lived experiences" – whether they sought competition or collectivism, an external challenge or an internal lens. These lived experiences transcended yoga and impacted participants' daily lives.

Ultimately, no matter what first brought people to the mat, the vast range of benefits inspired them to return. The common curiosity and desire for change confirms that many yoga students are indeed on a journey of personal improvement. No matter the course of one's journey through yoga, the fact that everyone is on a journey in the first place remains at the heart of this ancient discipline.

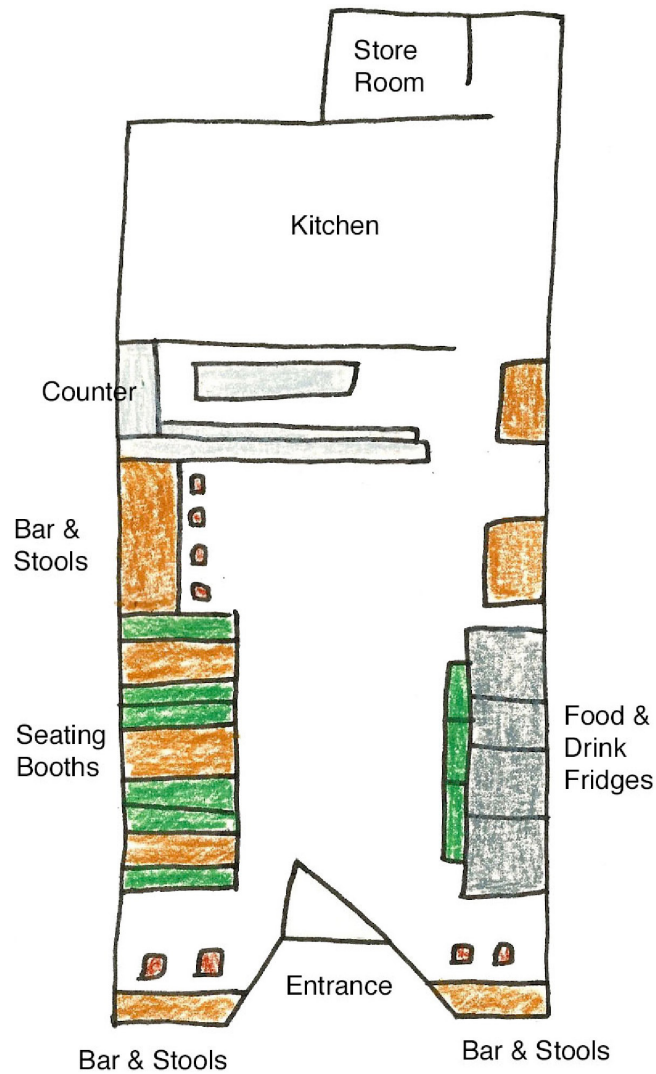
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# A Taste of Field Notes from Social Bite

RACHEL JOINER



*Social Bite – Map © Issey Medd*



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# A Taste of Field Notes from Social Bite

RACHEL JOINER

## Field Notes

Social Bite is a not for profit organization in Scotland, it has two main cafes with one branch in Edinburgh and one in Glasgow. It defines itself as a Social Business, inspired by Nobel Peace Prize winner, social entrepreneur, and banker Muhammad Yunus. In practice, this means, for example, that staff wages are capped so the people at the top do not earn more than 7 times the amount of the lowest paid staff member, and all profits go to charities that help the homeless. In addition to this, customers have the opportunity to buy a drink or a meal for someone homeless as they buy their own. Donated meals are recorded on ticket stubs for homeless customers to collect during the allotted hours. Furthermore, all left over food at the end of each day is given to homeless customers after the shop closes. The Social Bite café is also a social space where they offer homeless and vulnerable people counselling and social suppers for a few hours in the evening, a few times a week.

My ethnographic research focussed on the Social Bite café on Rose Street; a narrow, cobbled, pedestrian road off Princes Street in central Edinburgh. It is late Wednesday morning in the second week of February. I arrive after the early morning rush and before lunchtime therefore it is quiet. Few people are around as I arrive, only a large delivery van parked outside one of the shops. It is only my second visit to Social Bite, I have arranged to join one of the members of my group inside. We have each been once or twice, from their feedback I gather we are becoming familiar faces. It is the first week of February, Wednesday, around 1pm. I am coming straight from a morning of lectures so I am carrying a large backpack and have a warm winter coat wrapped around me. The shops along the street are a mixture of independent stores and well known chains; from hairdressers and small boutique shops to Greggs and Debenhams. Two men sit huddled on the floor in the doorway of a closed-down shop, covered in many layers and blankets.

Social Bite is towards the end of the street, a small shop front, similar in size to others next to it. The door is open and a sign on it reads: "Fresh and healthy local produce sourced locally hand made everyday." Inside the café is bright with a large space at the centre of the room. A display fridge runs all along the right hand wall, seats and tables along the left. A counter with the tills are placed at the back of the room, with a view into the kitchen behind. Some of the tables are laid out in a booth style; a wooden table in between two green sofas. There is additional seating by the window looking out onto the street, a breakfast bar with tall, metal chairs. On the walls are various signs relating to healthy food and good value. The café offers a variety of food, from individually packed meals in the fridge, such as sandwiches and salads, to hot meals like soup or paella. Smaller snacks, including crisps and health bars, are displayed by the tills. Staff members are regularly bringing out packaged food from the kitchen at the back of the room to the fridge in the front of the cafe. The layout in general feels reminiscent of a café such as Pret or Costa.

It is warm and bright inside due to the many lights and the large window facing the street. One can hear quiet music playing, blending into the background, songs from the current 'Top 10' as well as older, classic hits. I take a moment to listen to the other sounds of the space, the hum of the fridges, the intermittent grinding of the beans in the coffee machine. The smell of the café is reminiscent of a canteen, coffee granules as well as an amalgamation of food all mixing into one warm, savoury scent.

I join my fellow researcher sitting at one of the booths. It is fairly quiet inside the café and the door is holding back the fierce winds of the cold afternoon that is gracing Edinburgh. We are sat opposite each other with our bags and winter coats piled next to us on each bench. A man in his late twenties or early thirties is wandering around the café; darting into the kitchen from outside and back again. Takeaway coffee cup in hand, he is wearing a checked shirt with blue jeans and red Patagonia gilet over the top. I haven't seen him before and am wondering what his role is within the company. He stands behind the till counter talking to

Ryan, the assistant manager, just after, he walks over and introduces himself.

His name is Stephen, he asks what we are up to as “Ryan wouldn’t give him a straight answer”, we all share a laugh. I explain that we are University of Edinburgh students working on an anthropology project writing an ethnography about Social Bite as a space. He smiles and draws one of the metal chairs from the breakfast bar over to the end of our booth and sits down. He is tall and slim with light hair and a short manicured beard, he explains that he is the corporate driver for the Edinburgh branch of Social Bite. I ask what this involves; he says the shops are ‘the face of the company’, a platform for publicity and a safe, social place for people. The corporate section, which provides catering facilities to meetings and events for large companies, is the engine producing the majority of the profit as it has less overheads than the cafes. I ask what kind of clients they have, “Everything from RBS, to Natwest, to the NHS and smaller, local lawyer firms” he answers. I enquire as to why he thinks companies choose Social Bite, “Do you provide a competitive service and price?”. All of the food comes from the same place; Central Kitchen he explains. The food in the shop, the food given away and the food used in corporate events is the same. They offer a wide selection including vegan and gluten free, the quality is good and they offer the same service for the same prices as other companies, he says. However, as well as all this, they are doing it for zero-profit and a good cause, he explains that corporations use them as they can advertise that they work with ethical companies. From this information our group began to think about gifts, reciprocal gain and the perhaps selfish motives involved in exchange.

The conversation is flowing as he freely talks, there are few pauses so little time to ask questions without interrupting him. He speaks to both of us, changing the direction of his body and eye contact at frequent intervals. A few times we speak over each other as I respond to a specific comment, he pauses and allows me to interrupt with my questions before enthusiastically elaborating, often diverging onto a new tangent. This was the first occasion that any of us had spoken with Stephen and so it felt like both parties were enthusiastic and invested in the conversation. As our research developed we fell into a rhythm of interacting with the space and staff at Social Bite: the first ethnographer arrives, says hello to the staff and customers they are familiar with and settles in. After a few hours they are joined by another member of the group who in turn takes over and stays until the café closes. On the first few visits we were new faces and people were eager to speak to us to find out what we were doing. None of our interviews were planned, we ended up having semi-structured conversations with individuals finding out about their backgrounds and involvement in Social Bite, as exemplified in our conversation with Stephen.

I ask how he ended up working for Social Bite. He starts from the beginning, explaining that he has a “Background in Logistics” and has always been interested in working for the not for profit sector. He did not clarify specifically what this was, what kind of training or education this background involved. The conversation moved too quickly to ask more questions and we were forced to make assumptions. From the way he spoke about his past and his role in Social Bite we assumed it was a course or degree of some kind involved with management and business organisation. He had not heard of Social Bite before he saw their advert, it was exactly what he wanted and had been looking for. He got in touch with them and said he “was basically begging for the job”. We discuss how lucky this is to have found a company so perfectly tied to what he is interested in, all smiling, nodding and agreeing with each other. The conversation moves on, led by Stephen, to more political issues. He talks for a minute or so, without interruption, he rhetorically asks: “How has Britain has let this happen, how have we given up on so many people?” He seems passionate about this topic, he is talking in a steady, serious voice, laced with a tone of compassion. He discusses Social Bite’s role in relation to the larger problem of homelessness; Social Bite is just a “Bookmark...it’s bullshit, it is not a solution”. This comment is not said in a negative manner towards Social Bite because it is not doing enough to help the problem, but with anger towards the situation in general. An annoyance that a company like Social Bite is even required. He speaks quietly but with force, you can hear the frustration and anger streaming from his thoughts into to his voice. He sits with his body open to us, his hands gesticulating quickly, putting emphasis of what he is saying. It is clear he is passionate about what he is saying and what he is doing with Social Bite.

After each visit to Social Bite it became clearer that we were not just observing staff in a café but a family united in working towards helping the same cause. This interaction was the trigger for us to begin focussing our thoughts and ideas. We started thinking about the tensions a social business faces between the segregation that inevitably occurs when identifying and labelling the homeless, which perpetuates capital-

ist frameworks of exchange and a genuine interest in helping the homeless by offering them sanctuary and counselling.

## **Reflection**

After spending a fair few hours in Social Bite over several weeks our group became familiar faces as we slowly built up relationships with members of staff and customers. This familiarity meant that despite Stephen being a complete stranger he was friendly and interested in what we were doing, he was happy to talk to us and share any information he had. It was just by chance that we caught Stephen this afternoon, he usually works in the offices or at the events which they are catering for. He spends much of his time transporting fresh food from Central Kitchen to the events which are taking place that day. He had just finished his morning shift and was grabbing a coffee on his way out. No planning or negotiation was required which allowed the interview to be as relaxed as possible, when we explained our project we were honest and clear telling him that we were University of Edinburgh students working on an anthropology project and writing an ethnography about Social Bite as a space. Stephen did not express any surprise when we told him our reasons for being there, this leads me to think our project may have previously been mentioned to him by someone at Social Bite.

Whilst there are obvious differences between Stephen and myself; age, gender, employment experience to name just a few, these were not apparent in the context of the interview. Our group was made up of four females all with similar educational backgrounds leading us to be in our second year at the University of Edinburgh, aged between 19 and 21. Whilst working together, it became apparent that our group shared similar political and social ideologies too, not surprising seeing as we all chose to write our ethnography on a not for profit space. Whilst we may not have been too different from some of the members of staff at Social Bite, such as Stephen, there certainly were others from various backgrounds which we shared much less in common with. I feel confident that these surface differences with Stephen had no influence in the quality of the interview. Perhaps our shared interest in the logistics of Social Bite was more important in shaping the interaction than typical social influences.

I think Social Bite as the setting of what turned out to be an informal interview worked well. Stephen was passing through at the end of his shift and was therefore not interrupted or rushed by work. Evidently, he would feel confident and at home here, furthermore, I am familiar with the space and staff too so felt comfortable. A good space for an interview is vital as it sets the mood and tone and therefore in turn the feel of the interaction.

Due to the relaxed, impromptu nature of our interview a voice-recorder would have been inappropriate, the unstructured interview to the anthropologist would be considered just a conversation to my interviewee. Using a voice-recorder might have made Stephen more conscious of what he was saying, meaning his responses would be less representative of his opinions than what he shared with us on this occasion.

I found the interview an informative and enjoyable experience. I felt relaxed and comfortable, we maintained eye contact and were facing each other throughout, leaning forward occasionally. I felt Stephen wanted to speak to us and did not require constant probing and questioning, he spoke fluently about his role in Social Bite leading onto various tangents such as his personal background and wider socio-economic problems within Britain. This meant I could ask questions I had previously thought about as well as coming up with new questions in response to what he had said. One aspect I did find difficult, however, was remembering all the details of our conversation. Once Stephen left I did my best to immediately record everything I could remember, I think I did a good job of getting the general gist of the conversation down as well as a few specific quotes which stuck in my memory.







Social Bite – Scene © Issey Medd

## Multiple Motives: Selfishness, Altruism and Reciprocal Exchange in a Scottish Charity Shop

NATALIE NORTHRIDGE, PATRICK O'DOWD,  
LEDA OLIA & SAMANTHA REDFERN



FIG 1: The 'organised chaos' of the shop floor. (All photos © Northridge et al.)



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# Multiple Motives: Selfishness, Altruism and Reciprocal Exchange in a Scottish Charity Shop

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LEDA OLIA & SAMANTHA REDFERN

## Setting the scene

“What’s the most rewarding part of working in the charity shop?”, we ask.

“You want me to say when I raise loads of money for the charity, don’t you?” (Emma, Manager).

The UK’s leading veterinary charity, PDSA (People’s Dispensary for Sick Animals), provides care to ill and injured animals. The fieldwork we carried out in Edinburgh’s PDSA branch caused us to question what we conceived as charity, and who the shop actually benefits.

Upon entering the PDSA charity shop on the corner of Nicholson Street and West Nicolson Street you are met with organised chaos. Muffled music from a small radio in the corner permeates the space, providing the shop with pop and casual conversation. Racks of newly labelled second-hand clothing are dotted around the room, arranged by colour and size. The walls are covered in horizontal panels, allowing shelves and hooks to be slotted in, creating a patchwork of wares. Nearly all of the white space is concealed behind bags, mirrors, clocks, DVDs, ceramics, books, and more, giving the shop a busy feeling. On the right-hand wall, bric-a-brac items balance precariously atop each other. The heater above blasts warm air and the Pepsi glasses, tightly displayed, gently jostle together; listening closely you can hear the sound of their clinking and chiming. The back wall is divided by a door leading into the stockroom.

Delving into the stockroom, the feeling is very different from the public facade. The room is not large, seeming smaller than it is due to the clutter filling it. The air feels heavy and the room dirty, with a thin layer of dust covering many of the items which are waiting to be sorted. Coloured bin bags containing ‘rags’ which will be recycled, are shoved into large metal cages. These also serve as hanging space for clothes deemed suitable for the shop floor straight away. Clothes deemed neither ‘rags’ nor ready for sale are hung on the bars around the walls. It seems impossible that more could be stored due to the density of the rails but pushing the clothes forcefully will create precious space. Wooden shelves on the right-hand side wall are masked by stacks of plastic tubs and shoe boxes holding extra stock. This room is adjoined by a small, dank kitchen and the manager’s office

## Methodology

We were eagerly welcomed into the shop by the manager, who saw our research project as an opportunity to gain a few extra hands on the shop floor. This space soon became our home for two hours each Thursday afternoon, or more if we could spare it. We volunteered within the shop for seven weeks, conducting our research through participant observation, casual conversation and semi-structured interviews. We took detailed, reflexive field notes, both physically and mentally. Despite being there to do research we were treated the same as any other volunteer. This active immersion into the environment allowed us to witness a normal day in the shop and gain insight into the inner workings of this space. Although our time there did involve work, much of the observation was relaxed. We would chat with volunteers whilst moving around the shop, being careful to make the purpose of our project clear and acquire informed consent (Crow et al 2006: 83). We built rapport with the other volunteers, which led to open conversations and topical discussion. Additionally, we carried out formal audio-recorded semi-structured interviews about halfway through our research period with three volunteers and the manager. These interviews allowed us to delve more deeply into motivations and contradictions we had observed.

The mental health of some volunteers was called into question. We were unsure of the ethics surrounding their inclusion in the project, however, we decided that to exclude these people would be neither helpful nor fair. They are in this space as any other volunteer, so we treated them as such. That being said, we did not interview these people in particular as we thought they might feel put on the spot.

Furthermore, we encountered some issues which may have affected the outcome of our fieldwork and conclusions. As we visited the shop at the same time each week, and the people we encountered as volunteers only work certain days, perhaps we would have told a different story if we had gone at different times. Edinburgh is also a very student-heavy city, which could have altered the demographic of volunteers we worked with. In our experience, the volunteers were mostly under 30, opposing the conclusions drawn by Horne and Broadbridge (1994: 209-211) who surveyed Scottish volunteers, finding that only 1% were students and most were aged between 55 and 74 years old. At times the charity shop became very busy with both volunteers and customers and it is possible our being there, as a group of four, might have changed the dynamics. Lastly, we went into the fieldwork with the intention of speaking to volunteers, donors and customers but in practice we found the public less willing to speak than we expected. This has led to our ethnography being volunteer-focused and further research is perhaps needed to delve into the motivations of these two other aspects.

### **What is charity?**

The word 'charity' comes from the Latin word *caritas*, meaning to care for (Malik, 2008: 1). The colloquial form of charity usually refers to philanthropy: the act of 'selfless giving' from the wealthy to those less fortunate. Portrayed as a selfless act charity work is the epitome of Mauss' 'pure gift' (Mauss, 1954: 93).

Throughout our fieldwork questions began to arise over this perception of charity as pure altruism, causing us to reconsider our preconceptions of the meaning of charity. Rather than being a selfless act, we came to understand it as a mutually beneficial transaction. In terms of the charity shop the reciprocal exchange is perhaps most clearly exemplified with the purchase of goods. Regardless of whether the customer was shopping at the charity shop for noble reasons, they get their item cheaply and the money earned goes towards a 'cause'.

Volunteering at a charity shop can also be regarded as an exchange, though this is perhaps not as immediately obvious as there is no apparent material gain involved. However, whether it is an incentive to get out of the house or gain work experience, we found that volunteer work at a charity shop was done primarily for personal reasons, rather than altruistic ones. Interestingly, a study done by Parsons and Broadbridge showed if a manager leaves to work for another charity, the volunteers often leave too to join them (2006: 128). Therefore, it is not a loyalty to a certain charity that encourages people to give up their time. The volunteers are not exclusively there for philanthropic reasons, but for some sort of personal gain or fulfilment. Thus, similar to the other aspects of charitable giving, charity work is best understood as an exchange.

### **Charity as a selfish act**

Our initial perception of the PDSA shop was one of warmth and generosity. Emma, one of two managers in the shop, created much of this atmosphere through her confidence and reputation as a friendly troublemaker. Her enthusiasm and pride was contagious and the volunteers mirrored her commitment to helping "pets in need of vets", just as the PDSA's slogan on the side of the shop instructs. This was our perception until we conducted our interviews at the small, square table in the pokey kitchen at the back of the charity shop, dimly lit by an old, bare light bulb. It is in this private space, where volunteers are not bound to the till, or obligated to organise the overflowing clothing racks, where stories are exchanged.

While conversing with Emma, it became clear we had misunderstood many of the motives attracting staff to the shop. On asking her about the most rewarding aspect of managing the shop, she laughed. "You want me to say when I raise loads of money for the charity, don't you?" She paused briefly and continued, "I like making money because I like being one of the biggest and most profitable shops we've got. I wouldn't say it's particularly because I'm like 'ooh PDSA'." Emma's motives seemed to be grounded in personal pride



FIG 2: Entrance to the shop from Google Street View 2016 (top);  
FIG 3: Shop entrance facing Nicholson Street (bottom).

and a desire to prove her managerial skills. Her PDSA shop is the third most profitable shop in Scotland and maintaining this is important to her.

This was a turning point in our experience. It became clear that very few, if any, of the volunteers we came across had a personal interest in the welfare of pets. Emma even stated that it is “much rarer than you’d think” for volunteers to have any personal connection to the charity shop they work for. This opposed the findings of Flores (2013) who found people were likely to volunteer in a shop if they had a personal affiliation with it. Both of the volunteers we interviewed cited the main reason for choosing PDSA over other charity shops was simply because of the easy application process.

Despite the disconnect between the volunteers and PDSA, we still imagined most of the volunteers took part for altruistic reasons. Unfortunately, Emma revealed there were a huge number of less selfless motives for wanting to do charity work, listing off reasons such as wanting to improve their language skills, work experience or wanting a routine.

This in itself we found quite surprising, as a previous study on charity shops conducted by Broadbridge found as many as 48% of volunteers “had a personal affiliation with the cause of the charity being investigated” (Broadbridge, 1994: 433). It is possible this difference is due to the location of the shop and the high proportion of younger, student volunteers who may not have a connection to people unable to afford veterinary care.

The closer we became with the staff, the clearer it was that the charity benefiting from their work was more of a pleasant coincidence; predominantly they had themselves in mind. Some of the most common reasons for volunteering was to gain work experience or obtain a Duke of Edinburgh award, which requires commitment to a charity in order to pass. In this sense, participants turn their charity work into a commodity, an impressive label to stick on CVs and University applications to improve their prospects.

Despite the negative connotations of our findings, we felt the charity shop was not a negative space. Our own enjoyable experiences within the charity shop made us reconsider our initial interpretations. While the “selfish” aspect of charity is evident, we began to understand charity less as a selfless gift and more in the form of a reciprocal exchange.

### **Charity as mutually beneficial**

Back in the kitchen, 18-year-old Martin sits on a creaky wooden stool, sporting his usual grey fedora which tops up his fashion-forward outfit. Between his flashy fashion-sense and strong Manchester accent, you can always tell when Martin is in the room. He maintains his overwhelming presence on the shop floor too, making him the go-to person if we had any questions. If we arranged a new window display it had to be approved by Martin before it was seen by Emma. Despite his official status as a typical volunteer, Martin exudes the kind of poise on the shop floor which sparks questions as to why he gives up his time to PDSA beyond requirements for the Duke of Edinburgh Award.

Martin tells us he usually comes in three days per week, and more if he has the time, despite the requirement of the Award being just one. He then goes on to tell us that he enjoys spending time at the shop because of the social and uplifting atmosphere. For Martin, the shop is more than just the space in which he is able to fulfil his Duke of Edinburgh Award requirements, it is a home, a “family”. While Martin’s intentions to volunteer were not necessarily driven by altruism, there is certainly a sense of giving emerging in his attitudes toward working at the charity shop.

On the surface, the relationship between charity and volunteers promotes an exchange in which the volunteers provide labour to keep the shop running smoothly and the volunteers gain work experience, an improved CV or, in Martin’s case, an award. However, the underlying exchange taking place between these two parties is not simply material. Rather, volunteers gain something intangible and indispensable through their work in the shop. For Martin, this comes in the form of a positive space he can look forward to being in.

The PDSA shop provides a safe-haven for anyone and anything seeking refuge. Whether it is mismatched bone-china teacups or books with missing pages, the charity shop is a collection of what is without a place. Much like the quirky bric-a-brac piled onto the shop's shelves, Tracy (whose mental abilities limit her from working for pay elsewhere) finds her place here in the charity shop. Flores (2013) writes about the "therapy" voluntary work provides for people who have suffered personal trauma or loss. He describes volunteer work as "a way of regaining meaning, structure and belonging after experiences of social dislocation" (383) and this can definitely be translated into our space. It is a place where people who are not comfortable elsewhere can find employment and structure.

Volunteering is a mechanism through which "people are able to give meaning to their lives and (re-) gain a sense of ontological security" (Beck 1997 cited in Flores: 395). Despite the fact that Tracy might struggle in a standard employment position, here at the charity shop she is confident, making sure we, the novice volunteers, know what we are doing. Tracy is the smiling face in the pink t-shirt greeting you as you walk in the door; she is the recognizable pillar of this shop.

It is here we find ourselves every Thursday, surrounded by the mismatched jumble of items and assortment of volunteers who we have been politely interrogating for seven weeks. Perhaps one could say we too are in the shop for 'selfish' reasons, in conducting research for an ethnography, to boost our CVs, or to receive a good mark on our project. Like our counterparts in the shop we did not volunteer out of the goodness of our hearts; we did so with the intention of material gain and a mutual exchange. Despite our own selfish intentions, not only do we feel we have benefited the shop in terms of labour, but also that we, in turn, have gained something much more valuable than the completion of a project, ranging from a wider appreciation of the work that volunteers do, to new friendships.

## Conclusion

Through our work in the PDSA Charity Shop, we have challenged common perceptions of what it means to be charitable. The charity shop itself is an example of the paradoxical nature of charity, as it represents an ethos of generosity in a business-oriented space which strives for profit. While the shop advertises its commitment to the charity through its animal-themed merchandise, there is an apparent disconnect between this space of monetary exchange and the cause benefitting from it. Furthermore, we have found that charity is not necessarily a one-sided exchange bounded in altruistic intentions, but instead constitute a mutual relationship where both parties benefit. Despite what can be perceived as 'selfish' intentions among some of the volunteers', their contributions to the shop benefit both the charity and themselves, whether in terms of employment, friendships, or happiness. Our findings have helped us to better comprehend the complex nature of charity as a reciprocal relationship.

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ESSAYS

“Look at Those Double D’s!”

HAZEL GRANT



PHOTO: Double *Daphne*. © Hazel Grant



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## “Look at Those Double D’s!”

HAZEL GRANT

**Tuesday the 5<sup>th</sup> May 2016. 8.50pm**

“Jess! Look Jess!” I waited until our pole teacher Jess had finished talking to a pupil across the room before calling for her attention. She immediately gasped when she saw me and exclaimed in pride: “Yesssss!!!”

I had been practicing a *Daphne* and had achieved it for the first time. The pole move – probably not inspired by Scooby Doo, but it always brought the red-head to mind – involved holding onto the pole with only your thighs, and then straightening out your body and placing your hands back on the pole, one hand above your body and the other under. At that point, all you need to do is push your chest forward, bend one knee and let your head fall back in a relaxed expression. Simple.

When I first saw the move it appeared as if the pole dancer had a euphoric freedom coursing through their veins, throwing their head back and basking in their beauty and femininity in that moment. It appeared to be the embodiment of the commodity feminism image we had come to examine in Goldman’s (1992) work. Commodity feminism explores how commodities are advertised and sold to women as a way for them to achieve the hyper feminine ideals of their culture, and become the “ideal woman”, breeding a culture of acceptable female objectification. The dancer appeared to hold everything consumers of beautification commodities were seeking: grace, beauty, sex-appeal, confidence, and femininity. All pulled together effortlessly by the perfect woman.

However, viewing the dancer as only the image they create does not take into account the person performing the *Daphne*. And as the person in that *Daphne* for the very first time, I could vouch that there was so much more depth to that image.

There was pain, unbelievable amounts of pain. The skin on my thighs was burning from the friction of the pole my contracting muscles were causing in their mission to crush the metal into smithereens. In addition, there was the strain on my core muscles to keep my upper body straight making my torso quake, and the cramping of my clammy hands clutching the pole. The pain in my thighs was by far the worst; it was a very intense and intimate pain. I had in the past attempted running and core workout, and so knew the ache and pull of unhappy muscles, however, I was yet to encounter any exercise that called for tough inner thighs. Jess had “reassured” us that after a while pole dancers had thick thigh skin and “couldn’t feel anything there anymore”, but for now my delicate skin was angry and bruised for days after; making stairs (and walking in general) the bane of my life.

The physical strain was also just the start - my mind was locked in an old Western film style stand-off with my body. My limbs and muscles were calling to let go and end this madness, but the very real possibility of slipping and falling froze up my body with unadulterated fear. The signs of this internal struggle were blatant on my sweating brow and scrunched-up red face.

But against all odds, all the pain and fear, I was calling Jess over because I was in a *Daphne*. Likely the worst *Daphne* she had ever seen, but it was a *Daphne* and I was holding it long enough for her to jump up and down and call someone over to take a photo. I was radiating happiness through my rosy skin, feeling so proud of myself and my body in that moment.

“Wait, wait, why don’t we do doubles?” I looked up at Jess, still mid-*Daphne*. “What?” Doubles in pole dancing is where two dancers use the same pole at the same time, but it wasn’t anything I had seen in person before. “Let’s do a doubles *Daphne*! Get down a second!” I slid (or more accurately fell) down the pole and Jess immediately flew up and got into a perfect *Daphne*, then called for me to join her.

Although apprehensive, the other students and instructor encouraged me to go up the pole and struggle into my second ever *Daphne* under Jess. The class whooped and cheered us, taking photos of what they proclaimed to be “Double D’s”. I kept having issue of spinning away from the camera, as my body was getting tired and I couldn’t hold my sweaty hands in one place, but I lasted until the photos were done and fell to the floor, triumphant.

For the rest of the night, even after class had ended and we had limped out into the real world I was buzzing with pride. It was the only thing I would talk about as I met my friends and boyfriend later. When Jess sent me the picture of the “Double D’s”, I was instantly sending it to my friends and waving it in my boyfriend’s face.

Looking at the picture again weeks afterwards, I feel a little disappointed it isn’t as amazing as I remember it - and the immediate comparison of Jess’s *Daphne* doesn’t help. I see now how my legs could have been straighter, the arch of my back more exaggerated and how I was almost falling off by the time the photo was taken. There were a hundred differences between mine, and my teacher’s *Daphne*, from the point of our toes to my tomato-coloured face, but overall, that wasn’t what was important in the picture. I had achieved something, trained myself to do something that I had not thought possible before, and there I was, with my pole teacher and “pole family” – (the term for communities and classes of pole dancers) smiling at the wall behind me and feeling on top of the world.

When I showed this photo to my friends and boyfriend, I knew (at first at least) I was seeing a very different image to them. My friends said how alarming it was, my boyfriend grinned and told me how sexy I looked, and overall they focused on how my body appeared in the photo. In talking about how commodity feminism constructs women’s relationships and autonomy over their bodies, Bae (2011:29) summarises that

Women use autonomous control over their bodies and appearance to build a construct that will eventually be objectified by the male gaze. Thus[...] this feminist search for value and the meaning of women’s emancipation through sexuality and bodily appearance constitutes pseudo liberalism.

To some extent I understand how this was what my friends and my boyfriend were seeing: me building my body towards achieving the perfect feminine image; and how, although I was taking control over my body, it appeared as though the only way I could express this control was by aiming towards this image. But I cannot adhere to Bae’s point fully, as I see this image in such a different light. I don’t feel or see myself aiming for any “perfect feminine image”. I see what I was experiencing in that moment - that improvement, strength, pain and pride I had worked so hard for. It did not feel like pseudo liberation, and when my friends and boyfriend asked me questions about the photo - about how I was holding myself up, how much I trained to do this, how big were the bruises I had gotten from it - they began to move away from Bae’s perspective too in their dialogue and see where I was coming from. This photo wasn’t about anything other than my body, my goals and my inability to remember how painful it is to rub yourself raw when dreaming about when I could next try it again. And that is why I will continue to walk to and limp from class until I can achieve the perfect set of double D’s.

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ESSAYS

There is No Me Without You:  
Exploring the Self Through Others in 5Rhythms

ADEOLA ERIBAKE, FRANCESCA ROUSE  
& VIOLET METCALFE TROTT



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# There is No Me Without You: Exploring the Self Through Others in 5Rhythms

ADEOLA ERIBAKE, FRANCESCA ROUSE  
& VIOLET METCALFE TROTT

*Stillness: I opened my eyes, to see for the first time medium and large sized paper lanterns in groups of three suspended, swaying gently above my head. The floor was cold and rigid on my body as I lay relaxed observing the fragile decorations that dimly lit the space. As slow soft music quietly filled the room, my breath was the loudest sound I could hear next to the shuffling of other bodies, and the creaking of the floor below their weight. My body was so exhausted and yet my mind so relaxed, despite the extent I had pushed myself to. There were moments where I had thought to be self-conscious of the sweat breaking through my skin, but it felt too soothing, too much of a natural response, I trusted that this was what my body needed to be doing. The room grew quieter and quieter as I allowed myself to sink in to the floor, sharing this room and stillness with the other people who occupied it.*

(from Fieldnotes, Francesca Rouse)

5Rhythms is a meditation practice that allows participants to “creatively express emotions and anxieties, ... initiating us back into the wisdom of our bodies” through dance and movement (5Rhythms Website 2016). It was created by Gabrielle Roth in New York in the late 1970s, and is heavily influenced by other forms of ecstatic dance, indigenous traditions, shamanism, and Eastern philosophy (Juhan 2003). The five rhythms, which form the backbone of the practice, are always done in the same order. It starts with Flowing, then Staccato, Chaos, Lyrical and finally, Stillness. Each rhythm has been identified by Roth as corresponding to different parts of our psyche, life cycle, emotions and the elements (5Rhythms Website 2016). It is through setting ourselves into the motion of the rhythms that the body becomes free, the mind becomes still and the spirit awakens (Roth and Loudon 1989).

The starting question for our fieldwork research and subsequent analysis was the question; why could one not just dance alone at home and achieve the same psychological benefits? What is it about this practice and the shared experience amongst strangers that facilitates healing? We have taken an auto-ethnographic approach which foregrounds our own emotional and physical experiences in the field. As such, we are our own primary sources for the material presented in this text. We attended a dance class which had a strong therapeutic element and so the idea of standing off to one side and merely observing would not have been appropriate even if we had wanted to. Due to the emphasis on physical engagement and the intense personal experiences we were having whilst dancing we would describe our approach as “observant participation”, rather than participant observation (Wacquant 2003). Through this we found that other dancers became a focal point that helped to keep our minds in the present and away from ‘meta-thoughts’. Based upon our research and experience with 5Rhythms meditation this essay puts forward the argument that as social beings, because of the need to witness and be witnessed, self-knowledge and self-healing are better achieved through the presence of others. Those who come to 5Rhythms use movement and dance to achieve exactly that.

## **Intimacy and the Need for Others**

In the final rhythm, Stillness, you connect with the floor and the room, you wind down your body and breath while maintaining a focus on the shared journey you have undertaken with all of those in the space. It may seem like people dance on their own in this practice but in fact the session leader<sup>1</sup> encourages dance partner-

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1. In an interview with one of the authors, she rejected the label ‘teacher’, saying she would describe herself more as “the holder of the space”. We’re inclined to agree with that distinction as there is little to no dance instruction. She is more of DJ and spends most of the two hours in front of her computer at the front of the room, behind a table with a black cloth draped over it.

ships at different points throughout the session. It can be difficult to manage an awareness of oneself, of partners and of the rest of the room all at once, and there are examples of the success and failure of this venture within our discussion. But we argue that for 5Rhythms and the self-healing it promises, it cannot be a solitary affair. Engaging with other dancers is a necessity.

When dancing alone, it is easy to lose concentration and slip into the distraction of self-consciousness and passing thoughts. However, dancing with a partner requires a level of awareness that connects you totally with your body. Accepting and submitting to this is an intimate act and in the context of 5Rhythms we would distinguish between two types of intimacy: intimacy with the self and intimacy with others. Both types involve being comfortable with what is happening in the moment. Intimacy with the self happens when one is able to “let your body dance you” (‘Rainbow Rhythms’ teacher in a *Peep Show* spoof of 5Rhythms, 2004), to give in to the dance itself without caring about the aesthetics of your movement, or who might be watching. “Getting out of your head” as our session leader once put it. Intimacy with others, from our experience, occurs when dancers are able to tune into their partner and intuitively respond to their movements. This is more in line with the common preconception about intimacy, often perceived as involving other people. The idea that intimacy is not about capacity within individuals but rather is something that “exists in the ongoing interchange with others” (Weingarten 2004: 3). Intimacy is the product of “individual constructions”, which are in turn shaped by “prevailing discourses” (ibid). This social constructionist perspective helps to explain the limitations people felt on their ability to connect with or feel intimacy with certain partners.

In order to illustrate the importance of intimacy described above we will introduce the reader to an auto-ethnographic vignette of a successful dance partnership:

*Lyrical: “I was exhausted. I could feel exactly where my lungs reached their full capacity, and my heart beat in my chest, over and over again. I had, for what felt like hours, pummeled the floor with my feet and heard the sound reverberate around the room duplicating the throb of the beat. I could feel my body push back. The music began to change, this was so welcome as every movement and every sense of mine relaxed. I could rest back and allow my body to sway and move as it wanted to. If I had been shy before, you would not have known it in this moment. I felt my arms stretch across the space and lead me into a sweeping turn, my long hair feathering the air. I fell down into a deep lunge, a momentary pause, before my motion matched that of the figure dancing beside me. He was one of the most energetic and eye-catching dancers in the room. I had wanted to dance as freely as he seemed to, and had found myself doubting that he and I would ever share a dance together. And yet I found myself moving, turning and breathing with him, and at moments our dance and our bodies were indistinguishable from one another. Our movements were as one, I was entirely absorbed and focused on his body, my focal point had expanded from myself, into him, his body was just as fundamental to this dance as my own. As he placed his feet on the floor, far apart, flat and harsh, into a deep bend close to the floor, my arms swept down and up, the momentum bringing me onto the tips of my toes. My small body elongated, juxtaposed next the strength of his deep measured movements. As I spun in soft quick turns, my eyes finding him, I became the axis upon which he turned. His dance and mine dependent on each other, to stay stable, finding bursts of new energy and inspiration.*

*This was something that I could not have experienced alone, and would not wish to. His support amidst my nervousness and vulnerability, came together to create an emotionally transcendent experience with 5Rhythms. As two individuals we came together to create something momentary and entirely unique.*

(from Fieldnotes, Francesca Rouse)

The social necessarily involves more than the individual and we, as humans, are social beings. Successful social interaction in turn requires empathy, which is key to self-awareness (Finlay 2006: 6), something that 5Rhythms exploits. As Durkheim (1995) and many others have shown us, self-other differentiation is key to a sense of self. The ‘lyrical’ dance experience described above is of a dancer’s intimacy with herself, in a given moment. An intimacy that was deep enough to encompass another person and create a shared intimacy which

then fed back into her sense of self, leaving her feeling elated. Both partners communicated their openness to this encounter by mirroring each other and remaining engaged in the moment. “To achieve empathy we iteratively engage in different strategies such as bodily mirroring, imaginative self-transposal and reenacting the other’s experience” (Finlay 2006: 6). As infants and toddlers do, we in fact learn how to be and remain human by mirroring the people around us.

### **What Happens When the Thoughts Won’t Go Away**

This next section describes what can happen when the dancer is unable to arrest meta-thoughts. Weingarten’s argument, that intimacy arises out of social dynamics and our encounters with others (1991) is useful, mainly when considering intimacy with others because it is based on a social constructionist model. As in the ‘lyrical’ dance above, we would suggest that intimacy with the self needs to be achieved before one can be intimate with others.

*Chaos: “I went straight into the disabled loo to change as soon as I arrived, without going into the room to check-in first as I had done the previous two weeks. Robert was ahead of me as I entered the hall, carrying my boots, coat and large bag. He is probably in his late forties, balding. His kind face, salt and pepper beard and round-necked jumper make him look like a biology teacher. As we queued to pay and sign in he asked how I was and listened with a concerned expression as I said I was anxious about today and had been since last week. He told me about how when he’d first started, there were moments in the middle of the dance when he would feel lonely even though there were people all around him. He reminds me that the pressures and anxieties we feel during 5Rhythms are self-imposed.*

*Afterwards I had a similar conversation with another man. I was out in the corridor waiting for Francesca and he came over to say hello. When I mentioned my inability to relax during the dance he told me 5Rhythms offered a non-judgmental space. I echoed Roberts’s words back to him about the judgement coming from within and he agreed saying yes, perhaps it’s “self-judgmental”.*

*During the dance that night there was a moment when I experienced something of the loneliness Robert had spoken about at the beginning of the evening. I became aware that most other people were moving like a swarm or a wave. Their movements seemed to be coordinated and the direction of movement was away from me and I was on the outside looking in. I made a note to myself to try and join the wave next week. I’m never quite sure what to make of these sort of thoughts during the practice. On the one hand I’m trying to do what I feel comfortable with and then there’s the urge to do what everyone else seems to be doing.*

(from Fieldnotes, Adeola Eribake)

One of the best ways to overcome that urge to over-analyse could perhaps be to submit to an encounter with another dancer and fully focus on them. Doing this would be healing, in the sense that it allows the dancer to move away from self-consciousness to acceptance of themselves through a focus on their partner and their movements. In the ethnographic situation described above, the partner is the collective, all the other dancers moving together, in a wave. Surely less awkward than engaging one to one with another dancer and yet even that was resisted. We described two types of intimacy earlier, that with the self and that with others. This experience would indicate that intimacy with the self is a precondition for intimacy with others. It is fairly easy to spot the people who have been dancing for years because of their ease of movement. There is the shirtless older man in the white linen Thai fisherman-style trousers who glides and weaves his way around the room like a spring. Or the older woman with the ramrod straight posture and short, curly dark hair. She struts her way around the room in her tight-fitting black yoga attire. They both make full use of the entire room during the session. The man picks partners from time to time and other people also choose to dance with him but the woman in black is usually alone. There is something feline in her demeanor and apparent lone confidence.

Even when a partner dance is judged to be unsuccessful due to feelings of self-consciousness, the 5Rhythms experience is a journey. A journey where becoming comfortable with oneself in the room is the

first step. Our experience indicates that all dancers go through this journey even though different people join it at different points on the two scales of intimacy. That with the self and that with others. The session leader noted that most people in fact began their journeys towards intimacy with the self before coming to 5Rhythms for the first time. She was trying to make us feel better about our self-consciousness by pointing out that by joining the class for this project, we had come “from the cold” as it were. She told us that other participants often first came to 5Rhythms after exploring other types of movement meditation and/or shamanistic practices.

The need for brevity has necessitated a focus on self-consciousness here, but it was by no means the only emotion encountered in 5Rhythms. Thinking about hindrances to the two types of intimacy, other negative emotions we and our informants experienced included but were not limited to suspicion, self-loathing, irritation, anger, revenge, jealousy and grief. The ethnographic vignette of a ‘Lyrical’ dance earlier in this essay gives an example of a positive emotion, elation, that arose out of a dance partnership. Another positive emotion we experienced was that of occasional communion with the collective, with the group as whole

## **Conclusion**

We started with the question of why dance partnerships occur in a practice that on the face of it appears to be overwhelmingly about exploring individuality. Our auto-ethnographic approach has led us to the conclusion that other dancers become a focal point to keep the mind away from meta-thoughts, and feelings of discomfort and other latent pressures we place on ourselves. The meditative aspect of the dance requires the other dancers to act as a distraction. Much like chanting in meditative rituals, dancing with another person stops your mind from wandering. The external physical presence holds you there more fully in the present, in a way that could not be achieved by dancing alone at home. We would suggest that experienced dancers who prefer dancing alone derive this benefit from the collective, rather than individual partners. We have shown how self-knowledge and self-healing can be better achieved through the presence of others, and that those who belong to 5Rhythms use dance to achieve that. If we understand the type of self-healing being sought here to be intimacy with the self, we found that intimacy with others helps achieve this. As social beings, we have a need to witness and be witnessed, to mirror others and to empathise with them. Somewhat paradoxically, others are necessary to our own individuality. 5Rhythms offers a space, both mentally and physically that allows people, as much as they are able to, to explore complex emotions through movement.



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ESSAYS

I'll Be Up in the Studio Just Working on  
Accepting My Body and Doing Fergie Proud

DIVA MUKHERJI



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# I'll Be Up in the Studio Just Working on Accepting My Body and Doing Fergie Proud

DIVA MUKHERJI

**Monday 15/02/16 20.25**

“Four, tres, two, uno” – with *will.i.am*'s soothing voice blasting from the speakers, mixed with Jess and my classmates cheering us on, I decide that maybe this won't be the most humiliating experience of my life. Then I remember that it's being recorded. And that WikiLeaks is a thing. Never mind.

Listening to Fergalicious, one of my ultimate self-love anthems and nervously looking at Hazel on the pole across from me, I launch into a leg whip, a classic pole move, and one that takes me back to my first taster session 7 weeks ago, when pole dancing seemed like the last thing I should be doing. But over the past few weeks, 6.55pm every Monday became my favourite time of the week.

Throughout the entire routine, approximately 3 minutes, I couldn't stop thinking about how I've never felt so at peace with my body (and how much I need to start going to the gym, but that was secondary). As someone who grew up loving everything about pop culture, and still do, it isn't surprising that I was reasonably confused and insecure about how I presented myself as a woman. It may be nice to hear Beyoncé telling you that you're flawless, just like her, but it's also pretty hard to forget that she is Beyoncé. Even though you know she's still just a human female, it's also easy to forget that she probably has a sizeable budget dedicated to her appearance, and uses more than just supermarket brand eyeliner. Not to mention, apparently #nofilter #nomakeup selfies on Instagram invariably prompts the questions – do women actually look like that? Are women *supposed* to look like that?

Following a ton of “body positive” blogs doesn't really help my idea of unrealistic standards of beauty when my Instagram feed is filled with seemingly perfect women. But even though I don't really have the traditional ‘pole dancing’ body, I'm not thinking about that as much. With my classmates cheering at my body wave, I finally don't feel like hiding my body away.

I did not expect to feel the most ‘whole’ while spinning around a pole. Maybe it's because of the environment in the class – the only comparison or ‘aspiration’ to another female I've heard was “get Beyoncé's ass!” and that definitely didn't make me feel uncomfortable. Being in a space surrounded by other women, all of whom understand exactly where you're coming from and are unconditionally cheering you on, makes everything a lot better. Sure, every time I glance at the mirrored wall in the studio I think “oh god why do I look like that”, but the effect that has is hugely reduced when you also have Jess (objectively the cutest person in the world) bouncing up to you and complimenting your ‘perfect’ fireman spin. You know ‘perfect’ is an exaggeration, but that's just what you need to hear sometimes. Too often women are pitted against each other, and you can very quickly fall into the cycle of competing with other women you know – it isn't always a conscious decision, but it's just the compulsion to almost prove to everyone that you too can *also* do whatever another girl can, sometimes even better. But that's not what the classes feel like – it just feels like a bunch of other women being excited that you've accomplished something. The excitement feels so strangely *pure* as well, and the best part is that it's shared among all of you in the class, and returned to each woman individually. The happiness is infectious.

The feeling of contentment I get from class definitely makes all the ‘stripper’ questions worth it. Part of me acknowledges that, sure, even though I'm doing this completely for myself - and for anthropology - I'm still using my body in a way that would earn more than a few creepy winks from a certain kind of heterosexual male, and falls into line with certain forms of female objectification. Amy-Chinn (2006) found similar results while studying the business of lingerie advertising. She studies how when lingerie advertising is created in a way that perpetuates the idea of a woman as an object for male pleasure, it is acceptable. Maybe

I have been conditioned to believe that this is empowering, when in reality I'm just a product of the patriarchy and ruining everything feminists have fought so hard for.

Is my pole dancing really that empowering if I'm motivating myself by thinking "if only Tom Hardy could see you now"? I'm making a conscious decision to use my body in this way, but I'm still using it in ways that appeal to the (mystical) male gaze – Mulvey (1989) describes the male gaze as a specific portrayal of women through the eyes of men. Mahmood (2012) states that women's desires and needs are irrevocably influenced by patriarchal ideologies. She describes it as a system of said ideals objectifying women's bodies which in turn manipulate how women begin to view their own bodies, which thereby affects how they use them. Pseudo-liberation is a strange thing: you can judge the Kardashians for spending millions on their physical appearance, but still feel like you can take over the world when you buy a great red lipstick. As much as I want to develop a meaningful relationship with my body, I also don't want to do so in a way that perpetuates hegemonic ideas of feminine sexuality.

But maybe I'm not? Yeah, okay, my ideas of female sexuality do not exist in a void where they are completely unaffected by what the media has told me what a sexual female should look and act like. But I'm also making a conscious decision. Goldman (1992) discusses the idea of commodity feminism, which outlines how women build their own image and ideals based on those that they see portrayed in the media, and their social circles. But he doesn't take into account personal autonomy – I am aware that many of the personal goals I have for my body and image are hugely influenced by who I follow on Instagram, but if I'm using these tools to feel more comfortable with my body, my interpretation of these tools become more significant.

Yes, some of my favourite pole moves are the ones that involve ridiculously dramatic and technically useless hair flips, but I'm doing it so when I look at myself in the mirror I'm like: "Hey! Okay! I can work with that!" I probably have internalized the male gaze and maybe this is all an elaborate scheme to try and make me feel better about my body, but really I'm single-handedly ruining feminism. What I want my relationship with my body to be like still exists in the realm of mass marketing that prescribes a normative image of what women's bodies should look like. But I'm still enjoying myself and feeling comfortable – shouldn't that count for something? I understand and acknowledge the history pole dancing has, and all of its associations to adult entertainment, but that is not why I'm doing it. This is for me, and only me. In the wise words of Missy Elliot, "ain't no shame ladies do your thing, just make sure you're ahead of the game".

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## Illustrative Reflections: Self-fashioning Practices at ECA

ISABELLE INTRONA & ALEXANDRA DUNN



FIG 1: First Encounter with The Third Year Illustration Studio (20/02/16). © Alexandra Dunn



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# Illustrative Reflections: Self-fashioning Practices at ECA

ISABELLE INTRONA & ALEXANDRA DUNN

AM: “I don’t know what this means...why do I say ‘like’ all the time?”

Interviewer: “Oh everyone does, half the transcripts are ‘like’. It reads like a valley girl movie.”

This remark was the general consensus as we sat down with two Edinburgh College of Art students to read *Becoming an ‘Artist’? Self-fashioning in a collectively individual space*. This ethnography was the culmination of several months of observing their group of illustration undergraduates – a collaborative report we produced with fellow students Ryan Saunders and Clara Navarro Veiga. One ethnographer (Interviewer) sat in her kitchen with two of the students: her flatmate (IP) and close friend (AM). Their initial read-through began with giggles and ended in uncomfortable silence – it was obvious they were not entirely on board with what we had written.

IP: “God did I really say that?”

Interviewer: “Do you feel differently about it now?”

IP: “I don’t feel like it’s a fair representation. What AM does isn’t necessarily true for us all.”

Interviewer: “I agree; does that annoy you? That I could speak to AM and say all you guys do this one thing and you would completely disagree.”

IP: “Yeah, I think that’s how you came to the conclusions you have.”

Interviewer: “What do you mean?”

IP: “When you were explaining to me the part about our work not being individual I didn’t agree. Now reading that, I see where you are coming from but I don’t agree. I don’t think you can understand because you aren’t one of us.”

From the beginning, we knew that allowing them to read our analysis would potentially put a strain on our friendship but to have the relationship put down in an ‘us vs them’ way was a shock. In hindsight we see this as a trapping of anthropology as a discipline. You go into these projects assuming you are going to do some good and in your head you build this relationship of equals. However, looking at it from the side of being observed it must seem like the anthropologist has all the control – technically (although perhaps not ethically) they can print whatever they see fit and portray others in a way they may not agree with or like. During our time in the project we always viewed the students as having all the power as we were relying on them for information in order to produce an outcome. It was always in the back of our minds that at any moment they could say no and the project would be over.

Our ethnographic work explored the illustrators’ juxtaposed ideals of collaborative social work and the pursuit of an individual, original style. We suggested that jumping back and forth between these perceptions of themselves and their work informed how they behaved in their studio space.

Interviewer: “Is it easier to see the theory behind it?”

IP: “Yeah”

Interviewer: “We just thought it was interesting how for a stereotypical art student you think of how unique and individual they are and the same with what they do. Then we came in and it was constantly you guys checking with each other on colour schemes and “what do you think of this?”. It just went against everything we thought and then again with you guys saying it is all individual work.”

IP: “That’s because our work is for other people. We try to use each other as the consumer and I was very conscious of the fact you were there and I wasn’t acting normally. Normally I’m less social.”

AM: “Nah, you talk.”

Interviewer: “When I’ve been not doing the report in the past, you’ve seemed the same.”

IP: “That’s because you are there. If you weren’t there I wouldn’t.”

Interviewer: “Then was it a relief some of the days that anthropology people weren’t in?”

AM: “Yeah I probably did a bit more work because I just think that someone being there is like having a shiny new toy. I want to play.”

Interviewer: “Ah, so it’s not because I’m studying you – it is my actual presence.”

AM: “Yeah, because I don’t think we understand really what it is you really do.”

Interviewer: “Fair, I don’t think I do half the time.”

AM: “So yeah your presence influenced us but not because you were studying us.”

We noticed another tension of identities during our ethnographic work: between the Designer and the Artist. Our report suggested the work of an artist was based around its high cultural capital outside of the domains of typical social and economic life. In comparison, the designer is embedded in the wider social sphere and thus their work is informed by its potential for social and economic capital.

Interviewer: “Has the report changed the way you think about illustration?”

AM: “Since these conversations I’ve been thinking of that more and more - like the difference between artist and designer. so many differences.”

IP: “I wonder why AS said you don’t want your work to be too commercial?”

AM: “Probably from the tutor.”

Interviewer: “Do you not agree?”

IP: “Well I want to do advertising so I need to be commercial but AS does character design so I guess that commercial implies that you are following stereotypes.”

Through our discussions, many unnoticed nuances were becoming evident. Wide variations in each student’s perceptions had begun to rise to the surface. We had clearly influenced the illustration students, but it was also clear that this wasn’t always in ways we had intended.

Interviewer: “I ask because of MP [illustration student], what do you think about the fact that she’s not doing illustration anymore? Her and RS [ethnographer] were having a chat after the interview and she mentioned that because of this [the interview], this made her realise that she wants to go into fine art. That this is what she wants over illustration.”

AM: “I definitely wouldn’t put her as a fine artist - no. What she does isn’t fine art, it isn’t thought through or commercial.”

Interviewer: “But I thought it was okay to not be commercial depending on the type of work you do?”

AM: “She’s just not cut out for it and if this made her realise it then she must have already been swaying on the matter.”

Interviewer: “She was saying to us that she really enjoyed the course until she read this and then she hated it. Yeah, we felt we fucked her over so bad.”

IP: “I guess its best she decided now.”

This marks the first time in which we have really been confronted with a moral dilemma in our personal work instead of hearing vignettes from lecturers or in books. The fact that our work influenced MP in such a life altering way did not sit well with us even after she had assured us that it was the best course of action and that she was happy we had prompted the change. Feeling uncomfortable doing something you love is a truly odd feeling. It made us question our work and wonder whether a change of sentence or wording could have had a different outcome. This brings into play the ethics of anthropology and whether the good that arises from our curiosity and analytic tendency outweighs the bad. Our hope is that through reflecting on situations like this we can begin to understand our own feelings and continue to contribute meaningful work through our future ethnographies.





FIG 2: Illustration by "MP", commissioned for our final ethnographic report.  
(Reproduced with permission from the artist)

Pink Wigs, Bearded Nuns and Budding Anthropologists:  
Issues of Transformation and Self-making in and around  
Edinburgh Drag Culture

HANNAH DIRY & GAIA DUBERTI



FIG 1: Fig. 1 The Rabbit Hole stage.  
All photos © Hannah Diry & Gaia Duberti



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# Pink Wigs, Bearded Nuns and Budding Anthropologists: Issues of Transformation and Self-making in and around Edinburgh Drag Culture

HANNAH DIRY & GAIA DUBERTI

“It’s an expensive, time consuming, frustrating process. And I [made my drag daughter<sup>1</sup> meditate on] ‘Why have you decided that spending three or four hours changing your gender to please a group of people who are drunk, why do you feel that that’s a good idea’. Because on a piece of paper that’s a shit idea. That’s a fucking stupid idea.”

We are sitting in a crowded café with Tiger, a Drag Queen and former Napier student we met during our fieldwork at the Drag show “The Rabbit Hole”, which takes place in CC Blooms every Tuesday. He has just put into very blunt words one of the main questions we have encountered during our research. As with many other anthropological questions, there is no single and clear-cut answer, but a wider array of possible interpretations.

The following article is a collection of ethnographic vignettes, which give the reader an intimate insight into this “unfamiliar” part of Edinburgh’s social milieu. Each of them is designed to evoke and explore some of the different forms of transformation taking place, which do not only involve the Drag performers, but also the people around them – including us.

First we will focus on Alice Rabbit – the host and founder of the Rabbit Hole – and the interplay between physical and psychological change that she undergoes when doing Drag. Second we will show you Sister Ann Tici-Pation’s “manifestation” – one of Tiger’s alter egos, who is a member of the Order of Perpetual Indulgence, an organisation which provides support to LGBT (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender) people and promotes universal joy and the eradication of shame. Finally, we will reflect on the changes in ourselves as both individuals and budding anthropologists that these encounters have brought about.

## **Alice Rabbit’s New Beginning**

“Follow me down the rabbit hole...” As soon as Natalia Kills’ song ends, Alice Rabbit steps onto the stage and shouts: “Welcome to the Rabbit Hoooooole!”. The myriad of pink sequins on her dress glitter as the spotlights hit them. She flicks her bubble-gum pink long hair backwards as the audience blows up in cheering and shouting. There is no time to waste at the Rabbit Hole, so the show begins: Alice is the first one to perform in one of her usual sketches, lip-synching to an audio clip of “hysterical laughter”. Afterwards, she introduces the other Drag Queens who will perform that night. Every performance is different, and during the time we have been conducting our fieldwork we have never seen the same one twice, except for Alice’s trademark opening and closing sketches.

Alice introduces each of them with enthusiasm, loudly shouting “NEXT!” and whenever the audience does not respond with enough energy she does not hesitate to reproach them with an “Excuse me?! I’ve said NEXT!”. People tend to respond actively to these forms of interaction, but sometimes they simply return the prolonged eye contact with a shy smile: staring at a Drag Queen during her performance is hypnotising and intimidating at the same time.

Today is the last Tuesday of January, and as every last week of the month, the show has a specific

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1. When someone wants to start doing drag, they are usually mentored by a more experienced Drag Queen who provides support. They call each other ‘daughter’ and ‘mother’ respectively.

theme: this time it is “New Hole, New Me”. We enjoy the first few performances – consisting of the usual mix of lip-synching and dancing, but it is only during Alice’s second performance that the meaning of the theme becomes clear. The melancholic song “Cut the World” by Antony and the Johnsons starts playing, and the atmosphere suddenly changes: Lawrence Chaney, one of Alice’s Drag daughters, carries a chair to the centre of the stage, and all the other Drag Queens come close. Alice appears, wearing only her tights and a long wide white cape, on which insults like *Bitch. Fat. Ugly* are written in black marker. As the song plays, no one speaks a word. We have no idea what to expect: it feels very different from Alice’s usual performances, more serious and personal. She takes off her pink wig with a solemn movement as she takes a seat and the other Drag Queens gather around her. Lawrence stands behind her, holding an electric razor – and begins shaving her hair off. Meanwhile, Alice is making sweeping movements with her arms, following the music. This results in the shave being uneven: tufts of hair remain scattered on her head, which could be funny, if it was not for the intense atmosphere. As it goes on, no one in the audience makes a sound, until the song ends and Alice stands up, bows, and smiles. Then suddenly the spell is broken: the audience blows up in clapping and shouting, as Alice gets off the stage trying to hide her naked sides. The tension has been palpable during the entire performance, and it is a sort of relief to be able to laugh and cheer again. We do not know exactly how to feel about that performance, but we have a chance to ask her about it during an interview a couple of weeks later:

Interviewer: “When you shaved off your hair, what made you want to do it? Was that planned ahead?”

Alice: “It was planned ahead, I got a bit tired of this like new-year-new-me fucking cliché [...]. When I got my show, I was getting a lot of success, but I was also being very bad to friends, ‘cause I’m lost in my work load, and I don’t know when to stop being a bit of a bitch to get something done. And then I realised I’m a human, they’re human. So in a sense I think I did wrong to people who are very important to me. I watched the Game of Thrones (she giggles) and I saw this character, called Cersei, she got her hair all cut off ‘cause she had sinned. It’s like a re-birth, a cleansing, and when it’s done you can go on and start afresh. So basically when I did ‘Cut the World’, this song by Antony and the Johnsons, this is about new beginnings. So for me that was my way of separating my “cuntiness” that I did last year and moving on to something like a fresh start. But it was like a mock of it, but also internal.”

Alice’s transformation is meaningful both for her and the people around her. Through changing her physical appearance in front of us and her friends, she expresses her internal resolution to change her attitude. It is a public statement of both her freedom to take back control over her life and of her commitment to become a better person.

### **Sister Ann Manifests**

We are sitting in Tiger’s living room, with the Baileys we brought and the lattes Tiger just made for the three of us while telling us about the background of the Order of Perpetual Indulgence. The walls seem to bear down on us, loaded with any sorts of things piled up one onto the other: here a piano, there a tower of old paperbacks, magazines, and colourful wigs that sit like lazy cats on the pieces of furniture barely visible under the heaps of random stuff. Tiger is stirring his latte filled up with tons of sugar, his make-up bags all around him:

“Do you want me to talk you through it?”

“Yes sure.”

“Okay, so I’ll explain to you what I’m doing and what the Order is about as we go on”.

He puts on some perfume, and a playlist titled ‘Manifesting’, which consists of songs that put him in the right headspace. It is a mix of tunes from Tiger’s childhood, and movie soundtracks – especially Star Wars, of which we guess Tiger is a big fan, considering the big Chewbacca ring on one of his fingers. There is also some pop music, like Katy Perry, alongside Maya Angelou reciting her poem “Still I rise” (1978):

[...]



FIG 2: Alice getting her head shaved.

You may shoot me with your words,  
You may cut me with your eyes,  
You may kill me with your hatefulness,  
But still, like air, I'll rise. [...]

Right now he is still Tiger. Sister Ann will gradually manifest herself through Tiger's body as the make-up and elements of the habit are layered on.

"You'll see the change, at some point. The voice will change too as Ann shows through. She's all the best parts of Tiger. She's all about positive thoughts", Tiger says.

First, he puts on a headband to keep his hair back. As he applies the white facepaint with his fingers, he tells us that the white canvas is the starting point of any art performance: it allows you to become who you want to be that night. What he does here, he says, is not drag per-se, but rather *gender-fuckery*, which is designed to challenge people's perceptions of what gender is and how it should be presented. The colourful make-up and habits that 'Black Veils' – full members of the Order – wear are also designed to draw people's attention and spread the word about the support that they offer. Simultaneously, the painted face represents the 'eternal fool' and serves as a kind of mask. The clownish make-up helps Ann in her job: "People will disclose more to you if you're a character and not a person. They will feel free to confess you their problems". It seems perfectly reasonable to us – we, too, would tell the story of our lives to a nun. The fact that she is 6.2 feet tall and has a ginger beard is secondary.

Every time Sister Ann manifests, her make-up is going to turn out different. Nonetheless, as Tiger explains to us, there are some fixed elements which characterise each Sister, and her status within the order. For example, Sister Ann's distinctive detail is two lines – one straight and the other curved – painted below each eye, representing the Egyptian Wadjet's eye (see Horus' eye). The painted lips on the other hand mean she can speak for the Order, that she can represent it officially, and only black veil nuns are entitled to do so.

While he applies more colour to his eyes – bronze, gold, bright blue – Tiger tells us more about Sister Ann, especially how helpful she was while he was writing his dissertation. Being her made it possible to compartmentalise the stress and anxiety he went through during that time. Halfway through the process of putting on make-up, Tiger stretches and inhales deeply, and Sister Ann joins us. The transformation is not abrupt, but nonetheless noticeable. The change is just relatively physical. We can mostly perceive it in the gestures, the posture, the eyes, which become sweeter. 'Manifesting' really is a very appropriate term for what we witness here. Sister Ann continues the conversation, and tells us more about Tiger's drag-persona Philippa Snatch. She does not openly criticise her, but we still get the strong impression that she doesn't fully approve of her 'sibling'. As Sister Ann puts it, she would never talk badly about Philippa, but the same cannot be said about Philippa in relation to her.

Tonight, Sister Ann is not wearing her "traditional" (= full religious habit), but still puts on her veil, her scapular – which is covered in pins from all the events she has attended – her whistle and her vial of Holy Glitter. As she explains, when the other Sisters decide that novices are ready to fully join the Order, they receive their own vial, which contains some glitter mixed with a small quantity of the ashes of deceased members directly from San Francisco, where the Order was founded in 1979. What is more Catholic than that? Definitely not the fact that members of the Order are not supposed to wear underwear when manifesting.

When Sister Ann is ready, she grabs her basket full of condoms, lube sachets, and latex gloves. The free distribution of these items is part of the Order's promotion of safe sex. After completing her outfit with the fake fur she had been sitting on, we head out to pick up Brother Bimbo del Doppio Senso on our way to the monthly "Nuncheon", where organisational matters of the Order will be discussed. During our walk through the Broughton area, we can observe the reactions of passers-by to Sister Ann's eye-catching appearance. The contrast between the 6.2 feet tall bearded and colourful nun and the posh buildings around her is striking.

People definitely take notice; men tend to look away whereas women are more likely to stare. Nonetheless, Sister Ann's reaction is admirable: she gracefully smiles back at people and wishes them a good eve-

ning. As she tells us, because of her size and fighting abilities she is not afraid of walking alone, even though the Order members are not supposed to do so as they might be attacked. Even in a relatively quiet city like Edinburgh, homophobia can sadly still be an issue.

Manifesting Sister Ann is a way for Tiger to bring out all his positive feelings and attitude. On the one hand, he is able to detach himself temporarily from his preoccupations. On the other, this makes it possible for Sister Ann to provide support to others. In this sense, Tiger's transformation is not just about self-expression, but it also possesses practical and altruistic purposes.



FIG 3: The transformation from Tiger to Sister Ann

### Hannah's Royal Night Out

There are clothes strewn over my bed and sofa, all from the men's section of one store or another. It is surprising to see how many things I already own that aren't officially designed for my gender. My friend has brought along her own share of clothes, as well as an improvised binder made from the elastic part of form-shaping underwear. Tonight, we will try out being drag kings.

We have both been curious for a while, dressing up in our own rooms and hiding long hair under beanies, but this semester's fieldwork has opened up a new door to actually explore this more, and tonight we will step through it. We have decided to go to a drag show dressed in drag; not to perform (at least not yet), but as audience members.

The clothes and the binding are only one part of it (though the binding is the one I will be most conscious of throughout the night – breasts are not meant to be that squashed). What we spend the most time on is the make-up. We follow drag king make-up tutorials from the internet while applying highlights and contouring, and it is impressive how much my face changes through the simple addition of some shadows in the right places. When I look in the mirror, I feel simultaneously more and less like myself.

With gelled-back hair and a bottle of wine, we head out. It's already dark, so I don't feel particularly visible, but people still look at us. I can't tell what they think, whether it is positive or negative, but I find that I don't care. We just continue talking, and laughing, and I feel free and powerful and like a king.

At the venue, we still stand out slightly, but we are definitely not the most eye-catching people there.



FIG 4: 'Oh my god I look like my brother'

The drag queens' make-up and outfits are striking – a pink wig here, an elaborate Mad Hatter outfit there. The show takes my mind mostly off of my appearance, but during the breaks in-between performances I regularly go to the bathroom to adjust the binder. This is definitely the most troublesome part, but I find I don't resent it as much as I could. It's like a constant reminder that I am a different version of myself tonight.

During one of the breaks, my friend and I dance on the small dancefloor. We try – half consciously, half not – to move in a less 'feminine' manner, which changes the way we dance (less hips, wider stance) but not how much we enjoy it. At one point, two girls join us in a loose circle, and we all dance together. Suddenly, I feel uncomfortable in my skin. The character I am presenting right now – confident, cocky, *masculine* – clashes with who I feel I am. It doesn't last long, luckily; as soon as the girls leave I feel the pressure lifting. Curiously, my attraction to certain people apparently plays out differently in drag, dependent on what social role I am fulfilling. I don't ponder these things for long though; Alice Rabbit walks by, sees me, and lifts me clean off the ground in a big hug. All feels right again.

The rest of the night passes fast; the performances are amazing, the people are nice, and we dance until the venue closes. It is interesting how I can feel both like myself and like someone else at the same time. Through changing my appearance, I am able to freely express parts of myself that aren't usually in the foreground. At the same time, I am not fully removed from the character I'm presenting; unlike with theatre, the transformation is only from one version of myself into another. Excluding the moment where that second version clashed with the former, it was a great experience. I'd definitely like to do it again at some point, but for now I mainly want to get out of my binder.

### **Gaia's Drag Therapy**

It is late afternoon, and John is sitting on the couch in my kitchen: next to him a huge make-up bag filled up with any sorts of powder, brushes, and palettes. He starts putting on a thick layer of pale foundation on the highest points of his face: cheekbones, bridge of the nose, forehead, followed by a darker shade in the hollows of the cheeks and jawline. "I know it looks weird – he says looking at me – but it will all come together when





FIG 5: Alice's transformation and the Budding Anthropologists

it's done". Forty minutes, a pair of false lashes and a black dress later, John is not there anymore. Alice comes out of my room after positioning her foam padding in the right places, and asks me if they look even on both her hips. I am astonished: if I did not know it, I would never say that those hips are not real. She is not wearing her wig yet, but a simple black turban: she is gorgeous. We call a cab and head together to the Rabbit Hole, just in time to meet the other performers of tonight.

It is almost the end of the show, which means it is time for the much feared "Audience Victimisation". Alice is going to pick four members of the audience to dance on stage "as badly as possible". The audience is going to "boo" at the worst dancer, who will then be crowned as the winner. The price is usually nothing, but a moment of questionable glory. I am sitting in the second row, hidden by a taller guy in front of me, which makes me feel relatively safe. I am wrong. Alice walks straight toward me, she offers me her hand and whispers in the microphone: "Come on, sweetie, you owe me this". It seems legit after she came to my flat this afternoon and allowed us to interview her. So when it is my turn, I step onto the stage like a convict on the gallows. Afterwards I will tell myself that it was not exclusively an embarrassing experience: it helped me see the show from the performers' perspective, how it feels to be at the centre of everyone's attention. It is actually empowering. The "Macarena" starts playing, and I do not remember what I have done. Some of my friends later tell me it was entertaining. I choose to believe so. I do not remember how to dance the Macarena, so Alice comes up beside me below the stage and starts showing me the moves. How lovely of her. "Unfortunately", I do not win, but Alice and I definitely become closer: "I hope you did not mind I picked you. I mean you did well! And it was fun wasn't it?" she tells me after the show as we sit next to each other with a couple of drinks in front of us.

Besides the questionable contribution that my "performance" gave to our studies, it makes me reflect on a wider lesson that Drag culture and Alice taught me during my first fieldwork project. I did not undergo any form of physical transformation; it did not make me want to wear more make-up nor different clothes. Nonetheless, I realised that a transformation did occur. This fieldwork experience helped me question myself and my own understanding of femininity, while giving me a feeling of what it is actually like to be an

anthropologist – and from what I got, it also means putting yourself on the line.

Alice helped me feel more confident about my own femininity – regardless of whether I am expressing it. Seeing her pulling off all sorts of clothes, even not having what most people would define as the “ideal body type”, made me think “Why can’t I do it too? Why should I be ashamed of mine?”. Both Alice and Tiger as Sister Ann made me feel more positive about myself despite my flaws, encouraging me not to care about other people’s judgement and not to force myself into restrictive categories when it comes to defining my gender, my sexuality, my identity.

## **Conclusion**

“Drag is a way of communicating parts of a person that aren’t normally shown, that society doesn’t appreciate. Drag is a place, is a safe space for the art kids, the kids who want to cover themselves in paint, who want to have a paint enema. You know, these crazy, fauvist, crazy wonder children. It’s a way of getting the things that are inside of our heads, that keep us awake, out, in front of other people’s eyes. That’s what Drag is for me.”

Going back to the question asked at the beginning of this article, here is Tiger’s answer. This is not a universal answer – if such a thing even exists – but that does not make it any less true. The transformation process that Drag performers undergo affects not only them, but also the people around them. With LGBT+ issues gaining more and more visibility, and after the recent horrific shooting in the Orlando gay nightclub Pulse, we believe it is very important to give voice to members of the queer community like Tiger and Alice. The encounters we made during this fieldwork experience deeply influenced us, in ways we had not predicted. They helped us to grow both as individuals and as budding anthropologists, and hopefully, these vignettes have given you a taste of this extraordinary and unfamiliar side of Edinburgh we had the fortune to experience.

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## ***Acknowledgments***

*We would like to thank Alice Rabbit, all the performers of the Rabbit Hole, and Tiger, for their willingness to help us with our project and to answer our questions, but mostly for their wonderful show and for introducing us to the fabulous world of Drag. Also, we would like to thank Koreen for her enthusiastic support.*



ESSAYS

The Way I Saw Ethnography

TANNITH MATTHEW



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# The Way I Saw Ethnography

TANNITH MATTHEW

I stood in the corner of a barely-lit room filled with old fashioned toys, trying to slow down my breathing and build up the courage to move out of the shadows. I knew that I was going to have to talk to somebody at some point or I was never going to find something interesting to write about.

I was in the Museum of Childhood, located along the Royal Mile in Edinburgh, making my first attempt at doing fieldwork for my ethnography course. Sitting in a lecture hall for the past year and a half ethnography had seemed such a simple methodology and way of research, and I had naïvely believed that it would be easy to do what the big names in anthropology were doing. Since completing my group project for the Ethnography course, however, I have learned a lot about what it really means to do ethnographic research, and how difficult it can sometimes be. I have also learnt a lot about myself: how I work in a group; how I look at and respond to things I see; and how I reflect on past experiences.

The process of doing fieldwork turned out to be extremely challenging but also very rewarding. My main obstacle was my anxiety. The first difficulty I had was simply going to the museum in order to start my fieldwork. Although I had been to the museum a lot as a child - having taken many trips to Edinburgh with my mother - and knew the layout well, I felt very unsure of going alone in order to observe people. It took me a week longer than the other people in my group to begin research because of the time it took me to gain the courage to start. Once I started going to the museum I spent most of my time trying to blend into the shadows while watching what happened around me and making field notes from what I observed. I never stayed for long because I often found the process of observing people both overwhelming and exhausting. My awkwardness probably came across to those that I interviewed and most of the time the people I spoke to would do a lot of the talking for me because they could tell I was uncomfortable. While guided by my questions, then, they were not limited by them, they also became leaders of their own explorations. I believe that my initial awkwardness in the role of researcher, as well as my informants' response to this, allowed me to learn some really interesting things from them. My anxiousness also led me to be more aware of my surroundings and my position within them, which meant that I was able to reflect on my own role and its effects on what was being said and what I saw.

Working within a group to do this project ended up more of a blessing than I could have anticipated. My initial reaction to finding out we would be working in groups was to complain about it alongside all the other students stuck doing group projects this semester. Having Emily Dawson and Isla Whateley (my project partners) studying the same space that I was looking at, however, allowed for a much clearer insight into what we were seeing and allowed me to look at myself and the data I gathered more closely. Each of us saw things slightly differently and reflected on things in a different way from our own individual perspectives. In the end this allowed for more interesting concepts to emerge from within our combined research. We ended up looking at the way in which people who visited the museum looked back on their own childhood and the idea of nostalgia. One of the things we found was that people tended to look back on their childhood positively if they related to any of the exhibits in the museum, something that also often made them think of other types of childhoods as bad, or not as good as theirs had been. Looking at how people were remembering things from the past made me think about how I was remembering the things that I saw, and how I was reporting them to the other members of my group. It made me more aware of how I was viewing things and whether I was remembering and viewing things truthfully.

Doing this ethnography course has given me a unique opportunity to immerse myself in what anthropology is really about and why we do it. It has allowed me to see how working in a group can sometimes be more beneficial than working alone, and it has given me skills which I will no doubt need in the future. It has also shown me how I can use my anxiety as an advantage in certain situations, and it has allowed me the opportunity of understanding myself better as an individual. I have come away from this project feeling that I have learned

something about humanity, something about myself and something about doing research and I'm left inspired and excited about what else I can learn. Anything which fosters a good amount of curiosity and questioning of one's own mind, like this course has for me, can only be a positive thing moving into further years of study.



For sale? Invisible LIMITATIONS

Tokens live here (in the Computer)

Easy to feel home? Our positioning as researchers

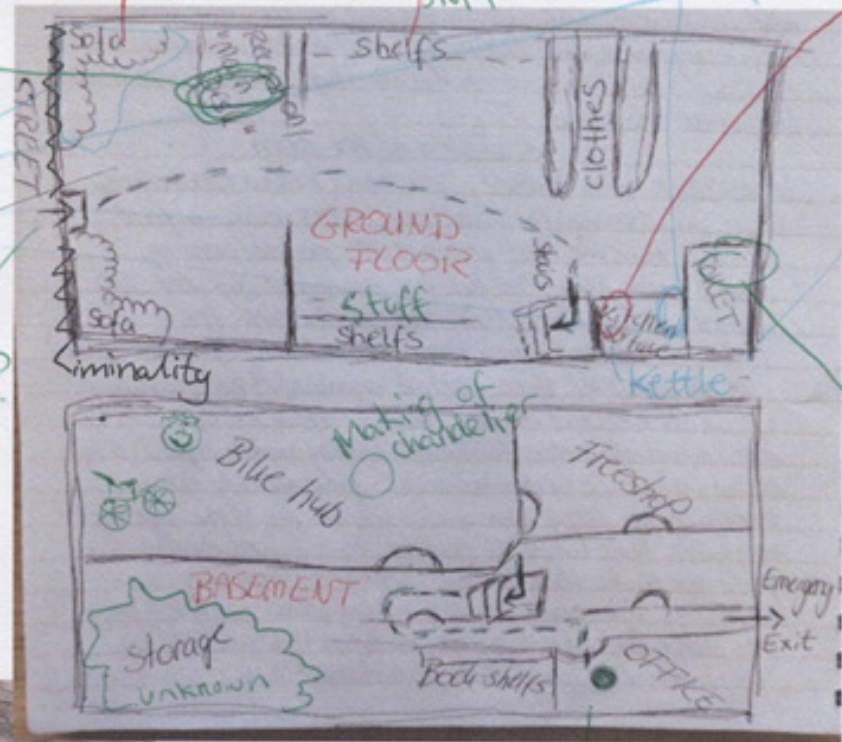
who is washing up?

Who is allowed to make a cup of tea? Who dare to? Free movement? Restricted by lack of knowledge/experience

Ownership

Akwardness / Insecurity / People / Fun / Friendship / Anxiety / creativity

who is excluded?



Posters with ideology/mission

cozy-serious

Interview setting: (semi-structured)

Context

Living room look



car sound

House door intruding?

Fairy lights

Film nights in cinematic office / The window to the world / (over)stimulation of colours / warmth



Concrete

Living room

Care

orientation

Feeling materiality

Temporality

"Free books" = representation of the Shrub's mission

Approaching Nervous

Lasting for generations?

DIY-dock

chatter

spoon: food sharing symbol



mission statement

ideology symbol

bike wheel frame

RECREATION SHRUB SWIFT & ROSE HUB

sound of music / smell of books

DIY-bookshelves

sound of the kettle

plant ~ environmentalism

Navigation / Youth / Community / Belonging / Friends / Network

Belonging "There is no such thing as waste"

Song: Look it up on youtube!

couch that has had a long social life!

free food from the food sharing collection

swapping in progress



# Contributors

## TEACHING STAFF

John Harries  
Stephen McConnachie  
Koreen Reece

## UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

Nicole Anderson  
Clare Anstock  
Hörn Arnarsdóttir  
Laura Assmann  
Clarrie Baker  
Becca Bolton  
Jenny Brownlie  
Alice Burgess  
Blyth Crawford  
Damon Dailly  
Hannah Diry  
Gaia Duberti  
Alexandra Dunn  
Adeola Eribake  
Kirby Fullerton  
Darcy Giles  
Hazel Grant  
Isabelle Introna  
Rachel Joiner  
Gideon Lovell-Smith  
Tannith Matthew  
Diva Mukherji  
Perry Nimtrakul  
Natalie Northridge  
Patrick O'Dowd  
Leda Olia  
Samantha Redfern  
Francesca Rouse  
Laura Silovsky  
Anna Thomsen  
Violet Metcalfe Trott



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