

## What Kind of World Do We Want, and How Do We Create It?

Jody Benjamin

I am currently on the cusp of becoming a tenured faculty member at my home university. I think often about what this milestone means in a country where legislators of the past once made it illegal for my enslaved ancestors to learn to read; and where those today try to erase their predecessors' tracks. Less than five percent of tenured faculty today are, like me, black. The number of tenured positions is currently on the decline in the United States, while contingent, part-time, adjunct, short-term contract teaching positions proliferate. Doors are closing. Please mind the gap.

These issues pose questions that are not separate from the "three-lives of a scholar" we are asked to consider in this provocation, but rather sit close to the heart of the matter. What kind of world do we want, and how do we create it? Knowledge "production" in the academy has long been disciplined by the dictates of capital that seeks merely to reproduce the dominant social order. Outside the

academy, politicians clamor not for an education that opens new possibilities for human well-being, but rather for an education that continually rehearses hagiographies of power. I would argue that this remains largely true whether one resides in the (allegedly) post-imperial Global North or the (allegedly) post-colonial Global South. Meanwhile Black intellectual traditions (radical, feminist, queer, anti-colonial, etc.) have long pushed against such narrowing of educational purpose. They teach us the importance of imagination, collaboration, and grit over individualized expertise, status and privilege hoarding. They also insist that everyday people outside the academy know things too. The goal has not been to uphold disciplinary boundaries, national borders, and institutional barriers, but rather to transcend them. This is difficult work. The stakes are high but, as I suggested above, they always have been.

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Left: A grandmother from Lodai massaging Nicolas' son to soothe his motion sickness. (Photo courtesy of Nicolas Bautès)

## On Intimacy in the Field of One's Research

Nicolas Bautès

As academics, whose main social function lies in the combination between research and teaching activities, we are often confronted with the judging gaze of many. Our daily life is punctuated by such interjections that cast doubt on our social utility, on our ability to help students find jobs and build their future, or even on the relevance of a particular course, or on the relevance of our courses to the job market. Behind these doubts lie some of the major issues at stake in our professions, in our educational and ethical commitments to promoting knowledge, fair learning, and to provide keys to understanding the world.

We often approach this world by conducting surveys, so-called qualitative, for they bring us into contact with social situations and people from whom we draw the elements that will enable elaborating - before transmitting - the means of understanding - before acting on - the world. This intrinsic relationship in the social science researcher's approach could be perceived, from the outside, as a banal one. However, when endowed with the caution, respect, and systematism inherent to any proper social (scientific) approach, it turns out to be a truly human (educational) experience. It strongly shapes a profession and builds the very fabric of the social sciences.

Research is at the very heart of a scholar's life because it brings together,

often in intimate situations, individuals from different social positions, career paths, and intentions. The example taken in *Earth as object*<sup>1</sup> illustrates the permeability between the lives we live as researchers and those we present as humans. The encounter with the so-called Other, is made up of these moments of sharing intimacy, daily, life and confidences which, after a delicate process of distancing and analysis, build in meaning which, without constituting a directly mobilisable educational resource, is an important modality of transmission of knowledge. It is also a core feature of social positioning and shapes the scholar's relation to the world. Namely, to be able to consciously address difference, aspiration, regrets, and projections into the future, all the aspects which make the social sciences not just an informed and aesthetic gaze, but rather a truly political relationship with the living world. That way could be a step into the long process toward decolonizing education.

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### Notes

- 1 Nicolas Bautès, "Earth as Object," *Storytelling Repository, Humanities Across Borders*, December 20, 2019, <https://humanitiesacrossborders.org/blog/earth-object>



Fig. 1 (left): Artisan Evelyne Bassène presenting the manufacturing process of clay pottery from Casamance, Senegal to participants of the Craft as Method workshop. (Photograph courtesy of Aarti Kawlra)

## Bringing Back Our Perceptual World

Jyothi Thrivikraman

Upon returning from the *Craft as Method* workshop and the HAB meeting, I began reading "An Immense World" by Ed Yong about the hidden realms of animal senses. The book uses the concept of *Umwelt*; "an *Umwelt* is specifically the part of those surroundings that an animal can sense and experience – its perceptual world."<sup>1</sup>

Reflecting upon the concept as an academic at Leiden University College (LUC) who lives and works in The Hague, *Umwelt* means knowledge. Understandings of where knowledge resides and whose knowledge is valued are based on a hierarchy of knowledge with universities as the pinnacle of all repositories of knowledge. This sense of knowledge being the exclusive domain of universities, ignores other types of knowledge.

This was evident during the *Craft as Method* workshop. Learning about the process of acquiring clay for pottery is a lesson in lived realities of climate change and geography [Fig. 1]. Determining which glass pieces can be combined to make glass beads is a lesson in chemistry. Learning how to look for indigo plants, dry them and dye cloth are lessons in biology, botany, geography, and chemistry. However, the practitioners

of these crafts do not call it such. And further, we in academia do not value this knowledge. The *Craft as Method* workshop was an opportunity to expand and share our *Umwelts* of knowledge, both as experience and perception of the world around us.

For academics, to proactively rethink where knowledge resides is to expand the doors of the universities. For craft practitioners, it is essential to have their stories and knowledge both valued and understood regardless of their location in surprising, even most mundane, everyday spaces, outside the haloed portals of universities. It is important that we have discussions on the place of universities in society and how universities engage with their wider community(ies).

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### Notes

- 1 *An Immense World: How Animal Senses Reveal the Hidden Realms Around Us* (London: The Bodley Head Ltd, 2022), 5.

## Youth Aspirations & Anxieties: Two Stories of Caste Marginalization in Kashmir

Hafsa Sayeed

The stories below are part of my larger research on caste and social exclusion among Muslims in Kashmir. They emanate from the fieldwork conducted in Kashmir with people belonging to marginalised caste communities, such as Sheikhs and Hanjis.

Rasheed was a school dropout because he suffered through a discriminatory pedagogic space where his body was not seen as authentic enough to exist. Rasheed articulated his capacity to aspire through an economic vocabulary, where an economic means to a dignified life upheld dignity and meaning. His aspirations sought an immediate economic recourse that could offer him and his family a sustainable means of income. Rasheed's parents work as *Safai Karamcharis* (sanitation workers) at the municipality, and demand institutionalization of sweeping jobs for the Sheikh community. It is seen as a way to access formal employment. However, Rasheed does not resonate with such aspirations. He wants to take out a loan, buy an auto rickshaw, and drive it. His anxieties rested on a stringent reminder of textual Islamic egalitarianism, where he is equal to all other Muslims

despite his caste and class identity. Rasheed reminded me that despite their community being the cleaners of Kashmir, the society does not extend the much-deserved respect to the Sanitation Workers: "Are we not Muslims? We are all equal in the eyes of Allah, and we clean the society, yet should we be discriminated against like this?"

In yet another district named Bandipora, by the banks of Wular, is a village where the Hanjis live. Hanjis are a marginalized community who are also the fishmongers of Kashmir. They traditionally lived in boats and believe that they are the descendants of Noah. I met a girl there in the ghettoized village of Rubeena. She had completed her Bachelor's from the District College. Her aspirations are reflected through her endeavors of imparting education to the children of her community in the village. Rubeena constantly navigated her anxieties on the borders of the caste, class, and spatial identity that defined her. She told me, "If a Hanji family gains upward mobility, and are educated, yet while searching for a match for marriage, most families find it difficult to overlook the caste identity."

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