

# Dwaalgast

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Elikser Uitgeverij

Review by Ina Keuper

A book review about a novel is a first for *LOVA Journal*. Yet, I think the novel *Dwaalgast* fits well with the topic 'reflections on personal experiences with harassment in the field', mentioned in the call for contributions for this Special Issue. The novel describes how a white female Dutch anthropological researcher and assistant professor at the University of Zambia in Lusaka experiences serious physical and mental health problems after having been harassed in her home by a black Zambian taxi driver and church pastor. Although the main harassment involved extortion with black magic, and not sexual violence, it concerns similar power relations between persons from different backgrounds, like when ethnographers are in their research field.

*Dwaalgast (Wanderer or Vagrant)* is written in Dutch. On the back cover readers are informed that the story is fictional, but based on real experiences of the author. The book is written in the first-person style of 'I' and only on the first page the name of Sophie is mentioned. The story can be read as an auto-ethnography, containing a chain of vignettes: literary sketches of events, meetings, visits, activities, conversations, dreams, reflections, longings, and fears, angers, depressions, reliefs and other emotions of Sophie. These present a vivid image of how Sophie experiences living in Lusaka, her working conditions at the university, her relation with students and colleagues, the houses she rents with their beautiful gardens, trips by car and bus to friends in the Copperbelt area where she did her PhD research and to holiday resorts in Zambia, her contacts with Dutch friends, the parties she visits, and much more.

A central topic in the novel is the harassment Sophie experiences by a local man called Alick. Sophie is attracted to this good-looking man she met on the street near her university workplace where he works as a taxi driver. They get to know each other better by chats on the street and going for drinks in the city. Some months later she invites him to her newly rented house to help her move a heavy desk. During this visit Alick initiates sexual contact without asking her consent. Sophie is embarrassed, but she continues meeting Alick and enjoys their sexual contact although it does not lead to a formal relationship. During one of these meetings at her house a few weeks later, Alick asks Sophie to give him money to buy his own taxi. Sophie refuses and in response, Alick threatens to damage her health and career. He says he will hurt her in her weak spot: her eyesight which has been deteriorating for a while. They have a fight during which Alick pulls hair from Sophie's head, after which he leaves the house.

The second part of the book, titled *Verdwaald (Lost)*, is filled with Sophie's growing health problems, especially with her eyes. She loses her job at the University of Zambia, cannot earn enough income from consultancy work assignments, friends keep their distance from her, and she moves to Malawi for another university job, only to discover that the house she was promised there is in bad condition, making her return to Zambia. In the end, she has to go back to the Netherlands. During the first year after the harassment in her house Sophie still does have chats with Alick in the street and now and then he visits her at home. He can be very nice and supporting. But then again, he requests money from Sophie and threatens her for a second time with personal misfortune. When she finds out that money and important papers in her house got lost, she suspects him. It takes some more time before Sophie realises that her problems might be related with Alick's extortions.

In the third part of the book, *Verlossing (Relief)*, Sophie is back in her beloved Zambia for a low paid consultancy assignment after having recovered from most of her health problems while in the Netherlands.

However, within a short time after her arrival in Zambia, her eyesight deteriorates anew. Following the advice of Zambian friends, she visits two different traditional healers and finds relief. Sophie then acknowledges that she Alick bewitched her with black magic. The last pages describe extensively the various feelings and emotions of Sophie during her healing process; gratitude is expressed for rediscovering joy for life and good health after having experienced so much misfortune as result of black magic. The book ends with a new job offer for Sophie. The third part of this novel feature various detailed descriptions of the many treatment rituals by the traditional healers, which show the ethnographic gaze of the author even more explicitly than the first two parts of the book: “...my anthropological heart beats faster when learning about rituals, herbs, and their effects...” Rasing (p. 271, translation by IK) writes. Sophie uses a notebook to write down all the instructions for her treatment, which she then types on her laptop in the evening, as an ethnographic fieldworker would do.

As the story is based on Rasing’s own experiences, the novel can be read as an autobiographical ethnography. Anthropologist Ruth Behar has discussed this style of writing and she wrote various essays and books about her own experiences and emotions in ethnographic research and writing (e.g. Behar 1993, 1995, 1996). In her introduction of *Women Writing Culture* Behar elaborates on fiction and ethnography. She states that “Fiction (...) can be an ideal genre to putting flesh back both on the anthropological subject and on ourselves as women of the academy. Fiction reaches also a broad audience because it entertains as well educates, enabling anthropological insights to travel further (...) For ethnography to matter in a multicultural world it needs to reach a wider range of audiences both in and beyond the academy” (Behar 1995, 21). In my personal communication with Rasing about her novel, I learned that Behar’s standpoint fits very well with Rasing’s main reason for publishing the book. Rasing told me that she indeed hopes to reach a larger public with her novel, as her scientific publications often do not reach non-scholars. With the novel she wants to provide information

about and enhance awareness of the ongoing omnipresence of the belief in magic and witchcraft in all social layers of Zambia and other African countries. An issue she believes is disregarded much too often by Europeans. Rasing's own experience with and acceptance of the existence of magic and witchcraft helped her to explain and overcome her health and career problems. I continue to wonder how to assess this.

The novel *Dwaalgast* is quite an example of how gender, ethnicity/race, and class intersect. Rasing describes reflections of Sophie about ethnicity/race and class issues related to various events; for example, she reflects on the arrival of a new dean who wants to expel all foreigners in his institution at the University of Lusaka. I was surprised that the role of gender was not explicitly mentioned in Rasing's description of Sophie's reflections on the harassment by Alick, I did read about Sophie as a white Dutch female with a steady academic job in Zambia, and Alick as a black Lusaka male with an enterprise as taxi driver and as pastor in an evangelical church. For Alick, Sophie is a rich white European woman who he can ask to support his enterprise. When she refuses his request, he physically overpowers her and throws a spell on her. I interpret these events as gender-based and as a form of sexual(ized) harassment (Kloß 2017, 400). It could even be interpreted as violence, as Sophie is badly injured by it during a long period in her life. The events occur in the context of the power relations, which in turn are connected to certain values and norms in the gender constructions of Sophie and Alick. These values and norms intersect with the differences in their ethnicity, race, nationality class and economic position. Alick's behaviour can be connected to his belief that a woman should support her man and that his perceived right to control his female partner. Sophie's reaction shows that she does not comply with these beliefs, but she endures much harm from it.

This special issue of *LOVA Journal* concerns (sexual) harassment and intimidation of ethnographers in the research field and its professional and personal implications. It is time to no longer neglect this important topic in anthropology and other disciplines which use

the ethnographic method. Experiences of (sexual) harassment and intimidation are especially common amongst female ethnographers, with varying degrees of trauma as a result. Fortunately, there is a growing group of scholars writing on the topic. For example, Moreno (1995) and Kloß (2017) have both written impressive articles that discuss issues such as silencing, victim-blaming, the role of societal structures and cultural norms, familiarity and relations with the perpetrator the role of power inequalities in the field, personal agency, and much more. Although the novel *Dwaalgast* is not about an ethnographer in the field, the experiences, emotions, and reflections Rasing describes do touch upon many of these issues.

*Dwaalgast* is really well written, I could not stop reading as I wanted to know what next would come up in Sophie's life and how she would react to the events and problems happening to her. This makes the book a page turner. The vivid writing about harassment in a context of structural and cultural differences between victim and perpetrator is an interesting contribution to our knowledge and awareness of harassment in the field.

## About the author

Thera Rasing has been chief editor of *LOVA Journal's* Dutch language predecessor *LOVA Tijdschrift* from 2002 to 2005, followed by another two years of board of editor membership. Between 1997 and 2007 Rasing published eight articles in *LOVA Tijdschrift*. She studied cultural anthropology at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (1990-1994, I was one of her teachers) and did a PhD research project at African Studies Centre of Leiden University. The latter was completed in 2001 with the dissertation *The bush burnt, the stones remain: Female initiation rites in urban Zambia*. From 2005-2010 Rasing worked as assistant professor in gender studies at the University of Zambia in Lusaka. She published many scientific articles about her research.

## About the reviewer

Ina Keuper is a LOVA board member and retired (feminist) anthropology lecturer at Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

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