

Rethinking LOVA's International Summer School 2019

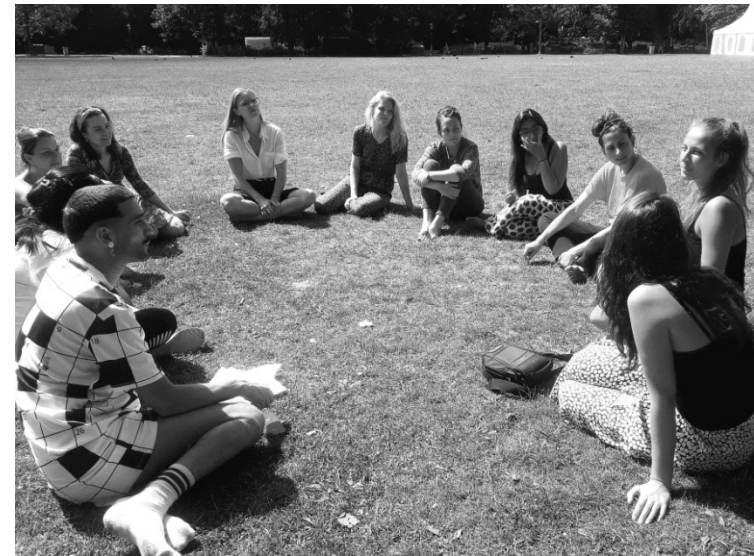
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Many of us who are involved in the world of academia share the very similar experience of a world of commodified education and research; the neoliberal university (Giroux 2014) that privileges auditing practices over quality and content. Moreover, the rise of authoritarianism and far-right politics and precarization of both researchers and research, challenge individual lives of scholars, as well as the freedom and eligibility of academia at large. In such a culture of oppressive competition, to find a space where truly challenging ideas, vulnerability, empathy and passion are appreciated, let alone celebrated, is extremely rare. LOVA International Summer School was therefore a surprising, refreshing, and home-coming experience for all of us who joined to participate in Amsterdam last summer.

The topic of 2019's Summer School was *Unschooling the Anthropologist: Gender, Love and Sexuality*. By attempting to recall the learning experience of the workshops on unschooling – already rather paradoxical statement – one runs the risks of missing the point. How to grasp in words what one has 'unschooled'? The theme suggested that the school would be about forms of unlearning, which at times aimed to *confuse* rather than explain. It unsettled our existing ways of seeing the world and mapped some detours around the

attempted paths of knowledge production. What the summer school has 'taught' us more than anything, is that there is a lack of academic space that would allow for such a process, in which passion and the uncanny are seen as important factors that in fact stimulate research. Janet Conway (2013) said that the value of anthropology and the power of ethnography is precisely in problematizing and politicising the production of knowledge about



LOVA International Summer School participants.
Photo by Irene Arends

'Others'. Reality of academia, however, rarely allows for such dynamics; instead it requires clearly defined deliverables. At LOVA International Summer School, we found a space where questions are not only asked to think about the answers, but also to indulge in the not-knowing. We found a space that does not need to strive to be taken seriously but embraces the playfulness, joy, and simple irrelevance that research can be and perhaps should be, if you read Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011). For these reasons, we

have jotted down notes on spaces such as this particular LOVA International Summer School, and why we need them in academia:

1. We dipped into the summer school with a dive in the Amsterdam canals. What brought us, the participants, together, perhaps more than the general topic of feminism or anthropology, was in fact that we are all trying to find our way in the world of academia. By opening up the first workshop with expressing our deepest personal vulnerabilities, we moved on to questions such as how can one reconcile academic work with activism? Religious belonging with LGBTQ+ rights? Feminism with dancing tango? These were the questions that gave shape to a week full of stories and warm exchange. We had space for not having to choose sides, to simply be in-between, and perform different roles. Instead of becoming more critical, we aimed at becoming more critical of the critical.

2. We were a very diverse group. In just one week, we could explore places from Bolivia to Poland, from Luxembourg to India. During the workshops, it became clear how these cultural backgrounds make us all relate to the question of gender differently. Why one person chooses to shave part of their hair, while the other reclaims their body through dancing bachata? Why one's utopia is another's dystopia? But there was no threshold for this diversity. There was no need to be different. Anyone could join simply by inventing a half-page story about themselves.

3. Anything could have happened, or nothing. During the first summer morning, we asked ourselves who we were, and what our expectations were for the upcoming week. This was not about defining aims and outcomes. It was about creating a space in which all of us could engage, learn, listen and speak up. This space would not be defined but constantly changing according to the sensibility of the group. It made each of us responsible for our own learning environment. In the first session, each participant was asked to

provide some sort of learning space. This 'unconference' departed from what was alive at that moment (this could be an odd question,

Participants
and organizers
Irene Arends
and
Emmy de Wit.



Photo by
Marina de Regt

an urgent story, an act of the body...), thus connecting to the immediate environment. Everybody could attend to each other's session, leave it right away, or stick till the end. This inclusive space celebrated a failed effort, as long as the effort was sincere. It was a space that, in essence, embodied a love for human nature. It gave way to our insecurities and expressed the deep notion that we are all humans.

4. The summer school was born out of a crisis. This is how Reinhilde König opened the week, and it included (perhaps unconsciously) an important message. Crises give rise to new ways of thinking. It is about being angry with the current situation of things, and pushing for change in the awareness that this change might not come. It is about pushing and being pushed. It is about

helping someone else finding the way, and getting lost together. The LOVA International Summer School provides a space in-between this turmoil to reflect and stand still. To truly listening, without already thinking of making a point.

The message we took away from this summer week was that, if we are getting lost while trying to find our way, then let's do so together, more gently, with more compassion for each other and everything else around us. Shanti George paraphrased Margaret Mead in her lecture and reminded us again that the role of anthropology is to participate in creating freedom for other freedoms to exist. However, like Shanti emphasized, this is not possible without scholarly humility of embracing the *de-knowleging*, instead of imposing the knowledge on others by following the corporate order of the current academia.

References

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