

The Gastronomy of Writing: Copenhagen, Denmark October 17-20, 2012
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Looking out the window as one descends into Denmark at night feels like looking down on a thin black wafer of metal stitched with copper electronic circuits, the Scandinavian cities glowing even as people sleep. I'd been visiting friends in Finland, people I met when I completed my Master's degree in English over a decade ago in Kansas. I'd acclimated to the lilt of Swedish vowels and felt refreshed by the jolt of cold sea after my first Finnish sauna. Now I hoped to find in a scholarly conference, the Society for Social Studies of Science (4S), multiple and provocative ways way of thinking about my research, which has begun to evolve since I left my primary profession as a creative writer and freelance journalist a few years ago.

I write about the process of constructing tornado warnings within an operational meteorology lab, and I write about the many public perceptions of weather. Like most scholars, I'm passionate about what I do and, perhaps like many scholars, hope my research reaches many different audiences. This is why I have my own blog about weather safety begun when I first started freelancing, and it's why I'll soon publish my first e-book. What has concerned me most since I began my studies as a Ph.D. student at Virginia Tech eighteen months ago is a problem of retaining my style and voice, both of which I've spent ten years honing even as I transitioned between mediums and audiences. I've written for literary journals, e-zines, parenting magazines, and online blogs. And, occasionally, I've written for academic audiences.

It's the latter, however, that has been most troubling. I've been subtly encouraged to dismiss my instinct to talk about personal experiences and their relationships to my work and to tamp down the figurative language and descriptive language that I spent several years developing in my M.F.A. Add to this the future prospect of a tenure process that requires of writers specific types of publication in certain types of journals or presses, and I feel frustrated by a lack of options. I understand that it's important to write scholarship that is vetted by one's colleagues and publish in venues that one's disciplinary counterparts find legitimate. But I think this process as a whole encourages writers to develop a style that often obscures one's message to readers outside one's field and neglects other publishing venues that would allow one to reach a broader audience, or to reach specific audiences more meaningfully. I've seen faculty members in my own department, for example, not get (much) credit for autoethnographic and personal essays published in scholarly journals, though their message is much more accessible, and I think, enjoyable. So what to do?

Fortunately, I've found reassurance rather quickly and, perhaps, from not an unexpected writer. On Wednesday evening of the conference, the third plenary speaker, Annemarie Mol, a writer whom I've just begun to appreciate, discussed as an example STS case the development of New Nordic food. It's a recent culinary field thriving in the context of the slow, organic, and local food movements. In this post, I'm not so much interested in the ways she famed this particular case as an exemplar of practice for STS scholars; instead, I

take inspiration and solace in the brief (too brief in my opinion) connection she made between gastronomy and the future of STS scholarship.

At the end of her presentation, Mol encouraged scholars to write for their readers as if they were consumers of food, dining on our words. We ought to cultivate, she said, the desire individuals already have for our stories, to satiate their hunger. We ought to seduce them. We ought to stir pleasure in our readers as they feast on our narratives in much the same way chefs attend with care the selection of ingredients and choice of practices as they evoke a culinary experience. A gastronomy of reading and writing.

What a lovely normative declaration about the style and voice of scholars. One *should* exhibit care with such things. (Care is a term I heard repeated throughout the conference: we ought to express care for the treatment of our topics, our colleagues, our work.) I applaud all invocations of care and concern, desire and responsibility, not just for the epistemological content of our publications but for the stylistic ways these objects might be digested in society. But what might care look like?

One of Mol's recent works, *The Logic of Care: Health and the Problem of Patient Choice*, offers one intriguing possibility. In this ethnographic study, Mol explores key issues central to the "geographies of care," a growing field of research in human geography that examines ethical responsibilities among caregivers and the spatial relations of care between people.¹ In healthcare, she notes, the dominant paradigm is a logic of choice based on a model of healthcare that positions patients as consumers and that leaves them to take responsibility for decisions about their own health for which they're often ill-prepared. Mol argues that practitioners should instead embrace a logic of care, or a framework that defines care as an ongoing negotiation between multiple actors, a "relational achievement"² that highlights those practices and activities that constitute an ecology of care. That is, healthcare should not simply be a provider/consumer relationship but a complex network of interactions that together establish an ethic of care—of what might count as good care.

While this version of care is not a perfect analog for the relationship between scholar and reader, it might give us a place to start.

- How might we begin to re-envision the relationship between scholars and readers?
- What practices and activities might we argue constitute an ethic of care for our work?
- What role do voice or style have in this ethic? What counts as good writing? Good for whom?

¹ Lawson, Victoria. 2007. Geographies of care and responsibility. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 97 (1): 1-11.

² Mol, Annemarie. 2008. *The logic of care: health and the problem of patient choice*. London: Routledge.

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<http://wp.me/p1Bfg0-uB>

- And most importantly, where might one find a coterie of like-minded writers concerned about what happens to our messages once they enter the various worlds of readers?

The bottom line is that it's possible to expand what is acceptable in academic scholarship, to push our words into the world in specific, carefully wrought ways and to engage readers not simply as consumers but as something more, something relational. As Mol has so eloquently said in another context, the world, like our bodies, are multiple. I believe that our craft and our engagement with readers should be, as well.

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