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Affective engagement with airport security work: Wor(l)ding material agencies through poetry

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About the Work:

Dear readers. Below you will find two poems. These poems give voice to the practice of security work in a Dutch airport. Writing poems is for us a process of engaging with the research data in an affective way, a process of writing together-apart (Barad, 2014), and a process that sparks joy and creativity. We see the contributions of this paper as twofold: (1) with these poems we feel that we can better capture the material agencies that constitute organizational life, and (2) we hope to spark an affective engagement from you when reading these poems on the doings of airport security work.

About the Authors:

Dide van Eck is PhD candidate of Gender & Diversity at the Institute for Social and Cultural Research at Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands. Her doctoral research explores the (im)possibilities of organizing for inclusivity in low-wage labor contexts. She draws from extensive ethnographic fieldwork and arts-based methodologies such as poetic inquiry to analyze work practices and marginalized experiences.

Noortje van Amsterdam is Assistant Professor of Organization Studies at Utrecht School of Governance. Her work focusses on bodies and health in organizations. Informed by feminist poststructuralist theory, intersectionality and new materialism, her work aims to explore the materialities, affective flows and ideological power structures that create inequalities related to embodied signifiers such as gender, dis/ability, age, sexuality and race/ethnicity. Noortje combines her critical theoretical viewpoint and conventional qualitative methodologies with creative methodologies (e.g. Arts-Based Research, poetic inquiry, visual methods, autoethnographic writing) to shed light on the everyday experiences of people with (their) bodies and health and to inspire critical reflexivity and empathic understanding.

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We booked the room we like working in best. It's on the second floor of the university department and has big windows with a view of the treetops and the sky. Our exchanges are always inspiring; filled with laughter, playfulness and reflection. We have talked extensively about Dide's research project. Her ethnographic research at a large Dutch airport involved six months of participant observation as an airplane cleaner and five months working as a security guard at the airport security lanes with their body scans and luggage x-ray. Today we are talking about the security work.

Noortje: I really love your fieldwork. It is so amazing. I wonder if it is possible to capture some of the complexities of your findings in poetry, especially the more affective and material aspects of the work you have done and observed.

Dide: Yes, this makes me think of Gherardi's (2019b) article on affective ethnography. Wait, let me look it up... she writes, 'ethnographic practice can be seen as an agencement of all those elements that collectively acquire agency in their becoming and intra-acting' (2019b, p. 753). I really think it is important to show the entanglement of me as a researcher with the place of security lanes, other security agents and passengers, everyday activities of security work, materialities such as body scans and X-ray machines, ordinary affects, discourses and various other elements.

Noortje: I think poetry would allow us to do that, to articulate some of the complexity and ambiguity of these entanglements that are hard to grasp in conventional academic writing.

Again we dive into an extensive conversation about Dide's fieldwork. We talk about how she felt doing the work; critical incidents that still provide vivid memories; things that came up in the interviews with managers; how new security agents are recruited through online campaigns; and the instruction manual for security guards. Together, we draw out a number of issues that seem critical for writing about airport security work. We make a shared file on google.doc and start writing. We comment on each others' writing, drink tea and eat chocolate, rewrite, walk, discuss, stare out of the windows at the trees and the sky, and rewrite again. We repeat this writing together-apart (Barad, 2014) a few times over a three month period until we have produced a number of poems that 'feel right'. Through a final selection, we end up with these two:

Performing uniform(ity)

Black shoes;
White blouse;
Carcoal vest; suit-jacket;
Trousers

Tied or sjawled around
Not so uniform necks
Gendered, racialized bodies
Fat, skinny, old and young
Material presences that stick
Out, in, up or down
Made to per-form
uni-form-ity

through formalities

Must be ironed;
 All creases of life
 All celebrated diversity¹
 Pressed out
 To signal
 homogeneity
 neutrality
 equality

The security agent's uniform
 Represents safety
 A shield that protects
 from bombs hidden
 In unidentifiable terrorists'
 Bodies, backpacks, diaper bags
 Suitcases, wheelchairs, cains

 from unwanted racist or sexist comments
 directed at those who wear the uniform
 but whose bodies do not blend well
 into normative ideas about who counts

The uniform does not allow
 Expressions of religion

Headscarf, cross, and yarmulke
 Disturb the idea of neutrality
 Of those who have to touch;
 Search for what they don't want to find
 In or on soon-to-be passengers

The smile becomes a uniform
 A way of saying "you're safe"
 In a language everyone understands

Searching

Body scans only
 think
 in black and white
 "choose male or female"
 but what about the gray
 that fills the cracks
 between the gender binaries?

What does not fit needs
 to be separated, searched

Hands need to be bare-skinned to touch

to feel
 in order to search
 what is not supposed to be there

Eyes need to adjust to
 24/7 work schedules
 where night and day dissolve
 stay awake, stay flex-i-ble

Knees need to carry the weight of going
 up
 and
 down,
 up
 and
 down

Repetitiveness is what makes it deceiving-ly
 exhausting
 leaving you up to no choice but to either
 rise up
 the organizational ladder
 or search for something
 else

The actual touching
 enacts
 a naturalized, non-negotiable
 gender quotum
'only women can search women'

The unwanted intimacy
 of touching and being touched by
 unknown others
 suddenly seem to let
 the hidden, unspoken, everyday
 sexism / racism / homo- and transphobia
 to come out

Highlighted,
 like an x-ray image
 uncovering
 forbidden items
 travelling with us

Postlude

Noortje: I think it is interesting how these poems turned out so different from the poems we wrote based on our research with self-identified fat employees (Van Amsterdam & Van Eck, 2019). Those were focussed on materializing the experiences of our participants, and we used a lot of our participants' words from the interview transcripts as a basic material to construct the poems. The poems about the security work are not that personal actually.

Dide: That's right. They are less anthropocentric. I see them more as our reflection on the entanglement of materiality, affect and discourses in the practices that I engaged in and observed. In that sense, they fit perfectly with practice theory actually (e.g. Gherardi, 2019a; Hui, Schatzki, & Shove, 2016; Nicolini, 2012).

Noortje: I am not that familiar with practice theory. It sounds quite similar to new materialist ideas around decentring the human subject as the unit of analysis and instead looking at about the entanglement of people with all kinds of materialities (Barad, 2003). Can you explain what you mean?

Dide: I think new materialist ideas are part of the same onto-/epistemology as 'posthumanist' practice theory (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Gherardi, 2016). A guiding principle of this onto-/epistemology is that neither humans nor non-humans are prioritized, but it is the entanglements of materiality, affect and discourses that need to be studied in order to understand social and organizational life (Gherardi, 2016). I think the practice of writing poetry allows us to more fully engage with the agency of for instance material things such as x-rays, bodies, and uniforms that actively constitute the activities within the place of security lines. But I do think we need to emphasize that these two selected poems can serve as an *example* of engaging with materiality and affect but are by no means exhaustive of my fieldwork within airport security work.

Noortje: I just hope that by addressing these materialities through imaginative wordings these poems can spark an affective engagement from the readers (Gilmore, Harding, Helin, & Pullen, 2019; Meier & Weigener, 2017). It's always hard to know if they 'work' (Leavy, 2010). But I guess we need to leave that up to the readers.

Dide: I also worry that because this paper has been 'easy' in the sense that the process of writing together and commenting on each other's poems was fun. And that makes me insecure; is it good enough? I have internalized this idea that academic writing should be painful, difficult, hard, lonely even – only then I feel that it counts as 'good science'.

Noortje: Yes and that it should be boring right? I think this also relates to masculine ideas of academic writing: that the author presents him/herself in the text as an authority through jargon, framing, disembodied writing and generalized knowledge claims as Pullen (2018) and Grey & Sinclair (2006) write. I think that kind of writing is often boring to read. I imagine this collaborative piece as our way of resisting these demands, of rebelling against hypermasculine ideas of what counts as good academic writing and present alternative ways that can be joyful, generous and based on feminist solidarity.

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¹ (Ahmed, 2012; Ahonen, Tienari, Meriläinen, & Pullen, 2014)