

The Materiality of Research: 'Thinking and Writing in Time and Space' by Ninna Meier

blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/2016/05/20/the-materiality-of-research-thinking-and-writing-in-time-and-space-by-ninna-meier/

In this feature essay, **Ninna Meier** explores the relationship between time, space and academic writing. She ponders the 'portable magic' of research: namely, the capacity for our thoughts to be both grounded in a particular point in time and space and yet simultaneously 'free from these dimensions, able to extend vast distances and travel'.

This essay is part of a series examining the material cultures of academic research, reading and writing. If you would like to contribute to the series, please contact the Managing Editor of LSE Review of Books, Dr Rosemary Deller, at lsereviewofbooks@lse.ac.uk.

Thinking and Writing in Time and Space



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Academic work never ceases to amaze me: it is the result of individual achievements and accumulations of knowledge across time, place and academic fields. It is tied to, and carried out by, human beings at a certain point in time and space, and yet it is free from these dimensions, able to extend vast distances and travel beyond the author's control to reappear in multiple locations at once or even after hundreds of years. I get this image in my head of being an entity on the surface of the earth, grounded, and that my thoughts, through words, can travel and thus connect to the thoughts of other entities, grounded at other places and in other times (or even simultaneously).

Milan Kundera points out in his novel *Immortality* (1992) that there are actually a lot more people on the earth over time than movements our bodies can make. In this light, the movements – not the individuals – can be seen as the more unique of the two; the movements express themselves through us, the humans, as vast numbers of us are born, live and die. I am not suggesting a similar shift in how we think about academic work as bodies and thoughts-in-words. However, when I think about the doubled nature of academic work, this image comes to mind. I kept

thinking about how academic work is both contextual, tied to a person with a body in time and place, *and* able to connect with people and thoughts/words, in several places at the same time, distributed.

Writing as practice is related to time and place in the same strange way. As [Stephen King](#) (2010) reminds us, writing is portable magic: through writing we may communicate across time and space, yet as we write, we are beings in a physical world, sitting at *this* desk, in *this* chair, reaching out through the words. Most of us have had the pleasure of losing time when we write, perhaps even feeling as if we are emerging from a deep dive to the surface, refreshed, when we are done with that day's work. At other times, writing (as the activity of crafting words and sentences) continues regardless of where we are as physical bodies. We may even start writing in our minds when we are still asleep.

This happens to me during deep, continuous data analysis and writing. When I go to sleep, this is where the action is. I will sleep lightly and wake up several times during the night, but I will have 'written' sentences, sometimes paragraphs, in my head, and during the hours between 4 and 6am, I have on several occasions solved issues I couldn't figure out when I was awake. On such a day, I'll wake up early, already crafting sentences in my head; the best way to harvest these words is to go, undisturbed, to the computer and start typing without speaking to someone. I quietly slip out of bed without waking the rest of the house, put on my favourite yoga pants and one of my husband's old, oversized t-shirts, turn the computer on in the study and go downstairs and make myself a cup of coffee. I bring some water as well, but real food distracts me at this point, so I just start either by opening the file (if I am writing) or by picking up wherever I reluctantly left off the night before. My day is then split between absorption in the material and annoyance that I can't finish *all the work* in one stretch.

During such periods, I am not much fun to live with, because even when I am present, I am not really fully there. I don't go to the office, because the act of preparing to meet the world (make-up, nice clothes) is a distraction to my concentration. The thought of dressing up, packing my bag and cycling to work and interacting puts me off. I need to *not move* physically to be able to move forward *analytically*, and my home office becomes an extension of my thoughts; [I distribute them across the room](#). For others, this part of the process may look entirely different (I hope it does – it would be interesting to hear about how other academics *actually* work). But for me, the focus needed to carry out this kind of work requires me to push bodily concerns to the background and be simultaneously enormously present with my mind. Such periods are quite demanding, but the focus and 'deep dive thinking' that this way of working allows for is so rewarding for me that I am willing to pay the bodily price of exhaustion and pain in my back and neck that takes a few weeks of recovery time afterwards.

It is an important part of the materiality of research, I think, that this work is embodied and disconnected at the same time. I like to think of it this way: thoughts need what we could call an action point or touch point, a body and a consciousness, to connect; and that connection is always conditioned by what this person brings into it and how this person uses the thoughts/words in new combinations. When I write, I can't imagine who is going to read it and so I never have a specific audience in mind. But my attention is directed at what I imagine to be the network of connections and relationships that are formed and reformed through academics putting their words and works out there. This is a beautiful, even poetic, image to me, and it motivates me to contribute to all this potentiality for knowledge, change, improvement, understanding, and (hopefully) impact more than any demands to 'publish or perish'. This, to me, is the *why* of academic work, or at least it's what I strive for: through endless iterations of reading, thinking, engaging and writing, I weave my personal threads into the network. I might add my work and make some threads stronger or change their colour ever so slightly or all together, *or* – as is probably the dream of all of us – I might start a new connection between previously unconnected threads for other academics to test the strength of, or add to in the future.

Ninna Meier is a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Organisation at Copenhagen Business School. [Read more by Ninna Meier](#).

Note: This feature essay gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of

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