

DOWN THE DESIRE PATH

Amelia Groom

When heading to the Sandberg Instituut or the Rietveld Academie, I usually ride my bike from the north, down Jasonstraat, towards the back entrance of the campus. After crossing the bridge over the canal, I take a right and follow the pavement along the water, and then I turn left. At this point, I veer off the paved path and follow the short, unofficial trail that cuts diagonally across the grass. This unpaved pathway leading into the school is what's called a 'desire line'; a line that was not part of any official design or planning, but has arrived instead through repeated and ongoing usage.

This essay is about such lines, into and through and out of the institution; lines of precedence, lines of convenience, lines that invite and accommodate, lines of entrenched default positions, lines of deviance, lines left by desire.

I first started thinking about the desire line while reading queer-feminist theorist Sara Ahmed.¹ She writes about the ways in which paths established by precedent invite further usage, but then it's their further usage that keeps the pathway cleared. As she puts it, "The more a path is used the more a path is used."² This kind of circularity can manifest as entrapment: think of how our attention is algorithmically managed online, when content that has received more attention (higher 'engagement rate' metrics) is made more visible, but then by being made more visible it receives (even)

more attention. Things are seen more simply because they have been seen more, and in having been seen more they end up being seen more.

In the context of the academy, the entrapment of attention loops is at work in public programing, curriculum building, and other citational practices where things are referred to and included because they are the things that have been referred to and included previously – and in continuing to reproduce the established narratives and epistemes, we end up entrenching them even further. "A book will tend to fall open on pages that have been most read", Ahmed notes. "Once a tendency has been acquired, a conscious effort to go that way is no longer necessary. Things fall that way almost of their own accord. The reproduction of the same thing is precisely what does not have to be willed."³

¹ Ahmed has turned to desire lines in a number of her publications, including *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2006); *Willful Subjects* (Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2014); *Living A Feminist Life* (Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2017), and *What's The Use? On The Uses of Use* (Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2019). I first wrote about the desire line behind the Rietveld building, with reference to Ahmed's work, in a commissioned text that was exhibited as part of 2 UNLIMITED at De Appel in 2018. Parts of this essay expand on that work.

² Feministkilljoys (Sara Ahmed), 'Institutional As Usual', 24 October, 2017. Accessed through: <https://feministkilljoys.com/2017/10/24/institutional-as-usual/>.

³ Sara Ahmed, *Living A Feminist Life*, p. 273.



Photo by Amelia Groom

It takes more will to find the paths that are less entrenched, but part of feminist and anti-racist practice, is, as Ahmed puts it, “to create a crisis around citation, even just a hesitation, a wondering, that might help us not to follow the well-trodden citational paths.”⁴

4 Ibid. p. 271

When considering routes of navigation through life, where passage is eased by precedent, Ahmed refers to heterosexuality as a path that many go down simply because it is so much more visible than the alternatives. The pathway remains smoothed-out and cleared of obstacles and discouragement, being endlessly maintained by inherited imagery, structures of institutional support, and established cultural narratives. As Ahmed also observes, though, paths only provide smooth passage to those who already fit their requirements. Career paths and paths into institutions, for example, can be clearly laid out, by precedence, in front of those with the right crystallizations of privileges. And when the path is clear for them, their ease of passage is experienced as unexceptional. The ground seems level and smooth for those who have inherited level and smooth bits of ground, but clearing the way for more diverse routes of access involves acknowledging the unevenness of the broader terrain.

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I started teaching at the Sandberg in January 2015. Over the last six and a half years, I have held an annual writing seminar in the Critical Studies department, and taken on various other roles including thesis supervision, assessment committee work, admissions interviews, public program administration, and graduation show coordination. I was the theory tutor for the Master of Voice, and the thesis supervisor for Approaching Language – both temporary masters programmes which disappeared from the school after their allocated two years. I have also taught theory at the Rietveld’s Graphic Design department, and ran

5 Like many of my colleagues at Rietveld / Sandberg, I have only ever been a freelancer invoicing for my hours, which has meant no sick days, no health or other insurance contributions, no holiday or other leave entitlements, no pension, no support as a non-EU person securing the work permit that allows me to be here as a freelancer, no long-term regularity or predictability in terms of my schedule or income, no wrongful dismissal protections, and no sense of security in terms of any commitment to a shared future. I am also not given any hours to support my research practice (though I have noticed the institution posting on their website about my publications, so they do use the outcomes of my research as part of their projected public image). I'm not going to focus on the institution's labour practices in this essay – maybe someone else will do that in a future installment of this 'commissioned critique' series! – but I will just say, burrowed over here in a footnote, that this neoliberalized precarity and extreme atomization for workers has an inevitable effect on the kind of education the students receive at the school.

workshops and reading groups within the school's Studium Generale programme.⁵

During the last eighteen months, while the pandemic relegated most teaching and administrative meetings to Zoom, I was paid to participate in a number of fairly recent Rietveld & Sandberg initiatives which have facilitated cross-departmental conversations between teachers, administrators and department heads. Namely, I joined the *Hear! Here!* staff study group on 'critical pedagogy', and I participated in the 2020-2021 programme of *Unsettling*, an "intra-curricular initiative" which works "between and beyond the structures and discourses of the academy to unsettle the Rietveld and Sandberg from the roots up".⁶

<https://unsettling-rietveldsandberg.net/about>

A lot of our discussions were centered on diversity and inclusivity, including issues around racial justice and equality – or lack thereof – in the institution's citational practices and distribution of resources; implicit hierarchies within the classroom, and broader projects of emancipatory pedagogies. Conversations like these within the contexts of Rietveld & Sandberg are not new, but the institution's new allocation of resources to support such conversations would seem to suggest that there is a desire to start paving new pathways of acknowledgement and action. Notably, though, nobody from upper management ever attended any of the sessions; reminding us that the value of the conversations can be 'recognized' but outsourced, as if the problem can be dealt with by being sent elsewhere. Now I am being commissioned to critique the institution for this series of texts called 'commissioned critique'⁷, and I'm wondering whom within the institution is actually going to read this...

7 Given how precarious our positions of employment are, any critique commissioned from freelance teachers like myself is going to be pretty compromised / compromising; instead of "com crit" we could call this series "com com crit."

Anyway, while participating in the staff workshops and discussions over Zoom during the locked-down winter of 2020/2021, I found myself thinking more and more about the ways in which highly sophisticated discourse can actually work to obfuscate a lack of real structural change. I had just had a very disappointing personal experience as a contributor to a journal

which explicitly positions itself as a critical feminist platform, and I was feeling naïve for having assumed that the commitments affirmed in the contents of the journal would carry over to any kind of ethics in their ways of working. I was also noticing a certain dynamic in some of the Zoom meetings I was attending, where some participants (myself included) were often frustrated by the ways in which certain individuals (invariably cis white men) would repeatedly and very comfortably occupy enormous amounts of our limited time and group energy, while also being very good at apologizing for doing so. What was striking was that the verbal language could display such refined awareness and sensitivity, while the behaviour could continue to reproduce the status quo.

There's often an assumption that once the unnamed power structures and invisibilized histories of violence that we've inherited are named and acknowledged, then the necessary restructuring and redistributive justice will have begun. But acknowledgement on its own does not necessarily shift anything structurally. We can adopt the right vocabulary, do all the right name checking, and become highly skilled in identifying and analysing oppression and inequality, but if the language is not accompanied by ongoing practice, nothing changes.

Here I want to draw from another idea developed by Sara Ahmed, that of 'non-performativity'. Performative utterances were conceptualized by philosopher of language J. L. Austin as statements that *perform* an act rather than *describe* it.⁸ In Ahmed's inversion, non-performatives work by saying while *not bringing something into effect*. The gap between what institutions *declare about themselves* (in terms of projected public image, internal statements of commitment to diversity, or official policies for inclusivity and equality) and what they actually *enact in practice* serves as an important reminder of the extent to which declarations can not only *bypass* but sometimes even work to *block* real action and recognition.⁹

When statements of commitment to anti-racism are presented as *evidence* of commitment to anti-racism, it's not just that there's a disconnect between 'talking the talk' and 'walking the walk' – it's that the non-performative becomes the mechanism by which the institution ensures that nothing actually shifts. In Ahmed's words,

⁸ In contrast with statements that can be evaluated as true or false, performative utterances (such as "I promise ...", "I hereby declare ...", "you're fired", or "I quit") carry out an action.

⁹ See Sara Ahmed "Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism" in *Borderlands*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2004); Sara Ahmed, "The Nonperformativity of Antiracism" in *Meridians*, 2006, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2006), pp. 104-126; and Sara Ahmed, "How Not to Do Things with Words" in *Wagadu: A Journal of Transnational Women's and Gender Studies*, 2016, Vol. 16, pp. 1-10.

Declaring a commitment to opposing racism might function as a form of organizational pride: antiracism as a speech act might then accumulate value for the organization, as a sign of its own commitment. A university that commits to antiracism might also be one that does not recognize racism as an ongoing reality, or if it did recognize such racism, then it would be more likely to see that racism as coming from 'strangers' outside of the institution rather than 'natives' inside it. It is as if the university now says, if we are committed to antiracism (and we have said we are), then how can we be racists? Paradoxically, the recognition of racism can be taken up as a sign of commitment, which in turn blocks the recognition of racism.¹⁰

¹⁰ Sara Ahmed, "The Nonperformativity of Antiracism" in *Meridians*, 2006, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2006), pp. 104-126; 110.

In other words, the problem is not just that the discussions about improving diversity and inclusivity at the institution are not taken seriously, or that action points arrived at in such meetings are not followed through – it's that the mere fact of the meetings having taken place can be included as an achievement in annual reports, and used as self-congratulatory evidence that the problems have been acknowledged, as if the work has now been 'done' – thereby functioning to hinder rather than enable action that would have a meaningful effect at a structural level.

There is of course much important work to be done in reinscribing the pathways of feminist and anti-racist genealogies, but it can also be deeply troubling to realize the extent to which diversity can be cosmetically achieved with an institution's citational practice – through its public programming, for instance, or with staff workshops run by people of colour on precarious contracts – and meanwhile when you look at the people and the mindsets that remain in positions of actual power and security at the institution's core, whiteness still reigns.



"That things 'just go on' is the catastrophe."¹¹

With these words, Walter Benjamin offers us a reorientation, whereby catastrophe is not something looming in the future that we can try to stave off – it's already in our midst, running

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, "Central Park" (Translated by Lloyd Spencer and Mark Harrington) in *New German Critique*, No. 34 (Winter, 1985), pp. 32-58; p. 50.

through the inherited structures that reproduce themselves through a status quo which is so entrenched that it can pass as a neutral precondition.



Let's return to the desire line cutting across the grass at the back of the Rietveld building. I have so far described this path as a kind of cautionary image, with regards to the entrenchment of existing attention loops, and the catastrophic maintenance of the status quo. But I also want to turn to it as a hopeful image, one that affirms the fact that bodies do not always obey the official routes that are laid out – and, crucially, that our collective deviations can leave lasting impressions which accommodate others. Beginning to veer away from the paved path can be dangerous, and exhausting. With less precedence, there's less support, and more resistance. The path is bumpy at first, but divergence can begin to mark new traces of desire, and these can smooth things out and begin to welcome others who follow. In this sense, the work of forging alternative pathways is crucial for practices committed to critical awareness and social justice that can foster communities of support and solidarity *across time*.

When thinking about the image of the desire path, some might recall the 'lines made by walking' that the British land artist Richard Long started doing in the late 1960s, where he would document tracks that he had left in natural landscapes by repeatedly walking back and forth along a line, until the line was worn down. The lines he made by walking are traces of passage which point to unofficial, unpaved routes through the landscape. But they differ in several crucial ways from the lines of collectively maintained, open-ended usage that I am interested in here. Long's lines are imbued with individual intentionality and authorship – and their processes of inscription are clearly demarcated in time. He selects a site, he begins walking back-and-forth along a line, he stops when the path has been sufficiently entrenched, and then he photographs it, becoming the sole author of the image.

In contrast, the desire path at the back of the Rietveld building doesn't really hold up as an object of conscious authorship, or as a matter of individual choice (as in Robert Frost's famous poem *The Road Less Taken*, which ends with the lines "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I— / I took the one less traveled by"). I'm interested in the desire line as a non-heroic and unintentionally inscribed trace, which can only arrive slowly, through open-ended, collective practice, where

the different contributors are not always or necessarily aware of the fact that they are contributing. This is not an idea of collectivity wherein everyone gets together and forms a consensus about what to do. Rather, it's a kind of collectivity that is enacted *across time*, as an ongoing practice of many bodies who follow and leave traces from and for many other bodies – none of whom can be credited as author.

An artwork which goes much further in embodying this complexity is *Transmission* (2007), a study of touch and the slow accrual of its effects, by Harun Farocki. The film shows various monuments and religious sites around the world where pilgrims and tourists line up to make momentary contact with surfaces that have been imbued with significance, and that have, as a result, been worn down and marked out as zones of ongoing attention. At part of a stone wall in Jerusalem which is said to bare Christ's handprint, for instance, people take turns touching the same spot, and through the repeated contact, the stone is worn away – leaving an indent which attracts more hands, which then contribute to further indentation.

Throughout the film, stony surfaces appear uncannily soft and receptive. We're not used to seeing solid rock yield to the touch of bodies in this way, because it's something that only happens over a long span of time – a span of time that stretches beyond the significance of any single individual. In putting their hands where Jesus's hand is said to have been, the anonymized bodies that momentarily enter into Farocki's frame are not just reaching toward a past event, they're also participating in an ongoing practice – one in which everyone's contribution is as insignificant as everyone else's, but together they nonetheless maintain a site that accommodates future arrivals.



When thinking about pedagogical practice, I often return to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's description of education as a process that engenders an "uncoercive rearrangement of desires".¹² Through such a formulation, we can imagine a situation where the primary role of the teacher is not to impart pre-determined knowledge onto their unknowing pupils, but rather to hold space for a collective and non-coercive process of rearranging – of establishing alternative routes of access, finding other lines of navigation, and rerouting the

¹² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Terror: A Speech After 9-11" in *boundary 2* (2004) 31 (2): pp. 81-111.

paths of desire, so that together we might end up better equipped to avoid the catastrophe of things ‘just going on’.

Elsewhere, Spivak also has helpful things to say about the non-heroic temporalities of maintenance efforts, with regards to what she calls “the practical politics of the open end”. When we brush our teeth, she points out, “we don’t think we are fighting a losing battle against mortality”. The repeated effort of teeth cleaning might be considered as *doomed to failure*, in the sense that we are all going to die – but we think of it in terms of ongoing upkeep and maintenance. “This kind of activity cannot be replaced by an operation,” Spivak observes. “We can’t have a surgical operation which takes care of the daily maintenance of a body doomed to die. That operation would be identical with death.”¹³

¹³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (Routledge, New York and London, 1990) p. 105. Thank you to M. Ty for pointing me towards Spivak’s tooth-brushing analogy.

In contrast with “political theorists who are opining from the academy with theological solutions once and for all”, Spivak says, brushing your teeth is something you have to keep doing, over

and over again.¹⁴ As an analogy for practical politics, ¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 40.

everyday tooth-cleaning is distinct from the “massive ideological act (the surgical operation) which brings about drastic change”. Both modes are necessary, but as Spivak points out, the big “surgical-operation” kind of politics often seems to deny “the everyday maintenance of practical politics.”¹⁵ ¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 105.



If the school’s efforts at carving out new pathways and lines of desire are to have any meaningful, lasting effect, the project needs to be seen as one that requires ongoing upkeep, at the level of mundane daily practice. The insidious inheritance of white supremacy runs throughout all kinds of seemingly minor default assumptions and tendencies, including in what Audre Lorde identified as “that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and

which knows only the oppressors’ tactics, the oppressors’ relationships.”¹⁶ As such, its undoing cannot be outsourced, or simply checked-off from a to-do list, or achieved once and for all with some spectacular, heroic gesture of a surgical operation.

¹⁶ Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press, Berkeley, 1984).

If it fell into disuse, the smoothed-out path at the back of the Rietveld would become bumpy, and the grass would grow back, and the disappeared space that constitutes the trail would itself start to disappear – but as long as it is preserved through the ongoing usage, the path keeps inviting further usage. So there’s enormous responsibility involved in thinking about the practices of attention that we want to participate in – and the ways in which they might congeal into lasting structures. The landscape we arrive at is not a tabula rasa; there are the paved and well-worn inscriptions that have been maintained before we show up. We have to work with what’s already there, but we also don’t have to only follow and reproduce the most visible lines; the task is to be able to acknowledge the inheritance of entrenched and emergent pathways, as well as the necessity of collectively sustaining or re-routing them.

Amelia Groom is a Berlin-based writer and art historian. She is currently a postdoctoral researcher at the The Laboratory for Art Research, Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, Copenhagen. She teaches writing and theory at the Sandberg Institute’s Critical Studies department. Her book *Beverly Buchanan: Marsh Ruins* was published by Afterall One Work in 2021, and she is currently working on a collection of essays about silence.

C O M M I S S I O N E D

C R I T I Q U E

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