

Justus Liebig University Giessen

Department of English

Seminar: Healing: Art and Theory (Module: Research Methodology)

Lecturer: Professor Greta Olson

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MA Thesis Presentation Review

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Uncertainty, Chaos, and an Invitation to Healing

We still find ourselves in times of great uncertainty, stress, and anxiety and thus in this pivotal moment of “What is happening?”, “Where is this going?”, “How can I cope?” we should take time for ourselves to reflect, to look inward, and to pay attention to our inner voice. I am writing this down because I realized that I struggled to grant myself this crucial task to take care of myself. As the world turned upside down, I still somehow expected myself to continue functioning as normal, to make sure nothing would interfere with my work routine, anchoring in auto-pilot mode seemed like the only safe solution. And yet, inevitably, this unsustainable strategy was meant to fail as I felt the passion and joy for my studies fading away, “other” things taking up my mental space, distracting me from being guided by my inner compass that would lead the way to destination thesis project. So, how can one find a coping mechanism during this time? What are helpful strategies to deal with all that is happening around us and that seems daunting, worrying, even paralyzing at times?

When I read the title and course description for this seminar, I (as well as most others, I suppose) felt an instant connection. “Healing”. This word stuck out, screaming at me; Is this what I need to do, too? To heal? If so, how? And from what exactly? As we went along with the seminar, I realized how important it is to define healing and to look at its theoretical understanding as well as different ways in which healing can emerge, be expressed, and practiced. This process of description helped me to gain perspective and to conceptualize an emotion-based experience that otherwise would be challenging to grasp or to put into words. At the same time, the class atmosphere enabled a highly supportive environment, a “safe space” where vulnerability was not only accepted but strongly encouraged. What surprised me about the classwork was the fact that healing was actively practiced by engaging in various exercises such as expressive writing, breathing techniques, or mindful-based drawing. It appeared unconventional in the sense that theory was put into (direct) practice, thus resulting in a rather “holistic” cognitive process of gaining knowledge not only through reading but also by active participation and experiencing. And of course, sharing some of our experiences along the way turned out to be not only extremely inspiring but also part of a healing process too.

Gaining Perspective – Point of Transformation

I want to explain the transformative power that I experienced because of the seminar, that is because of the general participation and the interaction with classmates. I am intending to describe this process as a two-fold development that occurred both externally as well as internally. On the outside, the overarching topic of the seminar enabled me to explore the concept of healing, which inspired me to imagine possible research ideas for my MA thesis based on that notion. As we were looking at cultural ways of healing, I was particularly fascinated by creative and performative acts that demonstrate the potential to hold space for grieving and healing. Amanda Gorman's poetry and her powerful voice moved and touched me deeply as her work illustrates the innate force of the Arts to find words for the things we struggle to name. As she described herself, "the fight for social injustice not only inspires my writing but my life's work. Through poetry I can speak to both the world's problems and its solutions, as well as the microcosms of conflict inside myself. I love writing poetry because it is innately cutting-edge" ("Amanda" 2017: n. pag.).

Gorman's emphasis on using poetry as a channel to express herself made me refocus again on my passion for literature. I, therefore, reset my focus on literary analysis and the potential of literature as a way of (cultural) worldmaking. I found this approach highly interesting as it investigates how experiencing times of crises, great uncertainty, and chaos is culturally negotiated and captured in the form of literature and what this can then signify for individual and collective processes of grieving and healing. Based on the observation that literature can become a powerful tool to express ourselves in difficult times became my point of departure to ask myself: What value may literature represent during uncertain, critical, and problematic times? Could literature represent a coping mechanism for writers and readers? In which ways does literature make sense of a reality that becomes too surreal?

While engaging with a variety of interdisciplinary class material and pondering on different strategies and spaces to provide opportunities to heal, we also focused on the Covid-19 pandemic as an acutely important topic of analysis. Because of its ongoing relevance, this "global health crisis" – as it has been framed predominantly – brought significant change, uncertainty, trauma, stress, chaos, loss, anxiety, etc. into our lives and thus bringing precisely those questions of the ways in which we can make sense of this time, of the ways in which we can heal from what we experience right now,

into the fore. Despite my initial hesitation to deal with the pandemic in my MA thesis, the classwork changed my mind because I was reminded again of the importance and potential to make a meaningful contribution in researching this acutely relevant time in history.

While the seminar introduced me to new theoretical approaches and material that influenced the process of finding a topic for my MA thesis, I also embarked on a transformative journey on the inside. As already mentioned, I was struggling to cope with the major changes I had to deal with since the beginning of the pandemic. Studying changed so dramatically and social distancing turned university life into a very lonely affair. I was spending all day, every day in front of my computer, by myself with social interaction limited to the screen of my laptop. I believe that during this time we all realized how important it is for our studies to maintain connection, to exchange ideas, to listen to each other, to engage in discussions, and to check in with each other. All these crucial components were fading away by digital improvisation. Like for many others, I find this time to be extremely challenging, especially in the sense of finding a way to continue working whilst allowing myself time and space to process all that has been happening.

On that personal processing and healing journey, the seminar has proven to be of great support and help. As we discovered some of the theories and conceptual approaches, we also tried several exercises which we then discussed in class. That way, we had time to sit with our own thoughts and feelings, helping to consciously reflect on our struggles and worries of the last few months, and this gave way to learning how to practice mindfulness by looking inward. At the same time, the group discussion represented a way to share connection. Listening to other classmates' experiences brought a new perspective and helped me to feel less alone. I felt understood and heard as I was reminded that we are all in this together. Eventually, I realized that my MA thesis could thus also be part of my own personal healing journey. And the seminar was a way to guide me through it. To invite me to this transformative journey.

After a couple of meetings with the class lecturer, Professor Greta Olson, a MA thesis topic was sketched out. As I came across a collection of Corona short stories, commissioned by the New York Times, I found this to be suitable material for my theoretical approach. It would be a perfect example of literature emerging from this critical time that may shed light on the ways in which we can make sense of the world by creating (fictional) stories.

Progress, Presentation, and Peers

An important part of the seminar was the preparation for the presentation towards the end of term. This part of the colloquium was a meaningful step for the MA thesis project. Since I needed some time to decide on a topic, I did feel some pressure to have enough material for my presentation. However, I felt reassured that it would be ok to present whatever I had at the time. I still tried to put a lot of effort into getting myself prepared and trying to progress as much as possible. That mainly included a lot of reading to get an overview of the existing literature and theoretical field. Based on that reading of theory and my material of analysis I created the content which seemed important to me to present in class. Because I was preparing my content and work for an actual audience, I paid attention to the ways in which I was gathering and structuring information. In particular, I was mindful of the fact that fellow students would be unfamiliar with the topic, theory, and material. Therefore, I kept other people's perspectives in mind and tried to maintain some clarity. The first steps of working on my thesis project were thus well organized and thoughtfully executed.

The presentation itself then proved to be a great experience and an opportunity to exchange ideas with fellow students and to receive overall feedback. In general, I would say, presenting my research work in front of others helped me to understand myself and my ideas better. I felt like putting my own mind out there was a very powerful moment. It enables self-reflection and gaining alternative perspectives. This was further emphasized by the interaction with classmates. Right after the presentation, I had the opportunity to engage in a discussion with those who had just listened to my thesis project. The feedback I received straight after my presentation revolved around my presentation style but also about the content. It was a great motivation boost to learn that others find my topic interesting and that they feel like it has some "value". It was also interesting to see how there were certain aspects that appealed to certain students. For instance, in my presentation, I mentioned that I was playing around with the idea to incorporate a word map using some data analysis program. This seemed to spark interest among the linguistic-oriented students and so I may have the chance to receive some further feedback or advice for this idea going forward.

After the presentation, I also received an email with further, anonymous feedback from two fellow students. Although this wasn't much, it still had a lot of importance.

This point of criticism referred to my theoretical approach, which I had explained to be based on “narratives of crises”. As the feedback pointed out, it would be necessary for me to define whether I would want to set my focus on the short stories and the theory of narratives of crises is supporting the analysis or If I want to focus on the theory of narratives of crises and using the short stories analysis to strengthen and support the theory. This argument was certainly important because it helped me to understand that there needs to be some clarification on the actual point of departure for my thesis project. It also led me to do further reading after my presentation in which I gained new ideas and some clarity on my preferred research focus. This particular feedback thus contributed to the further development of my thesis project.

Another point of criticism that has been made referred to the concept of worldmaking and the ways in which this can happen. As I had my initial focus on “narratives of crises” I was reminded that narratives are only one way of worldmaking and that there might be other ways worth looking at as well for my research. In that sense, receiving feedback helped me refocus and it represented a crucial moment in the process of developing my thesis project.

Looking ahead

I am now looking towards the next few months of intensive work on my thesis project. The preparation for the presentation, the process of presenting as well as the reflective phase including receiving feedback all contributed to my thesis project because it had a significant influence and impact. As I mentioned, structuring my thoughts and ideas for an audience helped me to maintain a clear and organized perspective and prevented me from getting “lost”. I want to emphasize that having had a presentation lined up shortly after deciding on a topic was a helpful challenge because although it was stressful, I can say that it forced me to get going straight away. I tried to be aware of the fact that this would be a “snapshot” of my thesis project and that it is a work in progress. The feedback I received was valuable as it showed me different perspectives and suggestions that I want to consider going forward. With the mindfulness exercises that we did in class, I also feel equipped with some helpful tools that can accompany me during this work-intensive phase and I believe to have gained more resilience with the knowledge of how to listen to my inner thoughts and feelings.

Works Cited

“Amanda Gorman” (2017). *The Project for Women*, October 4, 2017, accessed September 10, 2021, <<https://www.theprojectforwomen.com/girls/amanda-gorman/>>.