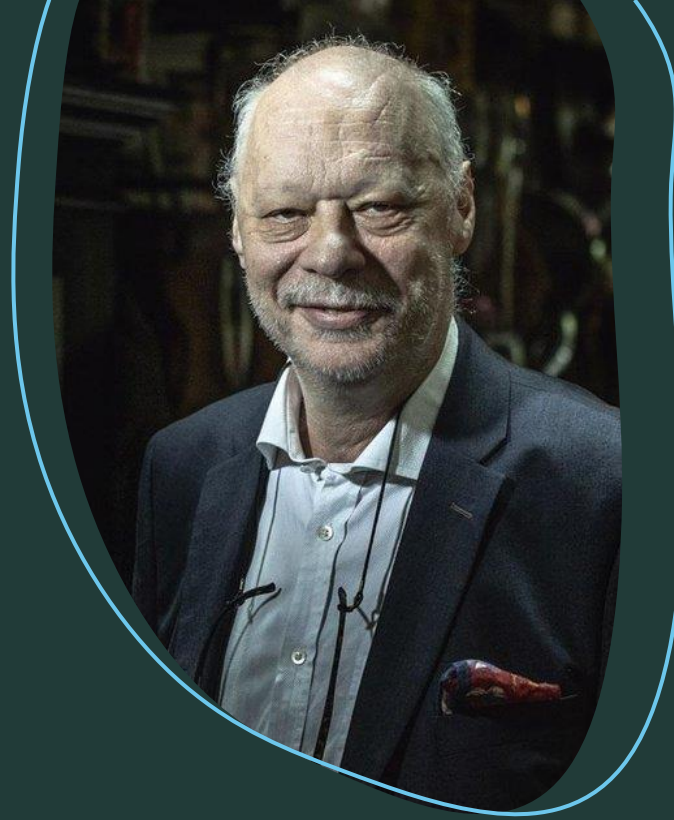


Bright soul
Jan Blommaert
(1961-2021)

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L5mnFRf3lco&list=RDL5mnFRf3lco&start_radio=1



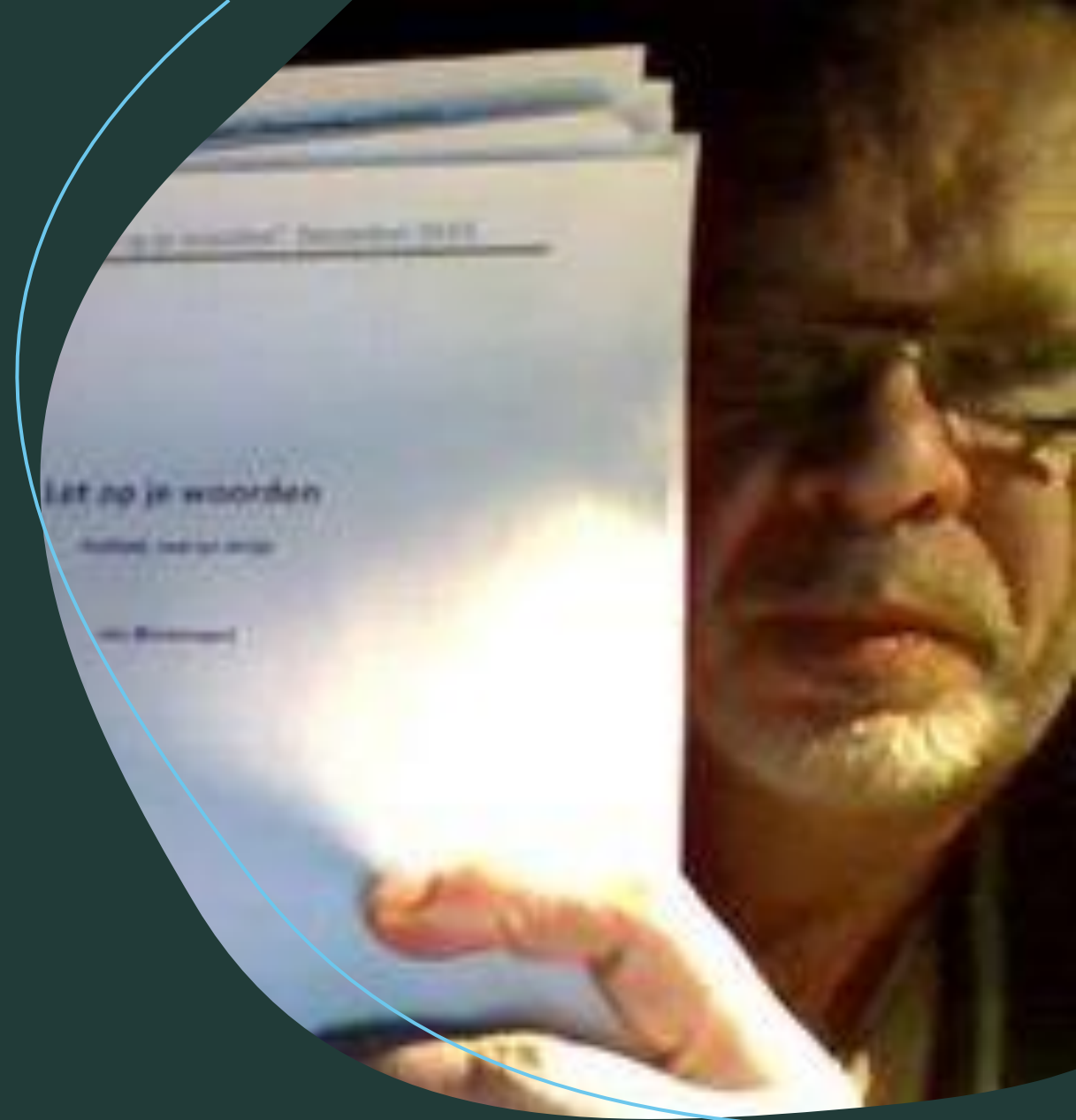


Jan Blommaert's Powerful Voice

Two packs of cigarettes and a working paper

Jenny Van der Aa

Part 1: The working paper



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TXs1kESwcWo>



Part 2: The cigarettes





- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PPExpmtdMEw>





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Two Packs of Cigarettes and a
Working Paper*

Credits

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Inspired by... Jan BLOMMAERT & Jenny-Louise VAN DER AA (2021)

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Jan Blommaert's Powerful Voice
Two packs of cigarettes and a working paper

(Jenny-Louise Van der Aa, 2022)

Intro: Bright Soul (Wingless Angels)

Part 1: The working paper

Dear Jan,

I have decided to write a bit about our life. Too bad you can't witness it anymore.

Last year my academic life was seriously disrupted by your passing on January 7, 2021. I often wonder where you are now. Are you dining with Bourdieu or Foucault somewhere, or is there nothing left to experience after this earthly existence. Only you know. When I heard the news of your expected death, I actually collapsed immediately. That didn't clear up until much later in 2021. I could no longer call or app, I had lost, as you once put it, my "escape route. How much the loss affected me, no one could accurately assess.

People went on with their lives, with their academic trajectory, and I stopped. I didn't understand that; I didn't want to understand that. In February I collapsed, with all the consequences. In the summer I read your last book, actually an essay, beautifully published by comrade Ico Maly. Then I realized that I had to find the strength to go at it again, that I had to teach and do research the way you had described it so beautifully: research as teamwork, teaching as inspiring. I also realized that then, like you, I would "collide" with different conventions. That happened, too. In one place I tried to teach gender studies from a Marxist perspective, elsewhere I was the libero who often coached 'my' PhD candidate invisibly from the shadows. And yet I have no regrets about what I did, after all "I speak not to power, but in defiance of power," as you so beautifully put it in DocWorkers' excellent documentary about your life.

Jan, I now discuss in your style some lines of life that urgently need to be continued with your inspiration as an example. I base these on our interview, the last interview you gave while alive, on themes close to your heart: teaching, research and activism[2].

One. We have an urgent need for research that deals with the figure of the teacher as a bridging figure in language and education. You belonged to a generation of teachers who strongly believed in a kind of humanism in education. And so you started teaching because you loved people; you loved the students in front of you and you genuinely cared about them. And in that sense, for you, teaching and all the activities that go with it, such as tutoring, was all about giving. It's all about the other person; it's all about the students. So you are a good teacher if students basically learn from you. You are not a good teacher if you manage to produce extremely sophisticated speeches, powerpoints, brilliant prose and so on. No, you are a good teacher if your students learn something from you. And we have to adapt to students: the opposite is never true. Or at least, you used to tell your students in the first lecture of the year that you would aim an inch above their heads, and they had to stretch a little bit to fill that gap. So you have to elevate yourself a little bit to be with them, and that's what students have to do. But it all starts from a basic human altruism where you see your duty, the calling, that brings you to the classroom and makes you give to others that which you have to give. And it's also that altruism that creates quality control or a certain rigor when it comes to quality. You have to be demanding. When you give things, it has to be good stuff. It has to be the best you have. So don't underestimate your students, make sure they stretch a little bit; but while you're doing that, give them the very best you have. Don't give them the science that was relevant five years ago or ten years ago, give them the science that is relevant now.

Two. You indicated in our interview that the most important theme for you was "informal learning. You have learning that is organized through schools and other very recognizable organizations and institutions. But of course, again, all this new technology is coming around the corner. There is a new learning environment that could support the learning environment in schools, but which is very often seen as negative, as a kind of enemy of

learning. If children play video games, in which they write a lot, or are active on their smartphones, this is often seen by mom and dad as anti-learning, while they actually learn a lot. And it is precisely the interaction between formal and informal learning that you have always emphasized in all kinds of ways. One example.

New technologies, like smart phones, have also brought new forms of literacy into our societies. Traditionally, literacy is something that is acquired from the top down, you know. So your generation, older people to which I almost belong myself by now, were basically the agents of literacy, teaching the younger generation how to become literate. All these new technologies have now turned that around. We have to learn from the younger generation, how these new forms of literacy work. And here's the interesting thing: most of these literacies, for example how to be successful on Instagram, have to be acquired informally in an extremely dense and extremely organized informal learning environment. So they have learning opportunities that we often overlook when we look at younger people's learning levels or the things they are good at. You would have learned that from Gunter Kress: to consider learning as everything that we acquire, really everything, in terms of knowledge and skills throughout life, including the bad things. So that's all learning and it's the fundamental processes of learning that are changing now, and we need to look at that.

Three. Activism has become a dirty word. And especially an activist academic, from a number of political positions in society, is the ultimate enemy. So an academic intellectual who also has a political range of views, ideas and principles, they are made active, hence the word "activist. In your life, when you doubted the importance of what you were doing academically (and that happened quite often), the answer was provided by your activism. And that answer was: because THEY needed it, these activists, unionists but also school teachers. You spent your life lecturing to non-academic audiences ranging from unions to individuals and organizations across the social spectrum, and you were everywhere. You were literally everywhere. You also wrote fifteen little books in Dutch, for which, of course, you never received any academic recognition, but they were vulgarized booklets that were used in unions, continuing education programs, and so on.

So the activists were also your audience and THEY told you that your academic work was valuable. They told you to keep going; they told you to do more; they asked the questions that then became priorities in research for you. And in that sense, it's basically your activism that keeps you alive as an academic. Because we all have a question about relevance: are we relevant? Your academic bosses will never give you a clear answer because you have to write an evaluation every year and there are non-stop quality reviews. So you don't get the answer there. You get it in society at large. So the bottom line is: no politician will ever answer your question about whether they are relevant - they are misplaced for that. Don't worry about what they say, just go on being activists. You learn a tremendous amount outside the gates of the university. You learn a lot by talking to teachers, social workers, police officers and so on. You learn a lot. And don't just do it in the context of fieldwork. Do it in the context of daily life.

Lovely Jan, I will continue to teach and research as I really can only one way: your way. And may your voice therein resonate in the caverns of society, the margins of existence, the places where you so often and so gladly lingered.

Intermezzo: Reggae fi Jan Blommaert (Guyanese Dub)

You don't see how the clouds then just came sit upon my dream
Came sit up on my dream like a dark silk screen
A dark silk screen over the vision I had seen
Vision I had seen, the vision I had seen

So I say that Jan Blommaert was a victim of disease
Someone says that he's gone through heaven in peace
Another says that Jan Blommaert shouldn't take up his true weight
And go carry it upon his back like a weary rock

But look how the clouds just came sat upon my dream
Came sit upon my dream like a shout or a scream
A shout or a scream or a really pretty scene

When Jan Blommaert spoke and the people they come in

So I say that Jan Blommaert was a prisoner of fate
Someone says that he's gone through the heroes' gate
Someone says that Jan Blommaert couldn't take his true weight
So he took it off his back and wear an anorak
And the raincoat it a drop, the fedora push back

But look how my dream just get blown to smithereen
Got blown to smithereen in the middle of the dream
Middle of the dream before the people they come in
When Jan Blommaert spoke, the people they come in

So I say that Jan Blommaert was no shark for the sea
And all that he wanted was to set the people free
With the workers and the teachers he would corporate
But like a fish to the hook, he got struck by cancer bait

You no see how my dream come just get blown to smithereen
And blown to smithereen in the middle of the dream
Middle of the dream before the really crucial scene
The really crucial scene when the people they come in

Part2: The cigarettes: A long poem in two parts

(I)

You blew smoke. That's what you did. Blue in the face. In the faces of many. I had learnt to appreciate the 30-minute ride from Turnhout to Tilburg puffing away ten ciggies or more. By the time we got to Tilburg, and could barely see each other, our words had resonated across the agrarian fields between Turnhout and Tilburg. Ideas about a better world, a better humanity, holding hands in superdiversity. Polycentricity. African authors and books. Kent menthol. "Jen, can you go and buy me some? Here's 50 euros, you think that's enough for a couple of packs?". Hastily I ran to the supermarket at the outer corner of the university premises. Without smoke, no words, and words were important. To lavish myself in order to write that PhD at all. What a dark day that was, dark and deep, the land was

shattering as they took away our desks in the smoking booth where we had, so dutifully and diligently shared our thoughts on Caribbean school children hidden away in a postcolonial context, hidden from the world, in a parish behind God's back. God... not a topic you wanted to talk about very often. You were an atheist, you said, but you respected and researched them, those with the headscarves, who had all the right and the beauty-oh the female beauty- to wear the headscarves. For hours on end you would transcribe, comment on, re-transcribe, omit, add, recenter... their stories, only to say that, in all right, they could wear the headscarves. Politics, racial inequality, all but not to talk about God. But where are you now? Where are you now?

(II)

It was raining. You didn't feel well. You had a sore throat you said, while smoking and sweating heavily. Your raincoat and rimmed hat, more a fedora really, resonated with the colorful scarf that beautifully underscored your 'character head'. You told me you wish you could put yourself full of drugs and write endlessly-vigorously- to finish everything you wanted to say. Still say. Many lines were drawn, many more to be finished. We were walking, then standing, smoking, walking, running, and finally, standing, in the pouring rain. The corner of the Dante building at Tilburg University, a place you changed so profoundly nothing's left of it anymore, now that you have left. I wanted to hold you there, in the rain, and tell you that everything would be okay, but in my heart I knew, it was not going to be that way, not the way I wanted it to be. There you stood, a monument, a mastodont. Researchgate, our paper skyrocketed and my impact rose, rose higher than the sky. But then you told me the thing. And I knew. I felt it long time coming. And how you were torn. And how the monument was demolished. In the middle of the dream. The middle of the dream, when the people they come in.