
In Memory of Sonja Luehrmann

Our highly esteemed and beloved colleague and friend, Sonja Luehrmann, passed away on August 24, 2019, a little over two years after she was diagnosed with cancer. As an Associate Professor in Simon Fraser University's Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Sonja modelled how to live a life devoted to learning. She was a brilliant and prolific scholar who produced innovative work on religion, history, politics, and Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. She was a devoted teacher and mentor. And she was a colleague who was, above all else, generous with her time, knowledge and insights.

It is difficult to encapsulate the breadth and depth of Sonja's scholarship in just a few words, as her work crossed disciplinary boundaries, research methodologies, and modes of writing. Among her most important contributions was her commitment to combining anthropological and historical perspectives in imaginative ways. Her first book, *Alutiiq Villages Under Russian and U.S. Rule*, a published version of her Master's thesis at the University of Frankfurt, uniquely combined an analysis of Russian archival sources, archaeological evidence and oral histories to produce a comparative study of colonization of the Alutiiq people in what is now south-central Alaska. After receiving her PhD from the Program in Anthropology and History at the University of Michigan, Sonja went on to publish a second book, *Secularism Soviet Style*, that drew upon archival research, long-term ethnographic fieldwork, and the analysis of images as material culture to understand the affinities between secularist movements and religious practice in the Soviet and post-Soviet era. Her third book, *Religion in Secular Archives*, could be read in part as a reflection on methodology—examining how archives sustain relations of power and what happens when those who produce sources are different from the people the sources describe. The Society of American Archivists, which awarded *Religion in Secular Archives* the Waldo Gifford Leland Award, praised the book as pushing archivists to recognize “the power at stake when we arrange and describe our holdings.”

Sonja's willingness to think outside particular theoretical or methodological constraints made each piece of her scholarship groundbreaking. Her work pushed us to make links between seemingly disparate issues and promoted awareness of historical processes so that we might more fully understand the stakes of our contemporary moment. Always creative, and as some said, “a scholar's scholar,” her infectious curiosity and support for others' work guided her editing of

an important book, *Praying with the Senses*, which explored how the bodily senses were linked to religious practice. She spent many hours working with copy editors to gradually turn the manuscripts of authors writing in English for the first time into beautiful essays. As colleagues who long knew of Sonja's devotion to research and her incredible aptitude, we still watched in awe during her final months with us as she continued to probe sensitive questions in religion and politics, working on projects that included her most recent unfinished book on anti-abortion activism in the post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church.

Sonja's inspiring commitment to a life of learning went far beyond her scholarship. It infused every dimension of what it means to be an integral and intentional member of an intellectual community. When Sonja learned that she had stage 4 cancer almost two years ago, she told us: “If I only have two years to live, I want to live them as an anthropologist!” And did she ever, continuing to conduct research, present at conferences and publish her work. Even when Sonja knew she was severely ill with cancer, she doubled down on her efforts to support the work of others by organizing workshops, joining the SFU Ethics Board, editing the foremost Canadian journal of anthropology, *Anthropologica*, exchanging ideas with colleagues about research and writing, and making thoughtful contributions to departmental discussions. When teaching her last class while undergoing chemotherapy, she expressed concern that the effects of the treatment might be hindering her ability to respond as astutely as she might otherwise have to student questions. That is, her concern for student learning never ceased. She dedicated her time and wisdom to students, departmental life, and intellectual community until her final days.

Sonja was exceedingly capable, yet she was humble. She cared for many of us at times, generously offering wisdom and friendship in quiet moments. She shouldered far more than her share of the scholarly burden to support our collective enrichment. In our little departmental community, her way of being in the world nudged us all to be our better selves: more thoughtful, more centred, more responsible toward others, kinder. She showed us a way through the familiar struggle to reconcile the varied demands of scholarship and life—through generosity of spirit, a commitment to the love of learning, a focus on creating new ideas that matter, and intellectual work that doesn't shy away from some of the most difficult issues we face in the world. Sonja was only 44 and the loss to her family,

friends, the SA department, the University, the scholarly fields she contributed to and the many communities she was an integral part of is truly staggering.

We will miss Sonja's spirit in our department around every turn, and we offer her family—her partner Ilya Vinkovetsky, Associate Professor of History at SFU, and their three children, Philipp, Vera, and Lukas—our deepest condolences. We are honoured to be touched by her legacy.

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