Family, Failure and Fatigue in the Field: A Patchwork of Omissions

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SHORT BIO
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Introduction

Megan Robertson

Many feminist scholars have, at some point in their careers, received critique that a piece they have written is too narrative, too emotional, or not scholarly enough. Sometimes these critiques are outright dismissive, while at other times they arise from genuine concern for the researcher's reputation, academic credibility, or personal well-being. Whatever the aim behind them, these critiques resonate with what Catherine Belsey[1] (2000: 1157) has called the "coerciveness of masculinist rhetorical codes," which continue to frame coherence, logic, and argument in opposition to intuition, emotion, and passion.

This piece by Henni Alava was originally conceived as a presentation in a webinar on 'Patchwork Ethnography[2]'in June 2021. Since then, it has gone through multiple iterations, including attempts to bend it towards a more

1 Catherine Belsey, "Writing as a Feminist", Signs 20, no.4 (2000): 1157-1160.

2 Gökçe Günel, Saiba Varma, and Chika Watanabe, "A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography," Society for Cultural Anthropology, 2020, https://culanth.org/fieldsights/a-manifesto-for-patchwork-ethnography

conventional article format. To Henni, it seemed as if something at the heart of the original spoken text resisted capture, which is why the piece is reproduced here in its original form. In both form and content, it speaks to three key concerns for feminist scholarship: the place of feminist knowledge in the academy, power and positionality in research, and an orientation towards gender justice in all spheres of life.

Henni's writing here clearly occupies the space of emotion, narrative, and feeling, but also conveys the lived logic of a researcher making sense of her experiences. In resisting the coerciveness of dominant academic rhetorical codes, it calls for taking seriously the promise of 'antihero care'[3]; for not just theorizing but transforming the situated lives of researchers. A starting point for such transformation is in recognizing the gendered and racialized ways in which work, care work, precarity, and privilege are distributed within and across societies and the differential risk that differently-placed researchers encounter when choosing to write subversively.

Our academic and private lives are unavoidably intertwined and the need to pretend otherwise can put a great burden on scholars grappling to cope with various demands on their time and energy. There is a need for researchers to be more transparent about the devastating effects of patriarchy and neoliberal academia on their personal and professional lives. The choices we make about what and how we research, what and where we publish, and how we write can and should continue to advocate for justice for all in a world where our rights are continuously challenged.

Family, Failure and Fatigue in the Field: A Patchwork of Omissions

Henni Alava

This piece is published in the original form in which it was given as part of a webinar by the Patchwork Ethnography initiative on 25 June 2021. The

[3] Emily Yates-Doerr, "Antihero Care: On Fieldwork and Anthropology", Anthropology and Humanism 45, no. 2 (2020): 233-244 https://doi.org/10.1111/anhu.12300.

webinar, convened by Gökçe Günel, Saiba Varma, and Chika Watanabe, gathered ethnographers to discuss the "ways in which changing living and working conditions are irrevocably transforming knowledge production"[4]. Some additions have been made for clarity. Included in the text, as in the original talk, are descriptions for visually impaired participants.

I am a Finnish woman, with light hair tied up, wearing a white shirt with a blue leafy pattern. I will be showing some slides, which include the quotes I refer to in the text. Only one slide has an image, and I will describe it once we get to it.

How to speak of burned-out fieldwork in a way that doesn't stink of privileged naval-gazing? How to come to terms with the damage academia has done to loved ones? What to say to seniors who tell you your life is completely separate from your work? What to do when the expectations of academia and well-being are incompatible, when you are too tired, or too needed at home, to 'go to the field'?

These questions have burned at the edge of my mind for years and I thank the organisers of this event for allowing me to present them to you. In place of clear-cut answers, as any such were pre-empted by the litany of distractions created by care responsibilities, so beautifully analysed by Kate McClellan[5], what I have to share in response are patches of reflections and a hope that some answers can be collectively found.

An endless edit

Throughout my academic career – particularly during the times I've lived in Uganda with my partner and our first two, then three children – my family and my fatigue at grappling with the demands of academic work and care

[4] Patchwork Ethnography, "Patchwork Ethnography." Accessed May 2, 2021. www.patchworkethnography.com.

[5] Patchwork Ethnography, "Panel 1: Familial Entanglements." 2021. Accessed May 15, 2022. www.youtube.com/watch?v=HvLuWQVuEWA

work have been marked as hindrances. Not just by peers, supervisors, bosses – some of them at least – but, most importantly, by me.

In a section of my PhD thesis, entitled "Family, failure and fatigue in the field," I drew particularly from Cerwonka and Malkki's[6] work to reflect on how realising this marking, and on somehow coming to terms with my vulnerability and my responsibilities of care, mattered. I described how recognizing the ableist masculine yardstick of hero anthropology, against which I deemed myself a failure during my 2012-2013 fieldwork, had shaped the analytical pathways I followed to conceptualize "anyobanyoba," confusion, in the context of Christianity and politics in the aftermath of the northern Ugandan war.

When I began transforming the thesis into a book[7], that section was cut. "It's a different genre," an anthropologist reviewer and friend told me, before I submitted the manuscript for review. Considering how vital writing that part had been for me; and how much time I have spent furiously raging at such sections being struck out of finished ethnographic products, it is something of an irony that I was relieved. Yes, let's save it for later. Let's stick to the genre.

Fieldwork hurts

On the PowerPoint slide, there is an image of a drip bottle of sodium lactate intravenous infusion. [When I read out this caption for the image, I began unexpectedly crying. I had practiced giving the rest of the talk many times, but only remembered to add the description of the picture right as the webinar started. I did not anticipate how triggering it would be to read it out loud.]

6 Allaine Cerwonka and Liisa H. Malkki. Improvising Theory: Process and Temporality in Ethnographic Fieldwork (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

7 Henni Alava, Christianity, Politics and the Afterlives of War in Uganda. "There Is Confusion," New Directions in the Anthropology of Christianity (Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

In July 2019, I returned to Uganda with my family for post-doctoral research. Earlier that year, I had been away from work for three months, on doctor's orders, recovering from burnout.

I went back to work too soon, just about a month after the insomnia, panic attacks, and dissociative pain of burnout had relented. I felt I had to because the project and family timeframes were tight. Yet, as it turned out, my own fatigue, which made countless days of fieldwork feel like I was trudging through a heavy greyness with leaden legs, proved to be a minor problem.

Shortly after my children started their new school, one of them started feeling really sick. [At this point in the talk I started gathering myself again after having to take many breaks. I said I was sorry and that I had been unexpectedly triggered by reading out the caption for the image.]

Only a month later, after many doctors and two hospitalizations, and after we had seriously considered flying back home, did I suddenly realise the one thing that connected all the odd dots: Lariam, prescribed to the kids by a paediatric tropical medical expert as "the safest option there is." After switching the meds, life slowly stabilised. But for weeks on end, the biggest chunk of my time went to doing something completely different than research: taking care of a really sick child and recovering from the shellshock of doing so.

At the end of 2019, we returned to Finland. And then COVID hit. Juggling distance-school and day-care closure alongside my work (luckily for only a short time in Finland) I burnt out again, though less severely since I knew to press the break and go on sick leave earlier this time – a privilege of our Nordic welfare system for which I am infinitely thankful. But again, my burn-out proved to be a minor problem.

As schools reopened, the same child who had been sick in Uganda developed a nasty headache. Some weeks later, it receded, only to come back later like a sledgehammer: persistent, ceaseless, searing, and increasingly debilitating pain. After months of doctors, labs, tests, and scans, and after finally getting referred to the correct public specialist healthcare –

again a privilege without which I don't know how we'd be standing – my child's care team gently laid it out to me and my partner in November 2020:

"We can't know for sure, but we believe the root issue behind your child's persistent pain is the trauma of their illness in Uganda."

My fieldwork, my academic aspirations, made my child sick.

Where in the anthropological record is there space for pondering such a thing?

Edited out

"For this reviewer, the author doesn't get the balance quite right."

This is what an anonymous reviewer said about the reflexivity in my book manuscript, pointing particularly to a section in which I wrote about an incident during fieldwork when a key informant arrived at our door to find me a blubbering exhausted emotional mess – like I am right now [here, I ironically pointed to myself with both hands].

The reviewer's feedback has led me to ponder: is there an absolute, uncontested point of balance for reflexivity, for writing one's vulnerability into the ethnographic account, a sweet point that is quite 'right'?

Right for what? Right for who?

Over the past year, working on my book, I have done a lot of editing out: Sara Ahmed's[8] queer orientations and thinking of theory as orientation rather than scaffolding – out; Tiffany Page's[9] "Vulnerable writing" – primarily, out. I have left them to what I have been envisioning as "another genre," so as to try to claim myself as a serious voice in my field of study.

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8 Sara Ahmed, Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

9 Tiffany Page. "Vulnerable Writing as a Feminist Methodological Practice," Feminist Review 115, no. 1, 13–29 (2017): 13–29, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41305-017-0028-0

Yet during the past year, and during significant chunks of my life before it, this pursuit of seriousness seems to have taken its toll. While I have been crunching up co-authored articles where none of the vulnerable "me" was left for readers to see, using those parts of my fieldwork diary where there is no mention of my complete exhaustion or of what was happening at home, I was actually in survival mode and my family, my child, were falling apart.

It was in the midst of pondering all this that I came across the work of a dance therapist, Pauliina Jääskeläinen. In the article, written as a dialogue with a colleague – and I cannot recommend this piece warmly enough – Pauliina writes of how the death of her son affected her research.[10]

In her co-author's words, "Pauliina is longing for . . . an approach to writing based on inclusion rather than exclusion of the ambivalent emotions and experiences that she had encountered."

Pauliina quotes Pullen to describe how scholars are taught to write properly, to "tidy up our embodied writing which leaks – we edit, cleanse, correct and say what other people want us to say."[11]

Does patchwork ethnography lead to patchwork writing, where the embodied anthropologists with all their families, failures and fatigues, are not cleansed out, but allowed to leak in somehow, somewhere? If it does not, then I fear that anthropology's demands of rigour, excellence, and sacrifice will in the end remain intact; seeping out of ethnographies to egg on new generations of aspiring ethnographers to burn themselves out in the pursuit of professional recognition.

Parenting pain

COVID-19 has shaken the ideal of "the brave anthropologist and her exotic field site" in a way that, at least in my home country of Finland, critical

10 Pauliina Jääskeläinen and Jenny Helin, "Writing Embodied Generosity," Gender, Work & Organization 28, no. 4 (2021): 1398–1412, https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12650.

11 Alison Pullen, "Writing as Labiaplasty," Organization 25, no.1 (2018): 125, https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508417735537

debates about research justice and decolonizing academia have not been able to do.

But I want to be honest. It is not, primarily, the grave ethical critique against "ethnographic presence" that has caused me to seriously consider what my next research project might look like, but rather the simple fact of my life.

Over and over again I have constructed my "expertise" through an exclusion of my vulnerability, and by exclusion of my being-in-the-world, so fundamentally and more than in any other way, as a parent to my children.

I don't want to perform that exclusion anymore.

My family can no longer up and move. Maintaining stability, including by me not being away all the time, has become a crystal-clear priority, even though my child is doing much better now than they were half a year ago. In addition, I have a mother with late-stage Alzheimer's, a vulnerable father, and a father-in-law in the late stretches of cancer, each of whom add reason for me to stay rooted right where I am.

So, for the past half-year, I have been envisioning a project where these two things – vulnerability and my life as a parent – be made the starting point and not treated as dirty residue that needs to be edited out. My dream carries the working title "parenting pain," and jumping into it means letting go of practically all the regional and thematic so-called expertise that I have painstakingly built up for over a decade. For me, the path to embracing patchwork has meant allowing myself to stop trying to stretch into doing fieldwork far away from home, even from a distance over the Internet, at least for now. Rather, I want to envision fieldwork as really starting from home and as weaving a quilt where all the patches are allowed to feature: those of home, those of work, those of strength, and those of failure.

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A colleague in a neighbouring discipline read a recent draft of this paper and said to me, in not quite these words but close to it, "This is hogwash. This

myth of the hero anthropologist," she insisted, "has been deconstructed decades ago – the problem is in your head."

Was she right? Are the masculinist yardsticks and monsters of anthropological rigour a fragment of my imagination, conjured by my inner demons and misconceptions of what is expected of an aspiring scholar in this field? Or is there something here that resonates more broadly? Preparing for today, I concluded by stating that I'm probably still too deep in my own quagmires of figuring this all out to answer the question and that I'd leave it to you.

But the other papers given at the webinar suggest I'm not alone in struggling with all this. This realisation makes me feel thankful and a great deal less alone. Thank you.

Literature

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