Trial by Fire

Trauma, Vulnerability and the Heroics of Fieldwork

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ABSTRACT | In this Introduction, we take two persistent tropes of fieldwork, the 'trial by fire' and the 'heroic fieldworker' to task. Our analysis traces out what we call *everyday decentering* of these tropes, which we argue is necessary for fieldwork to be taught and engaged with beyond romanticised twentieth century masculinist heroics. We argue that anthropology and related field research based disciplines might be better served by adopting a more ethnographic approach towards the lived reality of fieldwork. Through our review, we situate the contribution that the six pieces in this volume make to pedagogies of the field. Readers are invited to continue this conversation about fieldwork futures in anthropology's second century.

Keywords: Fieldwork; Hero; Method; Trauma; Ethnography

> "You cannot really teach someone how to do fieldwork."
> "I just went off to X for 2 years and then returned to write it all up. I had no contact with my supervisor or department for the time period."
> "An anthropologist is only as good as his fieldwork."
> "Fieldwork is the rite of passage that makes you into an anthropologist"
> "I would send back detailed reports every three months to my supervisor but he never even acknowledged them so I dispensed with this after a while."

Fieldwork remains the cornerstone of anthropology's disciplinary identity. It is *the* essential ritual of initiation that allows for the conferral of the title of an anthropologist on an individual. Even as fieldwork is centred and endowed with almost magical properties, there remains a deep and, oftentimes, dark unknowingness at the very heart of it. We are told it cannot be really taught but rather just, somehow, happens; the discipline is full of anthropologists who boast of their splendid isolation and heroic travels in exotic lands away from everything and everyone familiar; the lack of individual mentorship and institutional support during fieldwork is considered a given by most; it is commonly described/ experienced as a 'trial by fire'.

The fact is that despite some important reflections on anthropological methods that we discuss below, fieldwork continues to rest largely on a tacit understanding of what is considered 'good' and/or 'proper'. Coupled with lacklustre, if not entirely absent, methods training, the much-vaunted anthropological fieldwork is, in practice, the cause of much disciplinary anxiety and negotiated norms. So on the one hand lies the romanticism of fieldwork with its transformative potential whereby not only a new form of knowledge of a distinct social world can be arrived upon, but also the ethnographer is changed by this encounter with the Other. On the other hand, and this is what we wish to highlight in this special section, is the reality of fieldwork that can be deeply difficult - if not traumatic - for many, especially for those who do not carry racial, gendered, cisbodied, classed, Northern privileges with them. The romance and radicalism of fieldwork continues to attract the most attention with guides on how to 'better' this process, even as silence continues to linger on over the traumas and vulnerabilities experienced by so many.

In this special section, we consider the practice of fieldwork with a specific intention: to continue and revise conversations about fieldwork as an inherited practice, site of contested significance and productive of anthropological norms. To this end, the six contributions foreground experiences usually left to the side, out of sight, detailing fieldwork experiences that haunt the authors' otherwise published work. Our contributors observe how single precarious or jarring moments live on outside of the public texts that come to stand for the making of knowledge. The fieldworker as person is in the foreground here. She returns to write the field, to speak in the face of tacit academic cultures which render invisible physical dangers, psychological harms, and threats of violence, as research shifts from our bodies into our written work.

Anxiety associated with anthropological fieldwork has been foregrounded somewhat more over this past year due to the pandemic, which led to the shredding of research plans and the freezing of ethnographers in place. The interrupting of field research both planned and already underway, brought methods to the surface

of disciplinary discussion (Nelson 2020, Campbell et al. 2020, Douglas-Jones 2020, Sinanan 2020). These discussions of interruptions and the study of spaces from afar also do the work of opening out questions of disciplinary knowing and socialisation as well as the incoherent expectations of anthropologists-in-the-making.

The collection continues in the now established tradition of commentary on fieldwork, spanning reflexivity about positionality (Choi, this volume) to institutional infrastructures that hold ethnographic research in place (Donald, this volume). The impetus arose in conversation, generationally generated: as early and mid-career editors, we find ourselves navigating both our own changing institutional responsibilities and the push of movements that force academia and anthropology in particular to reckon yet again with questions of power. It also arose from conversations we have had over the years with one another on the inadequate nature of our own doctoral training programmes and the planned abandonment of fieldwork. These fieldwork struggles, especially at the doctoral level but not restricted to that, are all-too-commonplace but continue to be largely effaced not just from monographs, journals, and other texts, but also the classroom and methods training modules. They emerge, rather, in hushed conversations and painful confidences with colleagues, friends, family, and students. One of the lessons we draw from the contemporary moment is to lift the veil of silence that continues to allow institutions, individuals, and disciplinary knowledge-making systems to function as before, without posing a challenge to the tacit codes and hierarchies upon which they are premised. We are prompted to bring out in the open and to think collectively through the many conversations we have had or "horror stories" we have heard of what *really* took place when one was away in the field. Importantly, we are also prompted by our teaching and experiences of supervising doctoral work to come back to fieldwork as a site of disciplinary formation and institutionalisation. Anthropological fieldwork cannot, after all, be left untouched and unquestioned by #metoo, Black Lives Matter, or the international return to decolonising methodologies. We wish to ask what stories need to be retold or, indeed, narrated for the first time? How can different accounts about what constitutes 'good' research reduce harm to junior colleagues, economically precarious scholars, women, gender diverse and queer scholars, and BIPOC colleagues during and after time in the field?

Through the labours of the fieldworker connections are forged between 'the field', the discipline, and our institutions. The contributions we have brought together for *Commoning Ethnography* show those interconnections and their implications. A return to fieldwork through the lenses of trauma, vulnerability and a trenchant critique of heroism, continues to interrogate the 'we' of what kind of discipline 'we' want to be (Chua and Mathur 2018, Brodkin, Morgen and Hutchinson 2011, Jobson, Clarke and Cantero 2020).

With these stakes in mind, our Introduction reviews work being published on fieldwork as a site for disciplinary (re)formation today. In conversation with this literature, we make a call to conceptualise and think method in anthropology more critically. No longer can the traumas and acutely unequal vulnerabilities of fieldwork be simply written out - methodologically, ethically, and politically - from the anthropological enterprise. We argue this through a focus on normative understandings of what constitutes 'good' fieldwork and by considering how vulnerability and trauma faced in the field come to be erased from public

anthropological knowledges through a persistent, masculinist, semi-religious belief in the fieldworker as a 'hero'.

'Good Fieldwork'

Our title references the description of anthropological fieldwork as an epistemological trial by fire, a phrase appearing across decades of accounts. For John van Maanen (2010 [1988]: xi) fieldwork was *not* what he was expecting. Jim Birkenhead, writing in a collection foregrounding the 'unrealistic expectations' many bring to fieldwork, treated the idea of a trial by fire aspirationally, longing to "survive … and to gain membership to the fraternity of returned ethnographers" (Birkenhead 2004: 197). And John Jackson, reflecting back on his own enculturation as an anthropologist, comments that in pre-field training "[e]ven as late as the mid-1990s [...] would-be cultural anthropologists were taught to envision fieldwork as a kind of trial by fire, a rite of passage you did not prepare for so much as simply endure and survive, on the fly, by the seat of your pants" (2010: S280).

From these examples of the phrase 'trial by fire' we see scholars who have lived through anthropology's aversion to both methods and training. George Marcus, longtime commentator on anthropological pedagogy, observes that the discipline is not suited to the "inculcation of disciplined practices through formal rules or protocols for research" (Marcus 2010: 70). Indeed, this incapacity of anthropological fieldwork to be somehow formalised is what remains at its celebratory heart. Canonical accounts of 'good' fieldwork from the time of Mead and Malinowski onwards are steeped in stunning encounters with alterity that can radically transform 'our' anthropological understandings of the world. Learning ethnography, Marcus notes elsewhere, has tended to follow a 'legendary' path, set of "pedagogical practices that were effectively passed on generationally (see Firth 1957)" (Marcus 2009: 2). Each generation works with these inheritances, taken variously as essential ingredients for immersive learning, resocialization and scholarly insight (Wengle 2005, Simpson 2006). These ingredients are turned into what Marcus calls "storytelling in the Malinowskian mode" (2010: 71): characteristic moments - puzzlement and confusion - leading readers into the analyses of our monographs and articles. Such accounts make evident that field-work, through the ethnographer, can generate awe, dazzlement, enchantment and delight. It can also shock, displace, disorient and disconnect.

Methods handbooks predominantly offer advice on what Coffey calls the 'practical accomplishment' (1999: 2) of fieldwork. More recently, they also invite the 'design' of fieldwork, ever more deliberate shapings of field encounters and research questions, arising in part from time pressures and a greater desire to 'manage' the research encounter. Fieldwork does not stay the same. In the 2009 collection *Fieldwork is not what it used to be,* six doctoral researchers reflected on their first fieldwork, describing collaboration, unusable data, access, and what meaningful relationships could be for the topics they were interested in (Breglia 2009, Chung 2009, Hamilton 2009, Naficy 2009, Peterson 2009, Reddy 2009). As they point out, in the doctoral study there is a great deal at stake (see also Donald, this volume). Publishing on challenges comes with considerations about how disclosure will be read, the need to turn adversity into useful data, or a valuable publication. The condition of the job market, pressures to publish early often

heightens these considerations for junior scholars, who do their work alongside the inherited narrative of the heroic fieldworker.

There are, in many parts of the world, relatively new ethics boards and review committees that fieldworkers need to go through. These institutional reviews of fieldwork plans might, on the face of it, appear to be a welcome step forward given the prior lack of consideration of the ethics of fieldwork and the vulnerabilities of interlocutors. Yet, the neoliberal university stands in danger of turning such ethics reviews into paper tigers leaving genuine questions of power and structural inequality out of the frame. The paperwork of academic ethics bureaucracy and discussions around the fieldworkers safety and well-being often serve predominantly to protect institutions from future risks and legal actions rather than work through a genuine ethic of care for the researchers. These documents, reviews, and committees are, more often than not, considered burdensome bureaucratic hoops to jump through instead of constituting a critical engagement with the ethical quandaries and heroic assumptions of the enterprise of fieldwork.

The Heroic Fieldworker

The Heroic Fieldworker is hard to pin down, although easy to cite (Rose 1993: 70, Hartman 2007). He (and he is usually a he) emerges in seminar rooms, workshops, PhD training programs where competition grounds scholarly ambition and professionalization prohibits vulnerability. He is created in the ethnographer's writerly "contrast between 'us' and 'them'" (Chua and Mathur 2018: 6). He is sustained by supervisors and advisors who consider the field and what happens there the private domain of the PhD student-in-training. He may be doing heroic research, urgent work, a study of crisis (Hartman 2007, Starn 2011). He is given license by PhD programs that operate in or create isolation, and by publishing and assessment formats that elevate the single author. He is given greatest freedom by all that is not spoken, including in scholarly publication. He emerges from the overwhelmingly white, male, imperial habitus of the anthropologist that continues to undergird this discipline. He flourishes within the academy while the less-sheroic languish, for not possessing the same structural privileges but also because they dared to, even if only in hushed tones, voice their struggles.

He has been tackled, often head on, for decades. Yet he still stands. It is almost as if, were he to fall, so too would anthropology with its intellectual conceits of discovering and writing new worlds. For many, this white hero of a fieldworker is sustained as a figure to write against. In 2017, Maya Berry, Claudia Chávez Argülles, Shanya Cordis, Sarah Ihmoud and Elizabeth Velázquez Estrada wrote up field vignettes illustrating how experiences of race, gender, class, sexuality and ability/disability shape differentiated harms that fieldworkers face, and the different levels of legitimacy their experiences are afforded. They offered the term *fugitive anthropology* to counter 'the institutionalised notion of fieldwork as a masculinist rite of passage or an exercise of one's endurance (Berry et al. 2017: 538).[1] They call on anthropologists to reject "the discipline's implicit masculinist 'shut up and take it' mentality" (2017: 538).

Scholars are increasingly doing just that. Emily Yates Doerr tells us explicitly that in her fieldwork in Guatemala, she failed "in the Hero's terms" (2020: 2). Examined, these terms offered her "no path *but* failure because the figure of the Hero was never meant to be me" (2020: 2, emphasis added). Such

terms are rendered by Berry et al. as "an unencumbered male subject with racial privilege, to whom the field means a space far from home that can be easily entered and exited" (2017: 539, see also Arif this volume). In addition to producing 'failure', then, a further consequence of these terms is to mislead. Schneider, Lord and Wilczak, writing of the sexual politics of their fieldwork in China, remark that while they had anticipated "moving effortlessly from place to place," their bodies became more central to their research than any of them had anticipated (2020: 3). Where they could go, how they could move, and how others related to them informed the kind of material they were able to work with. As project plans were necessarily revised, they worried about the impacts for their future ability to tell fieldwork stories evidencing their skills as fieldworkers. In a passage revealing of how professional stakes saturate the fieldworker-information, they write that if "being the victim of an assault or unwanted attention in the field" becomes a "failure [that] does not produce new brilliant insights, we are understood to have failed in acquiring the necessary knowledge to be in the field" (2020: 3). Schneider, Lord and Wilczak realised how laden with judgment their sense of failure was, commenting they had "internalized sanctions against those who fail to 'conquer' the field" (2020: 3, see also Mattes and Dinkelaker 2019, Kušić and Záhora 2020). For both Yates Doerr and Schneider et al., publishing on (and undoing) this sense of failure is part of the ongoing work of countering the heroic fieldworker, because the heroic fieldworker discloses neither failure, nor trauma.

Vulnerability and Trauma

Some research topics have addressed experiences of fieldwork that go beyond its service as a tool of disciplinary knowledge. *Fieldwork Under Fire* (Nordstrom and Robben 1996) is a key text for its chapters about rumour, fear, terrorism, emergency and war, where research in explicitly challenging circumstances amounts to basic survival for researcher and participants alike. One chapter documents and analyses the experience of rape (Winkler and Hanke 1996). Nordstrom and Robben's collection has served as a resource to field researchers who knew in advance that their research would bring certain challenges, and it has offered a sense that others had been 'there' before them. Larissa Begley draws on it to describe and make sense of her six and a half months of fieldwork in the Kivu border region of Rwanda and the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (Begley 2009: 2). Fieldwork was initially peaceful, she tells us, but as the circumstances changed, her field notes show her growing sense of fear. The fear stayed with her after she returned. Nightmares, chronic fibromyalgia, and a strong desire to forget prevented her from writing the thesis on which her degree depended (Begley 2013).

As Sur puts it, "anthropology demands iterative re-dwelling: reviving fieldwork" (this issue). Like Begley, Sur had read *Fieldwork Under Fire,* along with a number of other ethnographies in the lead up to her fieldwork in the Northeast India-Bangladesh borderlands. But as she writes, "no amount of methodological insights can ever prepare anthropologists for the intense military scrutiny that ordinary villagers endure in such locations" (this issue).

Work in recent years has shown that even if one is not in circumstances of emergency oneself, it is not unusual to "develop traumatic-stress symptoms after working with people who have experienced violence or death" (Hummel and El

Kurd 2020: 3). This is now recognised as secondary trauma. Doing research with survivors of war rapes in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Nena Močnik describes the depression and heaviness that came over her during her fieldwork, finding the witnessing of stories to be a specific skill, something that "should no longer be a self-evident aspect of an individual's competence" (2020: 4, see also Das 1990). After her fieldwork, Močnik held a workshop in Helsinki called 'The Cost of Bearing Witness' bringing together others for whom research had necessitated spending time with, listening to and understanding traumatic experiences (see also Bonet and McWilliams 2019).

Several of the vital accounts that subvert the heroism of fieldwork and rather highlight its vulnerabilities, difficulties and profound moral quandaries emerge from sites that are considered extraordinarily challenging. Our claim, though, is that a habitus of the fieldworker as discoverer-hero going through this peculiarly anthropological rite of passage persists, whatever and wherever your site may be. To take the examples of the editors, it could be as very different as the study of research governance in biomedicine in Asia, or within government offices on the Sino-Indian Himalayan borderland, amongst nuclear test veteran groups in Britain, or on the question of how experiences of contemporary Māori are framed by neoliberalism and colonialism in Aotearoa. Varied as these sites and projects are, they remain framed by similar tacit norms of quality and carry the historical weight of fieldwork as a trial by fire. Research, in other words, need not be marked by war, violence or loss for everyday encounters to become notable for the way they mark vulnerability. Indeed, vulnerabilities are imbricated within the cherished, vital relationships that keep us safe and sustain us in the field, and those that grant us access. And different types of vulnerability exist within those field relations that threaten to do us violence. For fieldworkers, the slippage and distinctions between these two possible vulnerabilities are not always obvious or clear cut (Trundle, Gibson and Bell 2019, see also Abdullah 2019).

And yet the 'field' often requires tidy divisions. Ethics committees expect neat categories of safe and unsafe activities, places and people, which rarely prepare fieldworkers for the fluid dynamism of the field. And these divisions remain fuzzy once the fieldwork is 'over'. The field/fieldwork are only artificially separated out from the writing process with that frequent recourse to the two distinct spaces and associated acts: 'the desk' for writing and 'the field' for research. As Mosse has noted, this separation of field and desk is yet another legacy of Malinowski's ethnographic method that doesn't take into account the complex social relations set up between the contemporary ethnographer and her interlocutors (Mosse 2006). It also rests on an idea of 'entering' the field and then 'exiting' the field in ways that are now almost comically at odds with the mediums, networks, affective relationships, collaborations, and political comm-itments through which fieldwork is conducted and continued.

There is, then, no longer a fixed point in time - or place - at which that which we term 'fieldwork' is necessarily clearly finished. Regardless of the topic of one's research, writing becomes a key site of sensemaking. It is through this act of writing or expressing in some form - visual, oral, material - that ethnographers put a narrative (back) together. Nearly all pieces in this collection remark upon writing, whether it is the writing of fieldnotes (Choi), the writing of poems (Donald), the writing of dissertations (Sur) or subsequent academic publications (Arif, Sur and Jegathesan). In their introduction to *Crumpled Paper*

Boat (2017) Pandian and McLean ask us to "[i]magine ways of writing that might put ourselves more deeply at risk than what we have tried till now" (2017: 3). For two of the editors of this volume, erasure poetry has been particularly generative, allowing public and critical voices into the anthropology of policy (Douglas-Jones and Cohn 2018), and the transformation of canonical ethnographic texts as an act of erasure, argumentation and the unexpected (ASAA/NZ 2018). In 2014, Anne-Marie Smith published what she called a 'multilayered text moving between memoir, poetry and conversations', revealing what her academic thesis had kept hidden. The stories comprising her article had been written a decade prior, and kept 'separate' (Smith 2014: 699), much like those presented in this volume. With ethnographic poetry today finding a place in peer reviewed publications (Zani et al. 2019) this is one powerful modality of revisiting, rethinking and re-narrating fieldwork experiences.

Everyday Decentering
Decentering the figure of the heroic fieldwork through writing, teaching and practice is the work of generations, and the labour of doing so has been taken on by those who do not fit its narrow mould. Hannah Gibson writes that she did not see her body represented in anthropological literature (2019: 74), as she begins her article interrogating the ableist configuring of the embodied researcher as a 'tool' (2019: 75). "I cannot leave my bodily struggles at the door when I enter a room", she writes, explaining how her own experiences with disability create relations of solidarity beyond rapport in the field, enriching her ethnographic reflections and writing (2019: 75, see also Friedner et al. 2018, Okley 2019).
Gender, arising in feminist and queer scholarship has been a repeated route in. *Harassed* (Hanson and Richards 2019) shows how the erasure and ignorance of embodiment, subjectivity and positionality harms the production of ethnographic knowledge (2019: 170), leaving questions un-asked. "If norms and standards are to change", they write, "the white (cis, straight) androcentric perspective must be challenged and decentered from its hegemonic position in our disciplines, where it informs us what we should expect fieldwork to look like before the fact and how to evaluate our findings after the fact" (Hanson and Richards 2019: 189). A few years earlier Bianca Williams had observed that "women—particularly young, women of color—often find themselves navigating the danger, awkwardness, shame, discomfort, and violence of unsafe or not-yet-safe spaces, or previously safe and now suddenly, threatening individuals" within fieldwork (2017, see also Evans 2017, Nelson et al. 2017). In the wake of Tarana Burke's phrase 'Me Too', rising to global prominence, anthropologists took note, and #metooanthro emerged (King et al. 2020, Walters 2020). As one example, when Schneider, Lord and Wilczak published their paper, they did so in part because of #MeToo: "We feel encouraged to examine our experiences in print", they write (2020: 2), describing the convergence of shame over unwanted sexualised field experiences with fear for professional standing (see also earlier work by Clark and Grant 2015, Johansson 2015, Kloß 2017).

  Anti-racist and decolonial scholarship has pointed to the privileges of whiteness in the field that, like gender, often go un-remarked (Kobayashi 1994, Faria and Mollett 2016, see also Choi, this volume). In their 2011 piece, Brodkin et al. summarise "taken-for-granted practices of racially dividing labour [that] mark anthropology departments [in the United States] as white institutional

spaces" (2011: 551). This includes the construction of the field and the researcher within it, with students of colour treated "as research assistants and cultural brokers rather than scholars-in-training", being "valued for [their] language and cultural insight, not for [their] intellect" (2011: 551). As these students become anthropologists they are part of "unsettling the old colonial calculus where white people always did the studying and brown people were always the studied" (Starn 2011: 183). Yet, the struggles of those who were – till recently – only considered at best native informants and now find themselves within the academy are yet to be fully documented. The structural racism of the University coupled with the alterisation of anthropology as a discipline makes it incredibly hard to be handed over the title of an anthropologist, rather than an interloping native (Mathur, n.d.). The anthropological 'we' that is so casually invoked by 'us' anthropologists with its assumption of affinity arising from a shared discipline ends up glossing over the many differences and inequalities that mark the experiences of those who remain ineluctably marked as other (Chua and Mathur 2018).

Indigenous researchers have for decades described what it takes to research Indigenous lives, the costs of working in archives of colonial violence and presents of bureaucratic and institutional erasure. Ethnography here also means struggling with research methods in academic worlds "reflecting positivist and empiricist interpretations of knowledge" (Huaman and Martin 2020: 6, see also Wilson-Hokowhitu 2019, Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010), with some researchers producing ethnographies that aim to make anthropology's practices more visible to itself (Taddei 2018). Here what is decentered is research itself, as much as the researcher, to "approach research in ways that subvert ideas of Western modernity and the universalization of Eurocentric thought" (Dei 2020: xv). In her analysis pairing structural violence with historical trauma for Māori families in Whanganui, Aotearoa New Zealand, Vaeau (nee Bryers-Brown) does this by using a "methodological framework that was safe for her participants", one which she refuses to define through comparison, to avoid "positioning western research paradigms as the norm, and non-western research paradigms, including Kaupapa Māori, as the Other" (Bryers-Brown 2015: 20).

These techniques of decentering – and there are many more – challenge the figure of the heroic individual researcher. In their recent manifesto for a *patchwork ethnography*, for example, Günel, Varma and Watanabe point to 'neoliberal university labor conditions, the "feminization" of anthropology, expectations of work-life balance, environmental concerns and feminist and decolonial critiques' as reasons to redesign time in the field (Günel, Varma and Watanabe 2020). The 'patchwork' of their title, the authors say,

> refers not to one-time, short, instrumental trips and relationships à la consultants, but rather, to research efforts that maintain the long-term commitments, language proficiency, contextual knowledge, and slow thinking that characterizes so-called traditional fieldwork [...] while fully attending to how changing living and working conditions are profoundly and irrevocably changing knowledge production (2020).

In this patchwork are "'researchers' lives in their full complexity" (see also Donald, this volume). In his *Possible Anthropology,* Pandian "relies on the power

of ethnography to *decenter* and dissolve the sovereign self," offering us not a hero but an "anthropologist as medium in a wider world of thought and implication" (2019: 9, emphasis added). Yates Doerr arrives at a refusal of a failure narrative towards the end of her piece, arguing that "[f]ailure is a crucial part of the process of being with others, making failure itself an impossibility" (2020: 10). In its place, her alternative figure of ethnographic knowledge is an *antihero* based on a "care that rests, making space for an individual's fallibility, and care that *stops listening* to the story of the Hero" (2020: 2, emphasis added). Still, disciplines discipline (Todd 2018). By retaining a story of fieldwork in its idealized rite of passage form renders difference invisible and closes the space. As we have seen, work has been ongoing in efforts to dislodge and reshape the story of the heroic fieldworker. So how have they been heard?

Critical Receptions, Critical Response
Calls for change in narrating, doing and supporting fieldwork have largely been met with silence, sometimes even hostility. Perhaps not surprising: "[a]nthropology has always been vexed about the question of vulnerability", writes Ruth Behar (1996: 5), a vexation that appears both in all that surrounds the field – before and long after. Amy Pollard's research with British anthropology PhD students' experiences of fieldwork is now over a decade old (2009). Her analysis revealed stories of isolation, shame, betrayal, disappointment, embarrassment, fear, and feelings of being trapped. In a response to Pollard's study, one scholar described such students as failed anthropologists, recasting their traumas and difficulties as personal weakness:

> The habitus of the discipline of anthropology relies on a widespread agreement that not everyone can be an anthropologist, and the survival of the misery and bafflement of fieldwork is the best way to see who is, and is not fit to join the culture. Metaphors of 'ordeal by fire', and being 'thrown in at the deep end' abound...Pollard's informants do not all seem to have recognised and accepted that reality: so they are not yet fully socialised or enculturated into anthropology (Delamont 2009: 1).

In his reflection on two pieces of fieldwork twenty years apart, Simpson offers a different perspective on the unpredictable 'bafflement' of fieldwork Delamont describes. His initially helpful contact in the Berava community of southern Sri Lanka, Cyril, opened up connections, networks, contacts, and Simpson was delighted. However, Simpson found himself embedded in Cyril's charged social relations, resulting in a thesis 'seen through an aperture of which I thought I was in control but which, in fact, Cyril himself controlled and directed' (Simpson 2006: 6).This formulation makes plain some of the many dependencies scholars enter during their time in the field, as they learn to operate in the unknown (Sharma, this volume).[2] A reversal of agency that might be out of place in a grant proposal, Simpson remarks, but once more true to life: a fieldworker must be made sense of 'as a living social presence' in the field (2006: 127). How this sense-making happens is highly revealing, but neither is it up to the researcher nor is it predictable in advance (Tengan 2005). We might read Simpson's piece alongside other accounts of controlling gatekeepers and through a lens of gender, where

control is exercised over connections, mobility and freedoms (Donald, this volume). Both could operate pedagogically: what would you do in these circumstances? Do you have any experiences you could draw on? How do ethnographers make conundrums and bafflements generative? To do so would also be to address a question Delamont raises later in her commentary to Pollard: *why* are existing accounts of "misery" and "bafflement" during fieldwork not part of all preparation for the field? Is incomprehension of fieldworkers in the 1950s and 1980s still poignant (Delamont cites Bowen 1954, Barley 1983)? Or are their experiences of malaria, isolation or homesickness dropped because, written alongside the theoretical framings, racism or dated language of the time, they fail to resonate with young scholars today?

The articles in *Trial by Fire* offer counter enculturations: they neither accept the agreement of silence around experiences in the field nor the instrumentalisation of the unexpected into professional success. In their voice, style and topics, these contributions address what Delamont calls 'survival' by opening up parts of what fieldwork has entailed for them, showing without heroics. They refuse, as Hovland did a decade ago (2009), the deployment of 'fitness' as a bar to disciplinary belonging, reflecting instead on what fieldwork has been, and could yet be.

The Articles

Yasmeen Arif's opening piece, *We Don't Need Another Hero,* reveals that the heroic fieldworker identity is not available to all, and never has been. Her astute observations of power inequalities between Northern scholars and those based in the Global South, result in, and stem from uneven opportunities for fieldwork, study, and publishing. Arif takes us through conditions of knowledge production from where she is: from the professional demands on anthropologists today to the implicit mapping of heroism on to geographies and bodies of the South. She asks of us the quietness of 'committed reflection', a space between empirical work and the rushing worlds of concepts and ideas.

Vivian Choi's *Woman, Non-Native, Other* expands on Arif's theme of how anthropological knowledge is made to dislodge categories that "place the foreign, white researcher at the top of a hierarchy of what is considered legitimate and valid research" (this volume). No binary can capture the cross hatch of citizenship privileges, border controls, whiteness, fairness, and essentializing experienced by Choi as a researcher in her field on the basis of her appearance. Revisiting these vivid memories of the field, she asks herself why she did not write much of this down; why strategies, taunts and insults were not "worthy as fieldnote material", showing us how embedded silences are even within our own practices. Her request is clear: "can we have more categories [of researcher] than native and non-native?"

In Mythri Jegathesan's contribution, *a body writing,* her body fights to write. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's scholarship for strength, Jegathesan returns to moments her training had her discount, forget. Written so as to bring the reader alongside her during research encounters with tea estate managers in Sri Lanka, we watch, listen, and feel our way into the field. We learn how to see its demands and those of the desk side by side. As Jegathesan puts it, the writing body *must* write, speak: "without it, these stories of risk linger, unsettled like the spirits of those buried on the side of the plantation's roads" (Jegathesan, this volume).

Like Jegathesan, Madeline Donald too is looking back on past fieldwork. *I Said No* begins with a poem, written, she says "some years ago, in a long moment of rage and fear" (Donald, this volume). Poetry as a genre allowed Donald a format to express "what happened" during her MSc ethnobotanical fieldwork. Revisited for this contribution, she uses it to draw out both the potential of ethnography - its engagement of the whole person - and the intersecting vulnerabilities that this puts in play. Echoing Pollard (2009), Donald calls for increased and different forms of fieldwork mentorship and institutional responsibility that are designed by graduate students and junior scholars themselves.

Malini Sur, in her piece, *Sounds of Trauma*, describes an array of soundscapes that permeated her fieldwork, and continued to haunt the writing of her dissertation, and later, the crafting of her book manuscript. Here we get a palpable sense of how the sensorially rich sounds of trauma travel, seep and slip across space and time, animating writing processes, the ethnographer's body, and even her dreams. These 'unmoored voices' reveal the dislocations and borderlands involved in an anthropological life over time, the ways in which fieldwork refuses to be contained to the field site. Such voices, sometimes incomprehensible yet palpable, also reveal the limits of our literary, word-based labours, as we must make sense of, and learn to live with, the ethnographic experiences that have tunneled into us. Sur's piece spotlights the sometimes unnerving contrast that exists for the ethnographer, between the very public tales of fieldwork that enter the world through our writing, and the experiences that remain within us, privately, a type of unsettled excess that none the less deserve to be storied.

Malvika Sharma's contribution, *Of Women and Belonging*, takes a series of encounters in the field, and reveals the uneasy moments of peril and refuge that can be woven into the everyday fabric of fieldwork. On the surface, these stories could be read as heroic tales about making it through precarious and perilous events. But these frank reflections in fact uncover the ways in which Sharma's safety was entangled with those of her participants, how the female ethnographer might feel acute moments of threat and constraint, at the same time that she as a researcher occupies a position of opportunity not necessarily socially afforded to those whom she studies. Her piece reveals the mundane politics of fieldwork that might seem small but on which our sense of belonging comes to hinge. From deciding what to wear, to getting access to enough food, Sharma charts the corporeal vulnerability and dependencies that are intrinsic to fieldwork but on which the training of new scholars rarely focuses.

Invitation to a Conversation

Opening this Introduction we described fieldwork as an 'essential ritual of initiation and a cornerstone of disciplinary identity'. The scholarship we have brought forward to frame the contributions to this collection demonstrates the breadth of challenges to *how* fieldwork is made into that marker, and the work being done to unravel the tacit assumptions with which it comes. A pedagogy of trauma doesn't flinch at a 'trial by fire'. The work of revising that pedagogy may mean finding different idioms that acknowledge transformation. Is the apprenticeship in the vitality and fragility of ethnography not better served by other metaphors?

Three years after Pollard's piece, Ingie Hovland argued that "the way in which [...] emotional states are handled may be just as important, in terms of gaining a PhD, as the increase in knowledge that is the ostensible marker of a completed PhD" (Hovland 2012: 69). Her framing, *regulating emotions*, perhaps unknowingly referenced Marcus's description of the semi-tacit norms of ethnography as 'regulative ideal' (Marcus 2009: 7).

One reason that calls for institutional change and disciplinary shifts have not worked may be because they have failed to address anthropologists as critical scholars as well as institutional employees, supervisors and fieldworkers themselves. A critical disposition generates resistance to–and reasons for doubt in–bureaucratic programs. Just as the conditions of possibility for anthropology are everywhere situated (Ntarangwi 2018), there can be no single prescription for support. It is perhaps as variable as the supervisory relationship itself. Formal mechanisms may position responsibility on the side of training and universities, but risk becoming formalistic, emptied of care. Research ethics, for example, has turned into something that can be 'got', rendering training as an (anthropologically condemned) "proxy of moral judgement" (Meskell and Pels 2005: 21). Ruben Andersson, commenting on the emerging ethics regime in U.K. universities, notes that "The past years have seen a sharp move away from considering ethics as an embedded, context-dependent process in fieldwork, replacing this with a view of ethics as protocol" (2019: 13). He argues this is an outcome of the increasing bureaucratisation of academic research in the UK as well as the fact that the ethics review processes emerge from the medical and behavioural sciences and from the demand by external funders for the right boxes to be ticked. They paradoxically pose the danger of reducing the deeply social and human practice of ethnography simply to a form of 'data extraction'.

Neither ethics nor fieldwork practice can be 'external to the discipline' (Harper and Corsín Jimenez 2005) or they risk ossifying the supple skills of field reflection. But informality depends on engaged mentors, peers and informed staff. It thrives in an environment that is enabling of genuine relationality and collegiality and isn't driven by hostile competition. It requires a pedagogical structure distinct from the one created by the neo-liberal University. What hours can be allocated to support field preparation seminars? Is this work prioritised institutionally? Do already beleaguered academics have the time and space to design creative and careful methods components and mentor students adequately? Institutions embedded in neoliberal responsibilisation of the individual might prioritise interventions resilience and such as 'mindfulness' (Cook 2015) for students returning from the field. The critical capacities of medical anthropologists to interrogate how a method becomes pathologised complicates what it means to call for mental health support for fieldworkers: the framings and languages used in such settings are often part of the topics anthropologists interrogate (Ong 1988, Luhrmann 2000, Whitley 2014, Kohrt, Mendenhall and Brown 2020, Zhang 2020). And does not the increasingly brutal academic market reward those who never show the dark side of the academic process but rather emerge with shiny, daring, clever, trendy, and heroic accounts of fieldwork with publications in supposedly 'top-ranked' journals and presses put out as proof? Where is the space and time for reflection - or even acknowledgement - of the pitfalls, wobbles, failures, and vulnerabilities of the anthropologists' academic experience in an increasingly professionalised and fast paced academic culture?

This does not mean we are at a complete impasse. The past few years have, as we have noted above, seen the publication of a number of texts suited to reading groups, syllabi, departmental and supervisory conversations. There is also an explosion of digital magazines, websites, and blogging sites that open out afresh the question of disciplinary knowledge-making. #Anthrotwitter and the ventures of even the hoary old anthropological associations and institutions across the world, including Euro-America, to make anthropology more accessible are also creating some spaces for non-hegemonic voices to be heard. It is to this growing literature that *Trial by Fire* authors contribute. When we published our call for contributions, we invited accounts of experiences in the field, but we also asked writers to imagine alternatives to the bureaucratic and legalistic models of risk and responsibility that currently exist within university institutions and ethics review committees. We invited contributions of "alternative forms such as fieldwork syllabi, poetic and visual genres", "pieces that interact creatively with canonical or forgotten ethnographic works that exemplify or subvert the heroic tropes of ethnographic fieldwork". We hope these kinds of contributions will still be written, because documenting pedagogy, mentorship and institutionalisation of fieldwork is where the work of creating and re-creating 'anthropologists' is done (Ben-Ari, cited in Chua and Mathur 2018: 1). Fieldwork remains a profound encounter, a technique which, if one "were inventing a method of enquiry by which to grasp the complexity of social life, one might wish to invent something like the social anthropologist's ethnographic practice" (Strathern 1999: 1). To many anthropologists it is not just elevated, it is a given. Yet as the third decade of the 2000s begins, the first century of anthropology comes into greater view. The twentieth century was the first of "its short life as a professional discipline" (Ntarangwi 2018: 233). As fieldwork continues to be taught and experienced into its second century, an increasing array of voices agree that survival as qualification of entry, the 'trial by fire', belongs to an earlier era. The pieces in this collection, we hope, will continue to be central conversations in advancing the ethnographic method, renewing and multiplying figures of the ethnographer, commoning both the work of ethnography and the project of the discipline itself.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Endurance is remarked upon both in a given piece of research and as a feature of comment for some throughout the career (see Gellner 2012, Parkin 2000).

2. With dependencies come the interests and lifeworlds of those with whom we work, a point acknowledged in Berry et al.'s fugitive anthropology where the fieldworker "moves forward with an understanding that the path to reach spaces unknown is necessarily unpredictable (Vimalassery 2016)" (2017: 560).

3. A full history of the idiom 'trial by fire' is yet to be written, but medieval historians do describe it as one of the trials (others included boiling water, hot irons, cold water) constituting medieval judicial processes for four or five centuries (Bartlett 1986, Davies and Fouracre 1986). Trials by fire were condemned as 'akin to torture' in the 890s (Wilks 1989).

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