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a body writing

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ABSTRACT | This article is a meditation on how the body fights to write about experiences of gendered risk and discomfort in anthropology. It details the sensorium of trauma and risk in fieldwork and how writing is central to processing traumas and but also curating future methodological directions. Responding to the demands placed on knowledge production in the discipline, anthropologists are often trained to seal up and bury these kinds of vulnerable writings. However, feminist writing praxes of disobedience and survival encourage anthropologists to do fieldwork and write not to survive a "trial by fire" or preserve an anthropology tested and known but to treat the body and writing as mutual sites of re-visioning more ethical engagements in their fields of work.

Keywords: Fieldwork; Embodiment; Ethnographic writing; Knowledge Production, Plantations

the interview

Four months into dissertation fieldwork, I interviewed a Tamil unionist in a hill station town in Sri Lanka's Central Province. When I got to the union office he introduced me to the staff, escorted me to his office, and closed the door behind us. I sat across from him at his desk and he placed his hands behind head. His elbows fanned as he leaned back in his chair and smiled broadly. In Tamil, he asked, "So, what are your research questions?"

I scrambled for the list I had prepared. As I looked down and shifted my papers, I could feel his eyes on me.

His fingers tapped the desk impatiently, his gold watch hitting the surface each time.

"How long has your organization been registered?"

He told me.

"Is it Mytheli or Mythri?" he asked.

"It's Mythri," I said.

"Mmm. But you're Tamil right?"

Yes.

"What is your *ūr*¹?"

I told him.

I watched his eyes travel to my hairline and other parts of my face. He continued to tap his fingers—his gold watch keeping beat.

I grew warm and looked down at my notes nervously.

"Where does your organization receive funding from?" I asked.

He replied.

"What other programs do those donors fund?"

He answered.

I watched his eyes travel down my body. I had worn a loose blue salwar that day. I began wishing it would grow looser.

"What do you make of the ongoing wage negotiations?"

He answered with a question. "Do you not wear saris?"

I stammered, "No, not really, only for functions."

"Why not?"

I stumbled with a half-smile, "Salwars are easier."

"You should wear saris. Do you know how to drape one?"

His eyes were on my chest. My cheeks grew hot and small beads of sweat surfaced on my nose. I jerked my body to sit up straighter—hoping the sudden gesture would bump his eyes onto something without my sweat, blood, and flesh.

"Why is it hard for the unions to secure a living wage for workers?"

He replied. I eased a bit, making jots.

As I scribbled, I heard, "Are you married?"

I looked up.

Illai.²

His eyes left mine as soon as the word left my mouth. They landed on my chest. His mouth still grinning.

"How old are you?"

I told him.

"And you don't wear a sari?" with a bellowing laugh, his elbows fanning his face as he grinned with delight. His teeth were brightly white and neat.

My own began to grit behind a tight-lipped smile. I sighed deeply and shook my head once.

Illai.

Thirty minutes of stop and go—fingers tapping, eyes traveling—I made an excuse that I had another meeting. I smiled. Thanked him and left.

The bus was empty except for three men sitting on one side. They stared at me as I boarded, and I made my way to the seats directly behind those for pregnant mothers. I sat down and placed my bag against my chest, wrapping my forearms around its flap. I took out my fieldnote book but then looked out the window and rested my head against its dusty glass. I was too tired to annotate my jottings, but I managed to scrawl these words before closing my eyes:

“On the bus. The chauvinism, the churning in my stomach—it sounds like a steam engine—when I see a man who has crossed the line and acted inappropriately. I hate that men stare at my breasts, my body, and face. It has become a habit for me to look down, cross my arms across my mid-section and remain silent.”

the night on the mountain

Four months later, the plantation manager who gave me permission to conduct research on the tea estates he was supervising was abruptly transferred. A week later, the new manager called to let me know that I needed to renew my permissions with him.

When I called him back to arrange a meeting, he invited me for dinner at his home that night. Having gotten close to the Tamil workers on the estate, I was uncomfortable dining at his bungalow. But when I told them he had invited me, they insisted I had to go. They warned me, “You cannot say no to the *durai*.³”

I arrived at sunset. He greeted me. A half-finished drink in hand.

“Can I fix you a drink?”

No, I’m fine.

He motioned for me to sit on the veranda. I stared at the inviting, perfectly manicured garden before me. From here, I could not see the workers' *layams*⁴ where I had been spending the last months of fieldwork. I reminded myself that they too had built and maintained this place. No plant, structure, or body on this land had been untouched by their labor. Seeing the view from here for the first time, I felt sick. And lonely.

Suddenly, a woman's voice on speakers began blaring loudly from inside and cut through the air.

“Do you know Celine Dion?” he asked, coming back outside.

I do.

He motioned for me to follow him inside. There, I saw two Tamil men workers standing by the kitchen door. Their eyes met mine, and I smiled tightly, saying hello in Tamil. Right after the words left my mouth, I looked down. Sheepish for being there but also relieved. I wondered: if he crossed the line, would they intervene? Or would they look away because they, like me, also needed his permission to work?

The table we dined on sprawled across the room. Celine Dion continued to play and the two workers brought out course after course. I met their eyes with discomfort but gratitude. On and off, the manager would shout, “Appu!” It was

a term for male house servants I had seen in 20th century “Cooly⁵ Tamil” guides for non-Tamil planters. From the dry roasted chicken and buttered vegetables to the sounds of workers’ bare feet on the polished floor, generations of violence entered my body. My head grew hot with self-hatred for feeding on it all. But I needed to sit, listen and eat in order to continue working.

After dessert, I remarked that it was getting late.

“It’s not late. Stay for a bit. Have another wine.” I had agreed to a small glass at dinner.

“No, I’m fine.”

Throwing his napkin on the table, he got up and insisted I go sit on the veranda. I sat back down in the wicker chair, my bag in my lap, my phone in hand. At least I was outside.

By that time, it was dark. Without the sun, the garden was imperfect and cold apart from the soft din of *pallis* (lizards) and crickets. I remembered workers’ stories of *pey*, those spirits that linger in the estate’s liminal spaces after dark. With no designated burial grounds for workers and cremations too costly, relatives of the deceased often bury their dead on the sides of the roads or wherever there is space.

My heart began thumping and the skin encasing my chest grew tighter. If I wanted to get away—if I needed to—would I know where to run? Why had I not drawn better maps? How could I have been so foolish to have agreed to this?

At that moment, he came outside and placed his hand on the back of my chair. I was too afraid to turn my head but could feel his body above and behind mine, and I could smell his faint after-dinner whiskey in the damp air.

Not thinking, I quickly stood up to face him. “X⁶ messaged me, and she is worried.”

He looked away, sighing impatiently, “Fine.” He finished off his drink, slammed his glass down on the table right inside the door, and took his keys from his pant pocket.

“I’ll take you home.”

As he drove us down the mountain in his black SUV, he spoke about his wife and children who were living in Colombo, his lousy pay, and how he needed to get out. His frustration and desperate cadence were familiar. All I could think was—please let this pass. Let me pass. Just let me work.

The next day, I threw myself into fieldwork in the *layams*. I sat on cracked cement floors with mothers breastfeeding their infants. I walked barefoot with retired pluckers on abandoned footpaths. I listened to stories of hungry leeches and learned tricks to repel their bites. I interviewed domestic workers in cramped, hot living quarters tucked away within pristine middle-class homes in Colombo. I found myself gravitating towards researching working conditions of survival. Perhaps because my own surviving body was vulnerable and open enough to see them.



The pressures to oblige gatekeepers, perform certain types of fieldwork, and produce high impact outcomes in anthropology are abundant. These pressures

demand I praise their enclosures to gain legitimacy. Anthropologists' "field works" and the sites they map in plantation studies in Sri Lanka also make demands. They demand that I return to those patriarchal spaces. If, as Sara Ahmed writes, "disobedience can take the form of an unwilling obedience" (2014: 140) then my body in writing has unwillingly obeyed the tyrannies of anthropological fieldwork. Just weeks after my interview with the unionist, I found myself again sitting in a room full of men. I watched their eyes wander over women's breasts. I listened to a line of their gold watches clank against the table. Two months after that night on the mountain, I would write this in my fieldnote book: "I am not interested in this—not a world dominated by men. This official world is a man's world—not my world. I will never feel at ease here, knowing that so much and so many are excluded from the dialogue." And yet, I would need to return to those rooms again. And again.

Susan Leigh Foster writes, "I am a body writing, I am a bodily writing. We used to pretend the body was uninvolved . . . We even imagined that thought, once conceived, transferred itself effortlessly onto the page via a body whose natural role as instrument facilitated the pen . . . Now we know that the body cannot be taken for granted, cannot be taken seriously, cannot be taken" (1995: 3). My writing and movements today carry the somatic sensoria from my unionist interview and that night on the mountain. To pass, I press my thumbnail into the skin of my forefinger when a man is about the cross the line and I can say nothing. I contort my face on Colombo's streets to repel men's catcalls before they can even size me up.

To this day I still prefer the bloody lust of a leech over Celine Dion's voice. Perhaps because its lust and traces left behind—the abscess, swelling and inflammation of a body fighting toxicity—most closely resemble what Gloria Anzaldúa calls the "psychic dismemberment" (107) that has been my writing as an anthropologist. For Anzaldúa, "composing is an osseous process, the formation of the bone, though at times it feels like sweating blood" (104). In this process, I often trained myself to discount these moments of extreme unease, risk, and vulnerability as mere scratches in my notebook. I trained myself to forget that my fears, frustrations and rage were "once fed blood, once fleshed" (Anzaldúa 2015: 104). And like a leech bite wound, my writing closed in on and sealed up their remains. But their toxins stayed in my skin.

This kind of body writing refuses to conform to the literal bindings of the ethnographic account (see also Choi, this volume). It is wary of the heroic dances in the halls of higher education markets (Gunasekara 2020, see also Arif, this volume). I unearth the body writing because, as Gina Athena Ulysse reminds us, "I know I am not the only one here so desperate for breathing space" (2017: 75) to collectively air all of the erased labor of saying yes to pass. Without it, these stories of risk linger, unsettled like the spirits of those buried on the side of the plantation's roads.

Anthropology's predecessors must not be our fitness tests. What they have endured should compel us to confront and burn (Jobson 2020) the complicities that have been dealt within and in the name of preserving our fields of training and thought. Neither my body nor my writing will singly determine my acceptability in this thing we do called anthropology. Each invests in the other. If they did not, I would not be able to do this work, and I would not be able to see beyond what the field ports and stores.

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Notes

1. *Ūr* is the Tamil word for “home” or “where you are from.”
2. *Illai* is the Tamil word for “no.”
3. *Durai* is a Tamil word defined as a “word used (formerly) to refer to a European” or “one who behaves in a lordly way” (Cre-Å Tamil-English Dictionary). In my fieldwork, I would often hear workers use the word in reference to their employers but also as a term of endearment for small children, usually boys.
4. Line rooms or *layams* (in Tamil) are the residential quarters that were originally 12 x 7-foot colonial barrack-style structures that workers and their families lived in on the tea estates. Over time, workers have used their cash and incomes to expand these unowned line rooms to make them livable. While some were renovated and made purchasable through a mix of plantation companies, government, and donor-funded programs, most are still unowned structures owned by the estate companies. Despite infrastructural improvements, the line rooms are still stigmatized spaces and associated with plantation labor and workers’ caste, class and lower socioeconomic status in Sri Lanka.
5. Cooly or coolie is an English term used to describe a person who is paid a small amount to do different types of manual labor. In Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, the term referred to tea estate workers and other types of informal and formal laborers such as domestics, cooks, construction workers, etc.
6. X is the older woman I was staying with during my research and who had dropped me off at his bungalow.

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