

COMMONING ETHNOGRAPHY

Vol 3 | No 1 | 2020

Sounds of Trauma

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ABSTRACT | This article explores the sounds of trauma in anthropology. I ask: when, where, and under what circumstances do unmoored sounds and voices gain salience in anthropology? In particular, can methodological insights prepare anthropologists for the intense military scrutiny that societies endure in violent borderlands? Recalling the long tradition of orality in anthropology, I suggest that the slippery registers of sound and voice in trauma is generative not only of location and culture, but also of a perennial sense of dislocation. Writing anthropology demands the iterative re-dwelling and reliving of sound and voice that continually haunt, emerge, flow, and resurface across different stages of ethnographic labour. Disembodied sounds and voices generate indescribable languages. Based on my long term ethnographic fieldwork in the Northeast India-Bangladesh borderlands, I show how sensory modalities not only nourish divergent possibilities of meaning and emplacement but also register impasses of interpretation and displacement.

Keywords: Borders; Sound; Voice; Trauma; Displacement

From within an Indian border outpost in Assam in May 2007, two months into my dissertation fieldwork, I stared at India's newly constructed border fence with Bangladesh. Heavily armed Indian troops with guns and bullets strapped to their chests stood guarding the barrier, which cut through remote villages and rice fields. Wireless radios buzzed constantly.

The border lines that divides the states of Assam and Meghalaya in Northeast India and Bangladesh are forcefully militarised. Assam and Meghalaya share complex internal boundaries with India and external ones with Bangladesh (Baruah 2010, 1999; Karlsson 2014). Here, in addition to preventing smuggling, unauthorised migration, and terrorism, the Indian border forces also aggressively contain political separatism.

A new battalion of troops had recently to quell the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), a revolutionary organization demanding an independent state of Assam. The ULFA leadership had taken refuge in border villages, which immediately transformed these far-flung rural locations into sites of extraordinary violence.

Those who depended upon the border for their living—farmers and transborder traders and transporters whose lives I was there to explore—feared torture and death at the hand of the border troops. From the first month of my fieldwork in 2007 until 2015, so did I.

Crackling wireless radios, the heavy footsteps of troops, screeching sirens from patrolling jeeps, and the baritone voices of commanders dominated the landscape. Unlike at smaller outposts, where Indian commanders casually boasted over tea and snacks that every undocumented Bangladeshi migrant was shot at sight, the Indian troops stationed at this large outpost were distant and formal.

That May afternoon, after proudly showing India's new fortifications to a colleague, the head of the civilian administration left in a jeep with a revolving light. The shrieking sounds of the jeep's siren suddenly heightened vigilance. The border constable who stood next to me looked at me suspiciously.

He swiftly snatched the cloth bag that hung over my shoulder. He located my camera, a banking machine, and my notebook. He pressed a button on the banking machine and, mistaking it for the remote control of a bomb, yelled in panic: "Where is the bomb?"

Before I could clarify, he communicated with his seniors over the wireless radio. The radios hissed and sputtered. A commander arrived. His gravelly voice held me hostage. I produced my university letter, then took out my bank card, inserted it in the machine, and explained how internet banking worked. After what seemed like hours, the commander agreed to let me go, but not before he had hurled the same set of questions at me repeatedly.

This incident set a precedent for the rest of the year and those that followed. My awkward presence as a young woman anthropologist in a masculine militarized landscape could never be innocuous. Sometimes, Indian troops nervously conveyed their apprehensions about female suicide bombers. They often suspected that I was either a political dissident or a journalist who would report their deficits. Yadav, the border constable, feared that I would cost him his job. We feared the border.

We feared for our lives.

Despondency

For the next month, Yadav telephoned me from an undisclosed number every three days, routinely checking on my whereabouts. After that he started calling me from a mobile number. His tone changed. His voice broke and wavered.

Yadav conveyed that he missed his children. He never failed to enquire after me and my family's well-being. His tele-monologues blurred the rigid military protocols that his job officially demanded, which prohibited non-official conversations with civilians.

Often for weeks, I had no phone connectivity in the Indian villages that were located within three miles of the border. Here, the Indian state did not permit tele-communication networks for reasons of national security. Affluent Indian traders and politicians operated on mobile phones with Bangladeshi sim cards.¹

At the same time Yadav's enquiries were magnifying my isolation, I heard resonances of a similar depression in everyday conversations. Villagers could no longer walk across rice fields to see their families and kin: the militarization and the construction of new infrastructures had also disrupted trans-border trade.

I had arrived at the border seemingly well prepared for its dangers. I was armed with deep insights from Caroline Nordstrom and Antonius Robben's collection of essays, aptly titled *Fieldwork Under Fire* (1999). I had closely read, among others, Linda Green's *Fear as a Way of Life*, a powerful ethnography on Mayan widows whose husbands had disappeared during the counterinsurgency in Guatemala. The raw-ness of trauma and the nightmares described in Green's work were etched in my mind (Green 1999). I had judiciously attended to the methodological stakes involved in conducting fieldwork in dangerous borders.

But no amount of methodological insights can ever prepare anthropologists for the intense military scrutiny that ordinary villagers endure in such locations. I lived with the dangers emanating from guns and bullets. I constantly heard crackling, hissing, despairing, muffled sounds. I lived with voices that emanated from the mundane—from banking machines, mobile phones, wireless radios, wooden altars, graves, and computers.

I never got used to them.

Reverberations

As I began arranging my fieldnotes and listening to my recorded interviews to write my dissertation in Amsterdam, voices seeped into my dreams. Some emerged from the altar of a former church where my friends had publicly defended their doctoral dissertations, as I would in the coming years.

In my dreams, I stood alone. I could not see the people whose voices I could clearly hear from the altar. One night, a confrontation broke out between two disembodied voices over cow smuggling, a subject I was writing about. One voice resembled that of my supervisor—an anthropologist and historian renowned for his work on South Asia's borderlands. The other belonged to a Bangladeshi cattle trader with whom I had travelled and with whose family I resided for extended periods during my fieldwork.

During my fieldwork Muslim, Christian, and Hindu border societies all related to the metaphysical in the form of disembodied voices. Traders and transporters conveyed that they heard the voices of *farishteys* (angels) guiding them during their dangerous border-crossings. The *farishteys* spoke from the trees under which they rested. These voices possessed the traders and transporters who

crossed the border for a living, making them unable to leave the border despite the increasing and deadly risk.

‘Be careful; don’t walk too close to that tree near the border’ was a common refrain. The trees were possessed with both good and bad spirits—ones that were never seen, only heard. Fears were intimately linked to the emergence of angelic and demonic voices.

In Amsterdam I failed to find a single angel who could help me locate my authorial voice. As sounds from my fieldwork seeped into my consciousness, I lived with a sense of dread for those I had lived and travelled with along the border.

I continued writing, in the company of encouraging colleagues and friends, the tenacity of post-traumatic stress, conversations with a trauma dream therapist, and two dislodged vertebrae. I was certain that my dissertation would never see the light of the day.

When it did, I could clearly hear the sound of my voice in response to the questions that the external committee members posed. In Dutch tradition, I publicly defended my dissertation in another church before a gathering of my family and friends.

However, this event did not end the sounds of trauma.

Amplification

In my dreams, Monjula spoke to me from her grave. A Garo Christian border villager in Meghalaya, she had died from the lack of medical attention to deep vein thrombosis. I attended her burial in 2007.

In 2013 my bed was a grave. Muffled voices emerged from it. In my dreams, my body crushed Monjula’s voice. I could not decipher what she was saying, even when I jumped out of my bed in fear.

I returned to fieldwork from 2013 to 2015. Indian troops were fiercely patrolling border villages in Meghalaya to contain the demand for an independent Garo homeland.

I returned to a deep sense of loss. Many people I knew and lived with had died under mysterious circumstances. Others complained of ailments that had no medical diagnosis. In militarized borders ordinary life is filled with pain and suffering; here violence generates the very conditions under which suffering is made normal (Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997).

In 2015, India’s new border had fenced out Monjula’s grave. The village graveyard was now located in Bangladesh. I cautiously glanced at it through India’s new fence. I was scared of the black commando troops that India had deployed here: all masked, stationed at every yard.

In 2018, as I was penning the epilogue to my book in the city of Parramatta in Australia, muted voices emerged from my computer—in my faculty office located in a refurbished psychiatric asylum. The premises had earlier functioned as dormitories and day rooms for patients, who suffered from religious excitement and fright to sun stroke and ovarian disorders.² My relocation to teach anthropology had also laid bare the history of mental illness in Australia.

Long after dusk, my computer sputtered. Cracked voices spoke to me all at once in languages I could not comprehend. For a week. Then a month.

These voices unevenly linked distant worlds of suffering and sorrow. They generated new stifling sounds.

Except for my furious tapping on the keyboard and the voices of students chatting in the gardens outside, the mornings were relatively silent. I listened carefully, searching for the sounds of fear.

I left the premises at sunset.

Location and Dislocation

What might be at stake in situating the sounds of trauma in anthropology? Where and under what circumstances do unmoored voices gain salience in writing anthropology? Given the long tradition of orality in anthropology, sound has been fundamental to the history of anthropology as a discipline (Cox 2017). Sound situates the body and the senses, and the very experience of embodiment in modernity (Samuels et al. 2010). Anthropologists have studied sound through rituals (Needlam 1967, Jackson 1968), music (Feld and Fox 1994), and senses and ethics (Stoller 1989, Hirschkind 2001).

In a similar vein, anthropologists have also closely attended to the human voice in diverse registers of cultural life, socio-political and linguistic contexts, and identities. The voice and its mediation have been intrinsic to the study of politics and power. The voice connects subjectivities and material practices through meaning-making and relates to values, affect, contestations, and aesthetics (Weidman 2014). Sound also mediates the relationship between voice and place; it registers place-making (Feld and Brenneis 2004).

Anthropological studies on mental illness foreground the diversity and the locational specificity of voices. Tanya Luhrmann's collaborative cross-cultural work on schizophrenia shows how cultural contexts structure voice-hearing. People afflicted with schizophrenia hear varied voices that are both dangerous and offer auditory companionship and solace (Luhrman et al. 2015). Exploring the life worlds of ritual healing, Helene Basu reminds us that the voice itself constitutes a border between the inside/outside of the body and the normal/pathological. While psychiatric models situate the disembodied voice to diagnose severe mental disorder, in trance and ritual performances the hearing of embodied and disembodied voices gesture towards healing (Basu 2014).

Yet, the slippery registers of sound and voice in trauma is generative not only of location and culture, but a perennial sense of dislocation. Anthropology demands iterative re-dwelling: reviving fieldwork. Reliving the hauntings of sound and voice. These continually emerge, flow, and resurface across different stages of ethnographic labour. Writing anthropology requires the repeated re-living of immersive near-death experiences, the traumas of those we lived and travelled with as well as those who posed dangers to our lives.

In waking and dreaming, unmoored sounds and voices only partly find expression in words. Their hauntings generate indescribable languages. Sensory modalities not only nourish divergent possibilities of meaning and emplacement but also register stalemates of interpretation and displacement.

From near and far.

Acknowledgements

I thank Eli Elinoff, Geir Henning Presterudstuen and Catherine Trundle for their insightful suggestions.

Notes

1. In border zones, the use of mobile phones also enables traders and divided families to overcome the border's restrictions, see Horst and Taylor (2014).

2. I thank Professor Carol Liston, Western Sydney University, for a wealth of information on the Rydalmere Psychiatric Hospital. See also, records at NSW Government Gazette No.285, 4 May 1888, p.3162. Rydalmere Hospital for the Insane [Branch of Parramatta Hospital for the Insane] 02-05-1888 to 04-04-1892. On the list of moral and physical causes, see: https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/femaleorphanschool/home/rydalmere_psychiatric_hospital_1888_to_1989 accessed on September 20, 2020.

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