Speechless: Understanding the Manufacture of Omission in an Effort Toward a More Responsible Ethnography

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Speechless: Understanding the Manufacture of Omissions in an Effort Toward a More Responsible Ethnography

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Senior Honors Thesis
Submitted to the Department of Anthropology
Washington University in St. louis

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At any point in time, our sense of entities, including ourselves, is an outcome of our subjective involvement in the world. Narrative mediates this involvement. Personal narratives shape how we attend to and feel about events. They are partial representations and evocations of the world as we know it.

Preface

This thesis examines how people make meaning in their lives through narrative, and how anthropologists can engage narrative – both as a methodology and as a strategy of communication – in ways that can mitigate some of the ethical challenges of the discipline. In doing so, I engage with classic anthropological concerns about the nature of “truth,” the politics of representation, and the generation of anthropological knowledge. At the heart of this discussion is how anthropologists theorize the relationship between observable behavior and individual meaning, and how cultural and structural arrangements are thought to affect this relationship. By incorporating autoethnographic material, I contend with the excesses and omissions that shape the production of ethnographic narratives, and offer correctives born of this work that might allow for the production of more salient and responsible anthropological knowledge.

Individuals and Culture

Anthropologists have long debated how to think about the relationship between individuals and culture. To what extent are people (and their experiences) constituted by the cultural structures, meanings, and practices within which they exist? Are there any aspects of the person that are independent of these elements? And what difference does it make?

The classical existentialist tradition teaches that existence precedes essence, that meaning is constituted in and through existing, as opposed to a person acting in accordance with an in-built, homogeneous set of characteristics that comprise a stable Self (Crowell 2020). The illusion of self-cohesion, according to this view, stems from existence: by means of existing and continuously acting (or choosing to act), one instantiates a sense of an essence that is recognizably hers, similar to how those close to her come to associate her name and face.
Consider, for example, a flower whose petals close in the night and open in the day, often of vibrant color. We associate this opening and closing with the Morning Glory, and when encountering a flower of similar anatomy and function – opening and closing in response to stimuli – we assume that this, too, qualifies. A woman’s essence is comparatively more fluid. She who drinks her coffee straight as she does her Tequila, and prefers the solitary act of writing to the sociable act of day drinking or being confined to less than one foot of cubic space at some dusty college bar that charges a premium for bottom shelf liquor is considered a loner, she is considered antisocial, she is thought to be aloof. And maybe she is, but that is irrelevant. If the same onlooker or onlookers judged her in a different setting, at an intimate cocktail party on some cobblestone terrace or seated at a less crowded bar, sipping on a beverage of the mixologist’s choice, they might still consider her aloof but would be less inclined to label her as antisocial or loner. If they saw her shiny forehead and sweat-stained back mid deadlift, they would think of her differently still. And if they were to observe her in yet another context, dressed conservatively in Shabbat services or laboring over a beef brisket for the holidays or scaling waterfalls on late summer mornings, they might not know what to think.

If we are to associate meaning with essence and essence with a person’s adherence to those culturally constructed (accepted) signifiers that the Other plasters on our backs and left breasts beneath the words Hello, My name is, Self is not who you intrinsically are, but who others perceive you to be – and how you perceive yourself to be – in and through the practice of existing. In this view, perception comes first (I see you) and recognition second (I comprehend you through available cultural categories). Acceptance (I see myself in a way that reconciles how I am both seen and understood through available cultural categories) comes third, last. What this means is that the meaning-making that contributes to the constitution of the Self involves multiple layers of
negotiation and iterative processes through which some elements are deemed relevant and others extraneous. Rather than producing a fragmentary result, in most cases we are quieted by the illusion of meaning and order, by a sense of belonging, however arbitrary; and so we perform our Selves, fortifying them with repetition.

Each telling is situated in time and space and engages only the facets of a speaker’s selfhood evoked or assumed relevant to the specific storytelling event (Ochs and Capps 1996, 21-22). Narrative is in this way inseparable from Self, as it is both born of experience and gives shape to experience. Put simply, narrative makes experience *real*, which I use here to mean tangible or perceptible.

We see this force of narrative in ethnography as well. Historically, anthropologists have assumed an isomorphism between existence and essence, deducing from observable behaviors what they believe someone’s understanding or motivation to be. While this may in many cases suffice, in just as many cases it does not, posing a fundamental challenge to the very validity of the ethnographic endeavor.
Introduction

The Reflexive Turn in Anthropology

Western science historically has de-legitimized the expressive modes of rhetoric, fiction, and subjectivity in the name of transparent signification, fact, and objectivity. The latter were made to reside in a separate category – literature – the bounds of which were, and largely still are, irreconcilable with those of scientific inquiry. Literature is considered invented. It is thought to be metaphoric and allegorical (Clifford and Marcus 1986, 5), leaving space for interpretation that invites questioning and complexity. It is this complexity that is largely missing from traditional ethnography: the possibility for lived experience, for realness beyond that which was observed, pared down, and put on the page.

My inquiry in this thesis is rooted in the space created by James Clifford and George E. Marcus’ *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986). This text was a turning point in the decades-long debate about whether anthropology is a scientific or humanistic discipline: a debate typified by what was called “the reflexive turn” in anthropology and the rise of autoethnography, both of which center the ethnographer's experience as central to the process of knowledge production, and are fueled by an increased understanding of culture as complex and contested in ways that resist traditional ethnography’s propensity for constructing exotic worlds and fantastic spaces with discernable cultural boundaries.

Consider, for example, Clifford Geertz’ foundational work, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), wherein he defines ethnography as an intellectual effort: an elaborate venture accomplished by establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, reproducing narrative in writing, and using that reproduction as evidence (p. 6). Geertz leans on Gilbert Ryle’s notion of “thick description,” a conceptual framework for interpreting culture wherein the
researcher immerses her- or himself in the context of the culture they’re studying in order to understand and communicate specific patterns or modes of meaning making which, in theory, should inform their analysis and produce more thoughtful, accurate representations (Clark 2017). As Geertz notes:

Consider, [Ryle] says, two boys rapidly contracting the eyelids of their right eyes. In one, this is an involuntary twitch; in the other, a conspiratorial signal to a friend. The two movements are, as movements, identical; from an I-am-a-camera, “phenomenalistic” observation of them alone, one could not tell which was twitch and which was wink, or indeed whether both or either was twitch or wink. Yet the difference, however unphotographable, between a twitch and wink is vast; as anyone unfortunate enough to have had the first taken for the second knows. The winker is communicating, and indeed communicating in a quite precise and special way: (1) deliberately, (2) to someone in particular, (3) to impart a particular message, (4) accordingly to a socially established code, and (5) without cognizance of the rest of the company. (Geertz 1973, 6)

In other words, gestures are imbued with cultural and contextual meaning, and their truths are imperceptible to the casual observer (that is, unphotographable). A wink is only a wink if the ethnographer is familiar with the pairing of behavior and culture that constitutes the gesture. Otherwise, the resulting recreation of an observed scene or narrative encounter would not be representative of the truth or whole truth of that scene or encounter – it would be a partial truth which, though better suited for narrative and thereby the work of anthropologists, works against the form of traditional ethnography and its desired nearness to scientific fact.

Postmodernist and modernist anthropologists alike, barring those few ‘scientific diehards,’ agree that the study of the human world, anthropology, requires altogether different techniques than those employed in the study of the physical world. The first employs such subjective techniques as insight and empathy in the study of mind and culture that are largely irrelevant to the second (Spiro 1996, 766). If subjective techniques are to be employed in data collection, analysis, and representation (that is, if we treat language as referential and thereby observed or
lived reality as distinct from constructed narrative account), why does traditional anthropology tend to deem substantive only those forms of conveyance and modes of expression that create the illusion of objectivity? Although the premise that anthropology is objective has been extensively challenged in recent decades, the field is nevertheless characterized by a striving towards “truth” that is inseparable from its roots in prioritizing some forms of knowledge (objective, verifiable) over others (subjective, impressionistic). Why does the discipline tend to fear the subjective, when the subjective is its propulsive force, its reason for being?

When we tell stories, whether personal or ethnographic, we are fixing our subjects in language so that they become ‘defined,’ thereby limiting their realness to what has been written about them. The worlds encountered in ethnographies are the result of the subjective experiences of a few key informants. They are generalized, but may not be generalizable in the sense that the experience of some is the experience of all (though the experiences of the few studied and then published are true). These generalizations are good enough, or as good as a researcher can reliably get. As Clifford and Marcus note,

‘Cultures’ do not hold still for their portraits. Attempts to make them do so always involve simplification and exclusion, selection of a temporal focus, the construction of a particular self-other relationship, and the imposition or negotiation of a power relationship. (Clifford and Marcus 1986, 10)

To that end, partial truths are not the risk of this work, but the best-case scenario.

Omissions, Exclusions, and Silences

This leads to the question of what exists beyond that which is captured in ethnographic accounts. Exclusion in ethnography is impossible to avoid. Incongruent voices may be silenced to best serve the anthropologist’s project, and personal and historical circumstances deemed irrelevant by the ethnographer may be omitted because of limited page-space and/or project
scope. However, not all omissions are of consequence. The recommendations made in this thesis aim to limit those omissions that impact interpretation.

I wish to stress that my use of the words *silenced* and *omitted* are not intended to paint the anthropologist as calculated or intentional in their incomplete or altered portraiture, when the silencing of voices often stems from ignorance. The observer of twitch and wink or neither twitch nor wink may be versed in the meaning of the gesture and leave it out of the narrative, opting for details more obviously related to task or obviously important. They may also write the gesture but not contextualize it (without conscious intent to do so). In both cases, the meaning made would not match the meaning meant or communicated by the research subject. In both cases, the result is that ethnographic truths are “inherently partial - committed and incomplete.” In the words of Clifford and Marcus, “All constructed truths are made possible by powerful ‘lies’ of exclusion and rhetoric” (Clifford and Marcus 1986, 7).

Taking seriously the ways in which doing and writing ethnography constructs as much as documents its objects of study, the reflexive turn in ethnography arose in recognition of the asymmetrical power relations between researchers and informants, and a growing uncertainty about “anthropology’s subject matter (traditionally ‘the other’), its method (traditionally, participant observation), its medium (traditionally, the monograph) and its intention (traditionally that of informing rather than practice)” (Andrew Dawson, Jenny Hockey, Allison James 1997, 1-2). As a corrective, reflexivity seeks to mediate between the reality of “life lived and inscribed elsewhere but wedged between book covers and read here” (Behar 1990, 224), by labeling all facts as interpretations and points as subjective (Nazaruk 2011, 81). Its aim: to reveal the micropolitics (use of power, authority, and influence in narrative representation) and situate the anthropologist as *looking-at-research-subject-looking-at-anthropologist* (Nazaruk 2011, 80). This
evaluation of ethnographic writing as a distorted mirror of the self visualizes how a researcher’s personal history impacts their construction of ethnographic accounts (Nazaruk 2011, 78) and further distances ethnography from objective retelling and anthropology from pure science.

This is not to say that anthropology cannot be objective or that objectivity should not be a goal of the work. Nor is it to say that partiality equates to nonsense. Rather, reflexivity in anthropology calls for intentionality in practice over objectivity in output, which I take to mean the infusion of ethnographer’s process with systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall: the narrative I, autoethnography.

Narrative Construction and The Narrated Self

My primary interests in this thesis are the forces that shape the narratives of ethnography’s subjects, and further, the final written ethnographies produced using these life narratives as raw material. Where does ethnography break down (where the meaning made does not match the meaning meant) and who, writer or subject, got in the way? How do we use these learnings to address the ethical shortcomings of the discipline?

Narratives are versions of reality that are often fragile and always contingent. Here, I do not mean to suggest, as did some postmodernists of the 1990s (e.g., Clifford and Marcus 1986), that therefore ethnographers can’t know anything about anything. What I want to do, rather, is to draw attention to the ways in which anthropological knowledge is narrative knowledge, and, as such, it can be productively engaged with the tools of narrative study. Specifically, consider what is not present in the text, and why, recognizing that omissions and silences can be manufactured by both ethnographer and subject.
Methods

Autoethnography hinges on the “push and pull between and among analysis and evocation, personal experience and larger social, cultural and political concerns,” on the ethnographer writing herself into the narrative while engaging in dialogue with informants beyond the self (Adams and Jones 2014, 4). In my exploration of omission in writing as both a deliberate mode of meaning making and as a result of prioritizing fact for a writer’s project, I will lean heavily on the process of autoethnographic writing (personal narrative)\(^1\) as grounding for my analysis, and through which we may better understand the ethnographer’s predicament in narrative reconstruction.

The utility of autoethnography for better understanding ethnographic writing and associated processes rests in the treatment of past selves as distinct from present selves, and in the understanding of Self (past and present) as inextricable from narrative (Ochs and Capps 1996, 22). For this discussion, I will use personal narrative as a proxy for ethnography, as they have many similarities. Personal narrative engages the researcher (present self, writer) and research subject (past self or selves, from which the writer has one or two degrees of separation, distance) in a way similar to ethnographic writing. Specifically, I point to the negotiation between researcher and subject – or self and former self – as instrumental to the manufacture of omission as a strategy for dealing (or attempting to deal) with excess – the material collected and grappled with, yet not reproduced in writing because it was deemed inessential, of little merit (not worth telling), or impossible to pin down.

\(^1\) Autoethnography and personal narrative are not synonymous. Autoethnography is meant to connect to or illustrate larger cultural themes. The same is not expected of personal narrative, though it can function similarly. As I am using pieces of personal writing that speak to larger themes in writing ethnographies, I am arguing for its classification as autoethnography for the purpose of this thesis.
On Form and Function

My own experience with writing is fraught. I tend toward the real, and as such, I often run out of material; or, at least, material that I am emotionally and energetically prepared to write. The act of writing requires thinking, and such thinking requires introspection and the unearthing of memory that inevitably dredges up some trauma or another that hasn’t been contemplated, appropriately, for a number of years. The process of writing entails thinking, dredging, feeling, and aching in anticipation of the acute pain that results from the threading together of adverse experience after adverse experience until it becomes clear that I am the link, the narrative thread, the source of suffering.

In the coming chapters, I draw from narratives I have written over the years that proved integral to knowledge production – to my understanding of Self and of myself as a writer. Though I treat the excerpts differently, each speaks to an opportunity for improvement in ethnography, offering considerations for both writers and subjects that, if productively engaged by anthropologists, could improve the accuracy of ethnographic texts.

Using these narratives as a jumping off point, each chapter speaks to a source and/or implication of excess on the production of ethnographic narratives. In my first chapter, I broach the question of authority and responsibility in ethnographic writing with two published ethnographies: Stanton Wortham’s “Narrating the Self” (2001) and Peter Benson’s Tobacco Capitalism: Growers, Migrant Workers, and the Changing Face of a Global Industry (2012), which I follow with Benson’s reflection on methodological failings in anthropology titled “Tobacco Capitalism, an Afterward: Open Letters and Open Wounds in Anthropology” (2019). As a means of working through the problems earlier identified, I present a brief, unpublished account of an event between a young woman and her mother that occurred in the United States in
2013. In my second chapter, I engage reflexivity in a discussion of the reliability of ethnographic narratives, treating an excerpt from “Moments of Quasi-Becoming” (Goldstein 2021) as ‘field notes’ in order to illuminate some of the challenges of doing ethnography more generally. In my third and final chapter, I visualize the material omitted from ethnographic narratives by writing over an excerpt from my previously written work, “The Next Demand Made Upon Us” (Goldstein 2021), and including photocopies of the marked-up pages in the text. I attempt to work through my reasons for withholding in writing, which I believe are transmissible to the research subject’s experience in the field. As remedial, I contemplate the possibility of fictionalization in ethnographic writing, which is at present seldom named but frequently practiced.

You will notice my liberal use of footnotes in this thesis, which hold the personals that might have otherwise read as digressive, definitions of key terms as they should be contemplated for my purpose, reference images, and brief histories – any material that might not find its place in the text for the sake of brevity or obvious relation to task, but that prove inseparable from the truth. The text can be read without them, but the read is made far richer by their inclusion, which I intend to be evidentiary of the contingency of narrative, and a reminder of the worlds of contextualizing information omitted from the ethnographies encountered in print.
Chapter 1

What do anthropologists, ethnographers, risk when speaking for their subjects?

In a seminar on the narrative construction of self and the micro-politics of storytelling (Rebecca Lester, Washington University in St. Louis, 2021), we explored storytelling as the interface between Self and society, between the self as subject and social structure. One of our first readings was the introductory chapter to Stanton Wortham’s *Narratives in Action: A Strategy for Research and Analysis* (2001), titled “Narrating the Self.” The chapter begins with a statement of purpose, to explore “autobiographical narratives’ power to transform or construct the self,” and follows with an introduction to the autobiographical narrative of a woman under the pseudonym Jane:

In her early 20s, Jane had what she describes as an “affair” with a man from her neighborhood, and she got pregnant. Because of her relatives’ discomfort with the prospect of single parenthood, she decided to give the child up for adoption. So when her son was born, she brought him to an orphanage in downtown Louisville. (Wortham 2001, p. 3)

When the time came for Jane to sign the adoption papers, she couldn’t. What follows is an excerpt from Jane’s interview transcript:

I want you to know this woman yelled at me (pause) and tried to guilt-trip me. she said, “how dare you do this to me! I made place for your baby. I helped you out. you have to sign these papers!” I said, “I don’t have to do anything of the sort. I want my child!” and at first she refused me. And I said, “I want my baby.” And she practically threw a temper tantrum right there in the office of the orphanage, and was screaming at me because she had made room for my baby and she wanted my baby. they brought, my darling baby to me, who had (pause) his skin on his feet and his legs was totally scaled (pause) I think they left him alone for two weeks. (ibid., p.3)
In his analysis of Jane’s testimony, Wortham describes Jane’s recounting of this orphanage episode as representative of the subject changing from a passive victim to active, assertive woman (p. 4). Jane is described as recovering her composure at the same point that she tells of taking control at the orphanage, enacting an analogous shift in her projected relationship with the interviewer. Early in the interview she pauses often, her voice breaks, and at one point she cries. As she asserts control in the narrative, she speaks more fluently, more assuredly - fewer pauses, fewer voice breaks, no tears. “[S]he changes her interactional position with respect to the interviewer, from being rather passive and asking for the interviewer’s sympathy early in the interview to actively asserting how she in fact has more life experience than the naive interviewer” (p.4).

Where Wortham’s earlier treatment of his subject, allowing her to tell her own story as opposed to speaking for her (paraphrasing material) and assuming ownership of her narrative, is apt and responsible, his latter synopsis gives me pause. Simply put, it feels reductive. Nowhere in Jane’s narrative – what Wortham includes in the final, published text – does she assume to have more life experience than her interviewer, nor does she make a statement to her interviewer’s naivety (or to the interviewer’s respective position more generally). Such a claim brings into question Wortham’s authority as arbiter in Jane’s narrative reconstruction. I assume that he took liberties in writing, suffusing her narrative with motive beyond the obvious, including the fact that she was prompted to tell the story of her life as if it were a novel divided into chapters (p.2).

Returning to my guiding question, *What do anthropologists, ethnographers, risk when speaking for their subjects?* In the case of autoethnographic writing, the stakes are substantially lower, as the research subject and researcher are one in the same: two parts of that which constitutes a whole (or the illusion of wholeness). Thus, the ethnographer may be more
assumptive in their reconstructions, or rather can get away with being more assumptive, with intentionally or unintentionally stretching truths (collected, known pieces of information) to cover the gaps in narrative, than they could be when writing about other living subjects, as is the primary task of ethnographers. There are fewer repercussions, if any, with autoethnographic writing. While it would be immoral to present fabricated material as fact, abusing the public’s trust in academics – their propensity to take what has been written in academic circles as truth – beyond the merit of autoethnography as method and the good standing of the anthropologist in academic circles, relatively little is at stake. Or, at least, what is put at stake is completely up to the ethnographer and what she feels willing to risk. In this regard little is relative, depending on which you think is a greater offense: misrepresenting a research subject, someone in a historically disadvantaged or marginalized position, someone whose voice you are assuming, who either cannot speak for themselves or whose stories have not been deemed historically of merit, worth telling, worth listening to; or threatening the good standing of a mode of anthropological inquiry? In one case you do further harm to an individual or group. In the other, you limit a discipline’s capacity for change, for the inclusion of voices traditionally left out of popular discourse, and the reflexive turn that limits the authoritarian academic voice – a welcome inhibition.

In either event, the danger of doing ethnography in the traditional sense stems from the earned or assumed authority of academics and academic writing, and the limitations of language and therefore narrative.

Credibility in academia is sourced from expertise, from the authority that stems from specialty. The more academics write, the more they are published and cited by similar or more highly regarded academics in the discipline, the more weight their word holds, and the truer their assertions are or appear to be. Still, our capacity for expression is nowhere near exhaustive. We
must acknowledge or account for the worlds, the multitudes left off or left behind – all that did not make it into the final text. In Wortham’s case, the assumption that Jane thought her interviewer naïve in comparison (an assumption made, presumably, by deducing from observable behaviors what Wortham believed Jane’s understanding or motivation to be, though we are provided no proof) may or may not be sufficient. Wortham makes contextual claims without giving contextual evidence. Because Wortham is accredited in academic circles and speaks assuredly, we are inclined to take him at his word, which is fine, so long as his claims are supported by the right kind of evidence. He provides interview material and nothing else, and since the interview material is insufficient in proving his claim, we are left to rely on our faith in his expertise.

This kind of expertise can come at a cost. Peter Benson, former professor of Anthropology at Washington University in St. Louis and current professor and chair of the department of Anthropology at the University of Delaware, addresses anthropology’s ethical, methodological, and political failings in his self-reflexive work “Tobacco Capitalism, an Afterward: Open Letters and Open Wounds in Anthropology” (2019) – a eulogistic criticism of his earlier work, Tobacco Capitalism: Growers, Migrant Workers, and the Changing Face of a Global Industry (2012).

Benson begins:

I have lots of regrets. I regret that our relationship is broken. I have spent years reflecting on our relationship and the mistakes I made. I care about you and I would like to repair some of the hard feelings. There are definitely days when I wish I had not written Tobacco Capitalism (Benson 2012). I know my book probably caused pain, confusion, and anger. I want to offer explanations and apologies. I want to have a conversation that might help heal wounds I caused. (Benson 2019, 1)

Benson regrets his treatment of key informants as subjects in writing separate from those he had developed meaningful and intimate relationships with in the field. He calls into question the
anthropologist’s historical project of appropriating the stories of research subjects to produce “academic knowledge and narratives” (Scheper-Hughes 2000, 128) as opposed to awareness and visibility. The first is to treat research subjects as collateral in the acquisition of power, prestige. The second is to write into the white space, constructing a shared platform from which both researcher and subject may benefit. If not benefit, may they both feel aptly represented by the material offered as evidence and the truths unveiled or evoked in writing.

The point of this example, though, is not to speak to a belief now commonplace in the discipline, but to caution that there is more than meets the eye with ethnographic texts, and to make palpable the potential for harm done when key informants are reduced from real people to objects of study in the anthropologist’s transition from researcher to ethnographer, as well as the translation of individual experience to larger cultural theme. Quoting Benson’s open letter to his estranged informant:

We used to ride around the curing barns at night in a golf cart, shuttling from barn to barn amid the thick tobacco air and farm operation, a clearing surrounded by tall loblolly pines, peeking past sliding metal doors to check on the curing leaf, not really saying much to each other. I will never forget those good times. But they were left out of my book.

I could have written a different book, perhaps a book about tobacco farming as a positive heritage, or at least a book less focused on hard truths and conflictual realities. I could have written a book focused on “ordinary affects” in “a United States caught in a present that began some time ago,” eschewing “judgment” in favor of “an experiment,” stringing along descriptive vignettes about everyday life, allowing readers to do the work of interpretation (Stewart 2007, 1). I admittedly could have written something other than a strident critical analysis of troubling realities in a tobacco world. I did not have to muckrake. Focused on something argumentative and strong—a story—I never mentioned the good times or the warmth between us.

2 I would be remiss if I did not include even a brief discussion on the ethical concerns of Benson’s project. While performing a remorseful anthropologist intent on reform, in publishing this open letter in the Journal for the Anthropology in North America, Benson is doing the very thing he is purportedly speaking against: he again appropriates the subject’s story – a subject who has expressed an unwillingness to be further spoken to or about – for increased academic prestige disguised as self-awareness and reflection. This is not to say that Benson was neither self-aware nor reflective. I believe he was. I just think he went about it in a confused or controversial way.
We sat close in the golf cart and related in a dynamic of tag-along instruction. You were the grower, the expert, and I was the anthropologist, learning through observation and participation. But it felt like more than research, a bonding thing—a father and son thing. (Benson 2019, 2-3)

Benson’s experience in writing *Tobacco Capitalism* (2012) was one of “competing impulses and inevitable complications” (Ibid. p.10), knowing that he had betrayed confidence but feeling compelled to write a critical account of “corporate forms, racial assemblages, and cultural politics” (Ibid. p.9). This seems inevitable given how ethnographic research is done, particularly in the case of critical studies such as this one. When using the specific to get at global themes, and when the global involves interpretation and often judgment, the intimate scenes of researcher and subject riding around the curing barns in golf carts at night – those father and son-like moments – can read as digressive. Even if included in the first draft, they are likely cut by the second or third because they do not advance the thesis. Perhaps they complicate it slightly, but when writing on the tobacco industry and not the North Carolinian tobacco farmer who became a father-like figure, these moments seem to matter less. I am careful not to denounce the previous as an occupational hazard. I do not want to dismiss this real and urgent problem as a symptom of the work that we do without working toward a solution, but I also recognize my privileged position as someone who has not engaged in fieldwork and has not had to negotiate such conflicting identities.3

The unseasoned anthropologist in me is inclined to recommend that ethnographers write everything. I recognize this as a naïve if not romantic notion. Ethnographic writing is storytelling, but pointed storytelling that is meant to explicate, complicate, or contribute theory that is entirely new. To further complicate the ethnographer’s task, they are allotted only so many words, either by publications or the short attention spans of today’s readers.

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3 My experience in subject writing (yet to come) speaks to a different, albeit similar, discourse between researcher (writer) and subject. More on this later.
I wonder, though, if there aren’t more subtle ways around this problem. Could a portion of the “Methods” be dedicated to the relationship developed between researcher and subject? I think this relevant to knowing exactly how the information was obtained. Perhaps, if writing a longer work, the ethnographer could include some of the more sensitive or sentimental (reflexive) scenes in a preface. That way, the ethnographer can maintain the necessary degree of distance from their subject in the text to speak authoritatively toward their thesis, without discounting the generosity of their research subject and the closeness that allowed the ethnographer such insight. I don’t mean merely citing the research subject or host as hospitable, and describing the ways the two interacted, but engaging the reflexive turn, showing how this impacted the anthropologist, whether they felt their research and personal interests were at odds and their intention in putting forth the final written narrative. I wonder if Benson would find himself similarly estranged had he made such a space.

Practice in Writing Subjects

To offer another example, take this account of an event that occurred in the United States in 2013:

M. grabbed her daughter by the ankles and dragged her down the stairs. The girl was on her back, screaming some combination of “No!” and “Stop!” The consecutive collisions of her back on carpeted steps resounded in thump, thump, thump. M. watched her own feet so as not to miss a stair. She walked backwards, her brow furrowed and her lips pursed.

Her daughter’s canopy bed had two black metal posts at the head and two at the foot. The girl held on to her head posts and M. tugged at her ankles. The girl’s palms grew sore and she surrendered. She was pulled off of the bed and out of her room, to the top of the stairs and down. Thump, thump, thump.
M. dragged the girl to the family’s dining room and put her in her usual chair. She brought her a meal of salmon, farro, and green vegetable. The salmon was roasted, seasoned only with salt and pepper, the farro was cooked in water, and the vegetable was steamed. On her napkin was a piece of warm, homemade egg bread. M. took her seat and the father led them in prayer, first over the wine that the girl didn’t drink and then over the bread. It was customary to take a bite.

“One bite won’t hurt you.”

“Just try it.”

“You used to love it.”

“Your mother made it,” the girl’s father chimed in, “It’s good.”

M. got up from the table and grabbed the girl’s bread. She held it over her face. She pulled off a piece and moved towards the girl’s mouth. Her approach was forceful, aggressive. The girl kept her lips closed and M. came in closer. The girl’s head was pushed back. She shut her eyes and locked her jaw. She sank down and leaned right, anticipating her fall to the floor, an attempted escape. The girl moved fast but M. was faster, trapping her torso between tensed legs. M. knelt down, holding the girl in place with her knees now, squeezing her ribs, screaming.

Without context, there is a severity to the scene that could read as abusive, or violent, to use a less charged descriptor. The mother pulls the girl from bed, drags her downstairs by her ankles, and attempts to force feed her. The absence of support, dissent or any description, really, of the rest of the family heightens tensions, making the intensity more potent and the reader’s discomfort palpable. What do they think? Why don’t they react?

Now, what changes for you when you learn that M. is in fact my mother, and I am the girl? When you learn that I was at that point ninety-something pounds and had maybe eaten a Quest
bar that day, probably warmed in the microwave for 15 seconds as I’d seen other sick girls do on social media? I shouted explicatives at her, calling her an asshole and accusing her of attempting to ruin my life. You just want me to be fat. You don’t want me to have a career in ballet. You don’t support me. Fuck you. Meanwhile, my mother stayed up nights reading what therapists and online forums deemed essential biographies for mothers with anorexic children and memorized my fear foods when mentioned even once, working around them⁴ in her attempts to make meals I might be comfortable eating. She built me an acclaimed care team with alternates, quickly dismissing the adolescent medicine specialist who walked into our first appointment and told me that I could not be in recovery and pursue a career in ballet.⁵ She found someone better, someone who supported me in more than my immediate recovery. His name is Richard Kreipe. He is simply the best. She found a nutritionist who would prescribe the kinds of foods I had grown up eating, organic and whole grain, and whose familiarity with dancers would, in time, enable me to trust her. I still see her on occasion. Her name is Ellen and she is wonderful.⁶

The scene described took place months before Ellen or Dr. Kreipe or the hospital, when my mother’s tireless attempts at keeping me alive were met with something worse than disdain, something like hatred, loathing, contempt or spite.

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⁴ Before settling on doctors or meal plans, her priority was for me to eat anything. Anything I wanted and anything with caloric density. I was convinced that I didn’t want to eat and convinced that I wasn’t hungry. Family meals grew bland and often steamed so as not to further alienate me. My sisters were miserable, I’m sure my mother was too. But she did it. She filled cabinets with Sophie-approved snacks, her ammunition at the ready. She would have done anything to save me. More than that. She did everything.

⁵ At the time, we thought this first doctor was unwilling to work within what made me happy to make me better. Now, having since stopped dancing altogether, she might have been right. To be clear, ballet was not my mother’s dream for me. She did not force it down my throat, nor did she (I assume) feel particularly good about my resolve to continue dancing, knowing that the lifestyle fueled an illness that almost took me from her. But she is not and was not the type of mother to make such decisions for us. We lived and we learned, and whatever we chose, she had resolved long before that she would support us.

⁶ It was in Ellen’s office that I asked M. to call the inpatient treatment center and secure a bed for me. I hadn’t been able to stick to the bare bones meal plan that Ellen had made with me, a meal plan that was as clean as could be while being calorically sufficient, intended as a jumping off point to begin refeeding. My mom sat in a chair against the wall, to the right of the door. I sat in an armchair facing Ellen’s desk. The room was quiet with concern. I looked to my mom. I couldn’t hurt her like this anymore.
As part of this thesis, I presented this ethnographic vignette to my subject – my mother – for review. I asked that she mark up the paper copy freely, making note of (in)correctness and reactions to her portrayal, in the hopes of approximating to some extent the encounter between ethnography and its subject. She was prompted with the question, *If this were the reader’s only impression of you, what would you want them to know?* Here is the result:
M. grabbed her daughter by the ankles and dragged her down the stairs. The girl was on her back, screaming some combination of "No!" and "Stop!" The consecutive collisions of her back on carpeted steps resounded in thump, thump, thump. M. watched her own feet so as not to miss a stair. She walked backwards, her brow furrowed and her lips pursed.

Her daughter's canopy bed had two black metal posts at the head and two at the foot.

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M. dragged the girl to the family's dining room and put her in her usual chair. She brought her a meal of salmon, farro, and green vegetable. The salmon was roasted, seasoned only with salt and pepper, the farro was cooked in water, and the vegetable was steamed. On her napkin was a piece of warm, homemade egg bread. M. took her seat and the father led them in prayer, first over the wine that the girl didn't drink and then over the bread. It was customary to take a bite.

One bite won't hurt you,*, she thought.

"Just try it."

"You used to love it."

"Your mother made it," the girl's father chimed in, "It's good."

M. got up from the table and grabbed the girl's bread. She held it over her face. She pulled off a piece and moved towards the girl's mouth. Her approach was forceful, aggressive.

The girl kept her lips closed and M. came closer. The girl's head was pushed back. She shut her eyes and locked her jaw. She sank down and leaned right, anticipating her fall to the floor, an attempted escape. The girl moved fast but M. was faster, trapping her torso between tensed legs. M. knelt down, holding the girl in place with her knees now, squeezing her ribs, screaming.
With all of this context, the scene softens, revealing it to be one that is tremendously sad, desperate, and incredibly loving. I had forgotten that my mother would pull us playfully as children. I remember now, vaguely. My sisters and I would refuse to move. We would cross our arms over our chests and force a short and sharp exhale through our scrunched noses. She or my father would pull us and we’d giggle. Nothing hard. We were never hurt.

Our relationship changed when I got sick, as often happens between patient and caregiver, especially in those instances when the patient’s illness presents as the patient being noncompliant or acting in ways that exacerbate their condition (Lester 2017, 4). Thinking with the Internal Family Systems (IFS) psychotherapy technique significantly eased associated tensions, as is evident in my mother’s use of “the ED” and “the beast that possessed her” and “the monster” to separate the person I was from the illness I suffered from.

Even as additional information alters the way we read the encounter, I think it is worth considering what is lost or confused with added context. Narrative reliability can be brought into question when it becomes known that an ethnographer’s work was incomplete or, in other words, contingent. Where narratives conflict, a reader might not know which to lean on. Taking both with a grain of salt seems the obvious answer, but with this we lose the presumed rightness of academic voice, bringing the ethnographic and anthropological enterprises into question. How then, do we know what to prioritize?

\footnote{IFS was developed in the 1980s by psychologist Richard Schwartz, and has grown increasingly popular in the United States as a treatment for personality, mood, and eating disorders (Lester 2017). When we first learned of the technique it wasn’t presented clinically. We walked into Dr. Kreipe’s office for the first time and described this deep, hateful voice that came from my mouth but felt misplaced, wrong. He said, “That’s not Sophie, that’s Ed. Sophie would never say those things to you. Sophie would never treat you this way.” For my mom, this was the moment when she realized that we would make it through. It didn’t hurt that he followed the previous with something along the lines of “I’ve worked with enough patients to know that Sophie has what it takes.” IFS is not without its problems (see Lester 2017), but it was useful in our case.}
To give the least satisfying answer, which I believe, unfortunately, to be the right one: *it depends.* In the case of my most recent example, if I were an ethnographer writing on the experience of an adolescent in the throes of mental illness, the patient’s account should be at the forefront and the mother’s should be used to complicate a version distorted by disordered thinking, playing an important but less focal role. If writing on the experience of parenting a child with an eating disorder, then the emphasis should be placed on the mother’s narrative. If writing a more critical account on public misunderstanding and mistreatment of eating disorder patients, I might emphasize my own experience and complicate my mother’s insights, questioning whether her othering of my eating disorder justified her behavior and diminished my agency. It’s complicated. It depends.

When reading, “She was too weak to hold on from lack of nutrition,” part of me is willing to acknowledge that she was right, and another part of me feels belittled, as if she were saying, “Poor, sick Sophie,” and labeling me of unsound mind (unreliable). If I wanted my version of events unchallenged or uncomplicated, I might leave hers out altogether. I presume that this concern or consideration is not new, and might have contributed to the ethnographies that my thesis writes against.

Returning, briefly, to Benson’s *Tobacco Capitalism* (2012), and his choice to not write the moments that felt like more than research – the “good times” (2019): where I might have earlier discredited Benson for such a choice, I recognize the potential for his intimate, kin-like relationship with someone on the “inside” to complicate his claims to near-objectivity. On the one hand, such closeness almost makes Benson complicit in the systems he means to expose, and perhaps by extension he becomes an unreliable narrator. On the other hand, pushing back on the previous hypothetical, Benson could not have written such a thorough criticism of the tobacco
industry without this relationship, and so I circle back to my recommendation of writing our field relationships into the preface, allowing for space between that and the main text, and making difficult the withholding that burned Benson post publication.

Omissions and silences in texts are inevitable, though they are rarely, if ever, without consequence. In other words, the prioritization of X means the obfuscation of Y. When both X and Y together make for a more complete understanding of scene or story, and the understanding of scene or story has real consequences for the real people being written about (people the reader is likely encountering for the first time), the writer must be intentional to prioritize the information appropriate for the project, and more, to make space for the complicating identities of researcher and subject.
In this chapter, I grapple with these questions about selves, meaning making, and representation, by considering the extent of what we can reliably know from the life narratives we collect in the field. Below, I offer an account of my experience with anorexia and inpatient treatment, written in the spring of 2021, as a kind of data. This piece of autoethnographic writing was drawn from a larger work about my impetus to write, which I equate to “a craving for a newfound appreciation for breath” (“Moments of Quasi-Becoming,” Goldstein 2021). The second of four sections reads as follows:
Hospital

My first experience with the long aforementioned writerly release was at the age of thirteen, when I was hospitalized with Anorexia Nervosa.

It was the second day of my three-week hold and I was prepared to leave against medical advice. I had been allowed no solid food, no clothes other than a stained hospital gown, and no walking privileges; I had to be wheeled from my room to the sickly girls’ dining area and back again, and no visitors for more than one hour a day. I had a roommate named Sochi who was recovering from Scoliosis surgery and had gotten her period for the first time while walking from her bed to the bathroom. She left trails of blood in her wake and I hated her for it. I hated her for the fact that she was allowed friends and family at all hours, for the fact that she could use her television and her cell phone, and for the fact that when she asked me what I was in for, she offered a look of tremendous pity in response.

And so, on that second day of no solid foods and no walking and no social support, I tore my photos off the wall and rewound the rainbow-colored fairy lights that my mother had wrapped around the guard rails of my hospital bed and donned the sweatpants that I had been wearing when admitted, all in anticipation of her arrival. *Take me home, Mama. Don’t leave me here.*

Mama didn’t take me home. She incited the help of a nurse who held me down while my mother removed my clothes and tied a fresh gown behind my back. I laid in the fetal position and she wrapped herself around me, my head burrowed into her abdomen as if attempting reentry. My tears dampened the cotton of her t-shirt; her tears dampened my uncombed hair.

Suddenly I am reminded of my four consecutive years at sleepaway camp and the postcards sent home with deliberately placed water splotches, tears, and arrows of purple ink.
emphasizing my misery. These are my tears, I wrote in the margins. Pick me up Wednesday at midnight. Don't tell Rhonda, just come. They won't know that I'm gone until the next morning, and by then it will be too late. Mama didn't take me home then, either.

I laid in my hospital bed then as I am lying in bed now, propped up on pillows and trying to make sense of it all. I remember feeling drained, spent, defeated, and so I wrote into the cavernous space within.

I nearly quit dance at age eight because I wasn't getting the recognition I craved. I kept going because Robin told me she saw greatness in me, and I guess that was enough. I had a need to prove to others that I could succeed, even when I didn't have a desire to succeed myself. When Beth invited me to come to Draper, she said that I could be a professional ballerina if that's what I wanted, and out of the blue I had a new dream. Looking back on it now, I'm not sure if I've ever had my own ambitions.

With my head and chest propped up on pillows and my purple-spined zebra notebook with its purple-lined pages pressed against my bent knees, I wrote about those choices that resulted in my having vials of blood drawn by pricking and subsequently milking my index finger as one does a cow because I was too malnourished, too dehydrated for the technician to find a vein, and necessitated the feeding tube whose initial trajectory was the stomach by way of the nose but was somehow diverted to the mouth, the coiled polyurethane pressed against my tongue.
I consider the journal entry written in my purple-spined notebook with its purple-lined pages my seminal work (so far) as a writer and formative in my concept of Self, though I don’t know why I turned to writing that day. At some point I did know, and while I could reasonably infer from the subtext, and that inference could very well be true, I can’t responsibly project my supposed motive onto my subject, my thirteen-year-old self. I must accept this gap in my narrative reconstruction as inevitable, righteous even, and write what I know to be true around it: I know what I wrote and more or less what I meant because I have access to the original text; I know that I intended for the work to be shared as I addressed an unnamed other or others:

Before I begin I must admit that I am fearful that opening up in combination with my previous outburst will keep me here longer than my 17 day protocol. Could anyone assure me that my fears are irrational? At least I hope they are. In the final paragraph, I address myself: There are 15 more days of this program; each day a

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8 I remember feeling exasperated. Earlier that day, I had confronted Jessie, a vibrant woman with dull brown hair and an oddly abrasive brand of optimism that might have been palatable had I not been eighty-something pounds at thirteen and flirting with heart failure. I told her that I didn’t need to be there, that I checked myself in to spare my mom what seemed a futile effort to save me, but that I had scared myself straight. I was insistent that I was not as sick as the other girls in my program who, upon meeting me, asked what medications I was taking and, without so much as a breath, told me that I was taking a generic form of Prozac – a low-dose SSRI. The one who was twenty-one or twenty-two would be discharged the next morning. She told us how she planned to lose the weight.

I made my case to anyone who would listen. I tried to flag down the psychiatrist, but she either couldn’t be bothered or had dealt with enough cases to know better than to indulge me. Jessie was the adolescent activities coordinator or something to that effect. As I remember it, I sat in my wheelchair in the rec room and let out aggravated tears. My I don’t need to be here was met with her People rarely voluntarily enter eating disorder treatment programs without cause. You decided to come here. I’m sure you had a reason. I pressed and she pressed back. She asked, Besides the girl who is or is not sick enough to be here, who is Sophie?

9 My inclination was to say that I wrote because I was alone, which seems reasonable enough given that I was allowed only one hour of visitation each day, but I wasn’t alone, not really. There was April, the technician who took me out of the Adolescent Medicine wing on tours of the hospital’s back staircases and underground tunnels, and the psychiatric nurse whose name was either Joe or Mike or Dave or some other generic name for a cis-gendered, white male, who was integral to my success in the program. I can’t remember why, or anything, really, aside from his proclivity for colloquialism. He would say some variation of, No matter what happens, the sun will rise and set and rise again. I don’t know if I believed him. I don’t know if that matters.
chance to get stronger and healthier. Do not wait for the days to pass. Live each
day to the extreme. On day 17, when you are discharged, you will look back on
these 17 days and thank everyone for getting you

The entry ends there, unfinished. There my knowledge of the event ends, as does my
ability to speak to it with any semblance of authority.

How might this brief foray into autoethnography illuminate some of the challenges of
doing ethnography more generally? If it is this difficult to write one’s own self, to separate past
from present insight – to voice, and to do justice to the roundness of each, treating them both as
whole, as separate from the other – how can we go about understanding and writing about
subjects more responsibly? How can we synthesize the multitudes of information gathered in the
field and make something intentional or informative out of it without dismissing context as
superfluous or distracting from our central thesis?

In short, I don’t believe we can, and I caution against such intentionality, as it is unrealistic
if not irresponsible for a discipline with heuristic underpinnings to make claims to expansive or
authoritative retelling. And that’s fine, so long as the researcher- turned-ethnographer, the writer,
frames his or her findings accordingly, as part of an elusive whole.

The work of anthropologists is driven by a guiding thesis or research interest. And while
the anthropologist’s ‘project’ may (and most often will) evolve from literature review to subject
selection, to fieldwork, to the taking of field notes and finally narrative reconstruction in the form
of ethnography, each iteration of this project subjects the final written work to selection bias. The
details a researcher is attuned to in the field, those that make it onto the yellow legal pad and
further into the resulting book or article that, given its central thesis and the anthropologist’s
methods of inquiry, will be situated within a specific anthropological sub-discipline and thus
exposed to the narrow subset of academics interested in emerging literature in the field. Those
lines or key quotes deemed useful for the reader’s (who’s also a researcher) present project will be plucked from the already whittled down context and repurposed for this tertiary paper, article, or book. What this means is that anthropological knowledge is the product of layers upon layers of selective attention that is shaped by a myriad of forces often far removed from the original data upon which that knowledge is purportedly based.

These kinds of challenges about experience and representation sit, in many ways, at the heart of the ethnographic enterprise. We ask our interlocutors to tell us about their experiences – to help us make sense of why they did this or that, or why things are a certain way in their worlds. But what is it, really, that they can tell us? Like me with my 13-year-old self, they offer interpretations and conjectures about past (or even current) selves and experiences that have been filtered through layers of other experiences, webs of cultural meanings and interpretations, and, of course, language. In the next chapter, I continue this discussion, exploring the manufacture of omissions and silences by research subjects and contending with the ethnographer’s responsibility to the ever elusive “truth.”
Chapter 3

The story of one’s life is a privileged and troubled narrative for which rightness cannot be judged by narrative adequacy alone. In the tradition of Jerome Bruner’s “Life as Narrative,” I will consider autobiographical accounts as subject to “certain criteria of narrative or psychological adequacy” that allow them to be right even if untrue (Bruner 1987, 13-14). Truth, it seems, is separable from exactitudes – it matters not if one did or did not visit Santander in 1956, or whether it may have been Salamanca in 1953 (Ibid. p.14) – and as such, the issue of excess[^10] can be an interesting tool to think with.

Issues of excess pose particular challenges in ethnographic research. Ethnographers are bound by the details divulged by their subjects as well as things gleaned from observation, details that have been cherry picked for their pertaining to the research question or portraying the subject (Self) in an advantageous (desirable) light.[^11] Thus, in examining forces that result in a subject’s (or writer’s) omission of contextualizing detail we might identify approaches to ethnographic fieldwork that allow for more complete[^12] reconstructions.

Sources of Omission

In my own writing, I find that some stories are more difficult to write, or to write well: those stories that expose truths about mySelf that I am unable or unwilling to make known, that risk my narrative authority, an authority earned or assumed to have been earned when one’s

[^10]: For the purpose of this thesis, consider omission as a kind of fabrication, a means of surreptitious storytelling that further complicates the ethnographer’s enterprise.

[^11]: By advantageous I do not mean angelic or obviously good, but rather in accordance with how the speaker, writer, or research subject sees herself.

[^12]: Completion is relative; Complete to the degree that an unrestrained (unfiltered) narrative account can be.
words are encountered in print, or those that are comprised of moments that beg to be re-lived or re-experienced. At times I think I should write fiction, for in fiction one could relay her experience but less obviously: she could use character as intermediary between the personal made public. I suppose I could label my work as fiction and my readers would be none the wiser. So, for all intents and purposes my name is Claudia and I have medium brown hair with a propensity to frizz before holding a curl. Perhaps my name is Ella, and I am a bouncy blonde with a little button nose that turns up at the end. Ella is often asked for the name of her plastic surgeon, though hers, mine, was not the product of rhinoplasty. I may be Avery or Addison, Amanda or Emily; Felicity, even; I may be Poppy, Serena, James, Lauren, Louise, Tzion, or Sophie.

And if I had written as Louise or Lauren, Amanda or Emily, would I produce pieces with such labored prose and evasive narration as in “The Next Demand Made Upon Us” (Goldstein 2021)? Below, I offer this instance of autoethnographic writing that was difficult to write and impossible to revise as illustrative of the omissions earlier alluded to. For the purposes of this exercise, I went back and wrote the omitted material (and other marginalia that I couldn’t help but include, a writerly urge) over the original: all that I was afraid of or ashamed to include, and all that felt tertiary or too much but proved inseparable from my truth.
The Next Demand Made Upon Us

At the mercy of those we cannot but hold in contempt, we play roles doomed to failure before they are begun, each defeat generating fresh despair at the urgency of divining and meeting the next demand made upon us.

Consideration I: Start with Statement of Short, punchy, 'sounds nice' as opener.

I smoked a cigarette to prove a point. Long, languorous inhales and expedited exhales through pursed lips. I feigned the acumen of someone less cautious than I, attempting to embody her, or maybe the Joan Didion immortalized on the back cover of her books — Didion's birdlike arms arranged in a figure four, her left arm wrapped around her waist, her left hand hidden by the elbow of her right arm, perpendicular between her index and middle finger rests a cigarette which, in combination with the pointiness of her gaze, accounts for the severity of the photograph, for its intensity. I wasn't sure how to convey these thoughts. But this: the pose was compelling. She is a muse, it's an idyllic era, an ideal, but what does that reveal about us?

I had never smoked a cigarette, but I knew better than to waste it. I knew better than to hold the smoke in my mouth, letting it coat my teeth and tongue only to release it, polluting a once clean air. I knew to breathe deeply, but not so deeply that I would cough — an irrevocable blunder — and I knew that with inappropriately timed, elongated drags, I could wield silence as a weapon against her in retribution for crimes committed against me: for my abandonment in favor of my former lover, a perpetrator of violence, abuse — I could shift the power in my favor. I wanted her to know I was better off without her, that she sold me short.

I was caught somewhere between mimicry and embodiment, between being inspired and seduced. But it was a source of inspiration — the latter being my primary goal in this instance. I speak of inspiration in the most literal sense, the process of being mentally stimulated to do or feel something, as opposed to the colloquial, idyllic sense that is steeped in romanticism and fraught with

The list went on: she was sexually, emotionally, my friends...
disenchantment. I wanted to inspire her. I wanted her to see me differently, as someone who would accept paper-rolled paraphernalia and smoke it with an almost disinterested ease. Collected, comfortable, unbothered. I wanted her to see me as the embodiment of Didion’s writing of Didion-ness: her words have a transcendental quality that makes one feel as if she is sitting alone at an upscale bar, the amber of the light matching the amber of her drink. Her photograph exudes a similar quality. I aspire to be that woman, to have such an elitist allure, to be so compelling.

And so, I approached her. I asked for the cigarette that I had previously refused; I proceeded to light it, to position it aesthetically between my index and middle fingers and to angle the burning end down slightly, as Didion had done. (Do I need the Didion description at the beginning?)

When the tipping paper met my lips, I was suspended — like oil on water — above the exchange of boasts and brags and half-meant pleasantries between once close friends turned acquaintances by betrayal. I told her of the men I’m seeing and the substantive friendships formed in her absence — the former a fictive truth and the latter one of greater merit. She smiled and said, “I’ve noticed. I’m so happy for you.” And she meant it, as I knew she would.

I wielded the narrow cylinder of psychoactive material assuredly, effortlessly — the kind of effort one exerts in the hopes of making an action appear effortless. I am reminded of classical ballet and the years I dedicated to the illusion of ease.

Before one can begin dancing in her pointe shoes, she has to break them in to her exact specifications, sewing her ribbons no more than five stitches to the right of the shoe’s inseam and her elastics two stitches to the left, breaking the Shank (the shoe’s structural integrity, the arch support) to accentuate the height of her arch, crushing the box (layers of paper, cardboard, and fabric hardened by glue) to allow for full articulation of the foot, softening the wings to protect her bunions from becoming raw and her shoes bloodied, and banging the platform against concrete to ensure that the orchestra’s melodies aren’t overcome by a less pleasant symphony.
I am also reminded of the prerequisite becoming necessitated by the art form, a becoming of body that precedes the becoming of dancer.

A ballet dancer should be of slender build. She should have a long neck, long, lean legs, and high arches. She should be hyperextended at the knees and hypermobile at the hips. Her back should be flexible but strong. Her hips should be narrow and her shoulders broad and her collarbones defined. Few are equipped with all such attributes, but to the extent that one is able, she should (must) acquire them. Why not just say it outright? Many in the ballet world won’t tell you that you have to look this way, they are more covert about it, weighing dancing, acumen, on your body, building corps de ballet, with dancers of specific body types. 

For others, the process of becoming in ballet is a more elaborate ruse. Those who can pair psychoactive stimulants and waste away have it easy, for they are of proper proportions but improper size. Those of us who are naturally svelte but wider at the hips and with shorter legs must become adept at illusion, masters of disguise. I exclusively bought leotards with high-cut legs (else I exaggerated them with a few cuts and the ever-popular hoist—that is, to take the fabric of the leotard in hand and pull up at the hip, exposing another inch of the pale pink nylon-cotton blend) and low necklines to shorten the torso. I wore the waistband of my tights at my ribs, not my waist, so as not to accentuate my barely-there curves. If restricted to the ever-unflattering class uniform, a high-necked, low-cut catastrophe, I scoured resale sites for an older model in the mandated color—one with an entirely open back and a more forgiving (hoistable) fabric. The bare back was illusionary in cut. Why the build-up—what is lost gained with: The absence of fabric...and of itself: the absence of fabric around the midsection created a more pleasing (slender) side profile.
And after all that, after the agonizing over physique and the sewing of shoes and the attention to dress, the real work could begin: the grueling technique classes and perpetually aching muscles and bloodied feet and psychological torment that characterizes the industry. You will never be good enough. You are not good enough unless I [a ballet master] tell you so. The day you deem your work to be sufficient is the day you become complacent, the day your career ends. Complacency has no place in ballet.

I worked with the wind, angling my face away from hers in preparation for each exhale, knowing full well that the biting breeze would carry my cloud of smoke in her direction. I was not so bold as to do so when she was speaking; I was careful to only interrupt my own thought, to build in the expense with silence and secondhand smoke. I set her adrift in an ash cloud of thoughts still unsaid, suspended in a night sky speckled with stars. I smoked into the silence of my own creation and she stewed in it; she shifted her gaze from the burning end of my cigarette to the clearing ahead with silence. I thought to myself: she nurtured a hatred at my mercy. Revenge by calling her name! I am not boring, too boring to bear! I was passed over for the woman who violated me. I am not me. I am not better. A self-serving, smoking, powerful, self-assured, disinterested woman. I did everything right: I crossed my arms as Daldon did and I angled the tip of the cigarette down and I created innumerable sinkholes in the conversation with silence and secondhand smoke, and still, I faltered. I so concerned myself with becoming a more powerful other that I relinquished what power I held. Still, I was not acting for me so much as I was acting against her.

To me, the cigarette was a symbol of my strength, an ode to Joan Didion. To her, it was just a cigarette.
Shame

In these pages, I wrote a character who is Sophie-like or Sophie-lite, a version of myself composed of parts that are verifiable, though in combination are not exhaustive. The resulting character is partial, and not in the way narrative reconstructions or subjective facts inherently are for limitations of narrative reconstruction or the gap in knowledge that results from one, two, three degrees of separation from one’s subject, but from deliberate omission.

I couldn’t figure out how to write or write well the reason I asked for a cigarette I had previously refused, and how I came to smoke it with the little know-how to be derived from frequent encounters with Didion’s jacket cover photo. So, I left it out when I originally wrote the narrative. I was afraid that its inclusion would render my use of the narrative “I” masturbatory or self-indulgent. More seasoned writers have written about betrayal, and in having been previously published, they have earned the right to such an insular subject. Not me, not yet.

More than anything, I was ashamed. I hadn’t protected myself during the assault. I hadn’t so much as known that what I was experiencing and dismissing as unremarkably adverse were instances of assault. I remember laying there and thinking through how I might tell him to stop. I didn’t want to make him out to be a villain. I told myself that he didn’t know what he was doing, and that he would never mean to hurt me. By the time I found the words, it was done, and he had either left or turned over and fell asleep.

13 Julian Wasser, *The Way We Were*
I thought that loving someone who caused me irreparable harm made me unreliable, untrustworthy, so I wrote instead of the times I acted to be something or someone, how my cigarette smoking was not an isolated incident. I had historically performed roles that were inauthentic to who I was or who I thought myself to be to prove a point: an imperceptible, irrelevant point that I would only come to understand as such when my writing about smoking a cigarette as an act of retribution spurred their memory.

Elspeth Probyn’s *Blush* (2005) speaks to the etymology, experience, and implications of shame in life and in writing, which I believe may be extended to narrative construction. Beginning with Probyn’s conceptualization of shame:

Etymologically *shame* comes from the Goth word *Scham*, which refers to covering the face. The crucial element that turns sham into shame is the level of interest and desire involved. There is no shame in being a sham if you don’t care what others think or if you don’t care what you think. But if you do, shame threatens. To care intensely about what you are writing places the body within the ambit of the shameful: sheer disappointment in the self amplifies to a painful level. (Ibid. p.131)

Key to understanding shame is Gilles Deleuze’s argument that emotions and affects are ideas that are not solely of the mind, but stem from the “violent collision of mind and body” (Ibid. p.147). Supposing that is true, then “shame is produced out of the clashing of mind and body, resulting in new acts of subjectivity consubstantial with the words in which they are expressed” (Ibid.). Put simply, constructing narratives from emotionally wrought material comes at a high personal cost (Ibid. p.154) to both writer and reader, which for our purposes shift to mean research subject and ethnographer, respectively.

I attribute the nothingness that came of my attempt at writing contextualizing detail into “The Next Demand Made Upon Us” (Goldstein 2021) to this violent collision of mind and body. I had, as Probyn describes in the chapter “Doing Shame,” a flash of memory: I was transported by

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14 Of the same substance or essence
shame (Probyn 2005, 20) back to his twin sized bed in his shoebox of a room on the second floor of his fraternity house. My discomfort was threefold: 1) shame of exposure, 2) making the writing equal to the subject being written about, and 3) convincing the reader that mine was a story worth telling. Even now, as I write about it for this thesis, there is a soft static in my ears and a soreness where my neck meets my shoulders, collar bone, and chest, accompanied by a series of shallow, dissatisfying breaths. The air feels thick around me. My eyelids grow heavy. I am transported again, this time to the anesthetist’s chair or hospital bed. A clear mask cups my mouth and nose. I inhale. I count backwards from 10, losing consciousness by four.

If anthropologists aim to do no harm, and narrative construction (recall, retelling) can come at a high emotional cost to the research subject, how are we to responsibly research and write on the shameful or shame inducing? Further, how can we remain within the realm of the real to do so? Must we?

Ethnographers write what they know from what they can gather, which is limited by what a research subject is willing or able to divulge. One might suspect that those narratives which come at a high emotional cost are more easily engaged through autoethnography, where the ethnographer and research subject are one in the same, and thereby the potential to benefit is substantially larger. But this is not always the case, as evidenced by my continued inability to write on the totality of my experience. Maybe I’m not ready to speak to it, or maybe the benefit to my thesis does not outweigh the somatic and psychological symptoms endured for the sake of knowledge production. Theoretically, though, if I thought myself on the brink of breakthrough and thereby increased academic authority, I might be more inclined to try and try again. When

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15 Wisdom teeth
16 Endoscopy
17 My purpose in engaging this material was not to write my experience in its entirety, but to write what I could to emphasize the impact of shame on narrative construction. I spent the better part of two weeks writing the section titled “Shame,” which resulted in a little over two pages of text. Each time the same:
engaging a subject other than the self, however, the subject’s compensation is not proportional to the success of the published piece. If anything, ethnographic research may involve significant risk to its informants in the form of “discrimination, disruption of personal and family relationships, loss of rights or claims, civil or criminal prosecution – usually as the result of disclosure of private, identifiable information\(^\text{18}\) such as data gathered in interviews, filmed on video, or recorded on tape or field notes” (American Anthropological Association).

Eliminating the potential for harm, either external or shame-induced, would require ethnographers to no longer involve subjects in their research process – a recommendation far beyond the scope of this thesis. This raises the provocative question of whether strategic fictionalization could alleviate the potential for harm in some instances, allow for ethnographers to obtain more complete histories from their research subjects, and by extension, result in the production of more salient or “real” academic knowledge.

Using Fiction to Tell the Truth

Both fictions and ethnographies begin with the same raw material, the same “fertile ground” of facts and events, and aspire, to varying degrees, to represent the real in writing (Augé 2011, 214; Fassin 2014, 42). In doing so, writers of fictions and ethnographies are afforded different modes of signification (meaning making): where ethnographers strive to reproduce the

\(^{18}\) From the “AAA Statement on Ethnography and Irbs”: “Ethnographers should inform IRBs and participants how they plan to use and protect data from disclosure and if personal identifiers and other data will be preserved or destroyed. Ethnographers should inform participants of the possible benefits and risks of providing identifiable information (e.g., data collected during the course of a study could be subpoenaed). Ethnographers should also respect participants’ wishes if the participants would like to be identified and/or credited.”
real (and ethnographic authority is reliant on this effort), fiction writers are privy to the hypothetical or predictive facts to which that ethnographers are not allowed – what didn’t occur but could have.

I offer the somewhat paradoxical proposition that fictional narratives can be more than true, more than what happened, and ethnographies less than.\textsuperscript{19} I find the idea that fiction may be used as a tool for getting closer to the reality of one’s situation or predicament compelling.

Already, ethnographers fictionalize their research to a point, using pseudonyms in place of names, stripping narratives of identifiable details, and treating rightness as separable from narrative accuracy (Bruner 1987, 14).\textsuperscript{20} They stitch together disparate, time-distanced events and conversations into a narrative whole that is “about” something else. If such narratives can “get it right” despite certain elements being untrue, what changes if ethnographers were to do the previous deliberately, changing dates and places to construct scenes that are based on the same gathered material \textit{and} get at the same subjective truth?

This is, admittedly, a tricky proposition. And it seems the obvious answer is that narrative alterations (from lived reality) are permissible insofar as they are in accordance with the American Anthropological Association’s Statement on Ethnography and Institutional Review.

\footnotesize

\textsuperscript{19} I use fictionalization in the tradition of Writing Culture, meaning that ethnographies are partial: their stories are fashioned or fabricated by ethnographers through the inclusion and exclusion of certain detail, as well as a concern for the aesthetics of language (Clifford 1986; Narayan 1999; Elliott 2011, 152).

\textsuperscript{20} Jerome Bruner’s “Life as Narrative” describes the following to illustrate his point that narratives can be “right” even if they get details “wrong”: “And there are by no means all external criteria as to whether, for example, one did or did not visit Santander in 1956. Besides, it may have been Salamanca in 1953, and by certain evaluative criteria or of psychological adequacy even be “right” if untrue” (Bruner 1987, 14). Narrative or memory is engaged for its merit as indicative of cultural ways of thinking or experiencing lived events. If all else is the same, should an event be recalled as occurring in Salamanca in 1953 or Santander in 1956, the meaning remains. There are exceptions to the rule, as some projects may rely on verifiable chronology, though in such a case the researcher likely wouldn’t rely on memory as evidence. They would turn to a more reliable source, i.e., travel records or date books.
Boards. This feels, to me, an effort to offer a final written narrative that corresponds “fairly closely to the ‘reality’ evident in the field situation” (James, Hockey, and Dawson, 10) – an effort upended by the ‘Writing Culture’ debate of the 1990s – as well as an argument against the ethnographer’s deliberate fictionalization of their research subject’s stories. As ethnographies are now largely considered attempts at evocation as a way of communicating reality, and fictionalization is 1) currently employed in ethnographic writing, and 2) not synonymous with falsification, I posit that a marginal increase in the prevalence of fictionalization in ethnographic writing could serve to better illustrate the experiences of our research subjects as opposed to taking us further from them.

Composite Characters

As an aid in thinking through the boundaries of genre, Denielle Elliott’s “Truth, Shame, Complicity, and Flirtation: An Unconventional, Ethnographic (Non)fiction” (2011) can be helpful. What follows is an excerpt from Elliott’s “Notes” section, in which we get a glimpse of her process.

1. The two male characters in this paper are composites characters. Jackson is based on a handful of street-involved Aboriginal men that I have worked with over many years in an urban Setting in Canada. Dr. Hunter similarly is a montage of medical epidemiologists who work in HIV/AIDS that I have interviewed or observed in clinical practice during my doctoral and postdoctoral studies. Neither character as they exist in this paper form is “real” in the sense that they represent one specific person, yet, no details have been “invented” or made up in the traditional sense of fictional writing. Both names are, thus, fictional pseudonyms.

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22 In the wake Clifford and Marcus’ Writing Culture, anthropologists were made more aware that the making of ethnography involves the use of literary devices that may lead to the distortion or misrepresentation of worlds (James, Hockey, and Dawson, 10), and thus it was argued that the discipline needed to reconfigure ethnographies as attempts at evocation rather than referentiality (Tyler 1986).
2. As this paper has transformed, I have made various attempts at creating a composite. I tried to rewrite the story of Dr. Hunter so that he became any one of many male, North American medical epidemiologists working in HIV/AIDS whom I had interviewed and observed during the course of my research in both Canada and western Kenya. However, my attempts inevitably failed. Instead I seemed with each try to simply give more accurate descriptions of one man, and thus I realized that except for differences in how many children they might have or what specific schools they attended, they share very similar personal and professional lives. Most have worked with marginalized populations in North America, spent time living in the global South, do contracting work in other international settings, and are privileged. Although I borrowed from other men’s stories, I think if the original Dr. Hunter read the story, he would see himself throughout the paper, even when I was writing about someone else. This was the case in another paper that I presented. A medical doctor working in Kenya said to me that he wished he hadn’t made a comment about “evil epidemiologists,” but I had to remind him that he never had. It was a composite and another medical research had used the phrase. He saw himself in the paper even when I was writing about someone else altogether. (Elliott 2011, 156).

In her attempts at writing away from verifiability, Elliott wrote composite characters that felt real – so real that her research subjects thought they were singularly representative. These characters are by my definition more than true: they are ‘invented’ in the sense that Jackson and Dr. Hunter represent, respectively, a montage of street-involved Aboriginal men and medical epidemiologists working in HIV/AIDS as opposed to a single Aboriginal man or a single medical epidemiologist, but are not ‘made up’ in the sense of traditional fictions. All details are verifiable of undifferentiated subjects, not unlike statistical averages taken in quantitative research that are, I might add, thought to be more accurate values than those taken from single experiments. Averages account for and diminish the distorting effects of outlying values on data sets. Composite characters function similarly, if not the same, in ethnographic writing.

If a researcher were writing a critical account in which accountability was important, or if a project hinged on individual experience as opposed to generality, composite characters would be unproductive. But in the event that the object of study is the general and not the particular,
composite characters can go a long way in substantiating the pervasiveness or scope of a practice, belief, or behavior, assuming that the researcher-turned-ethnographer is detailed in their methods, writing the specifics of the composite characters’ makeup.

This is not a catch-all solution. In writing composite characters, ethnographers might overlook nuance for the sake of cohesion or pay selective attention to areas of interest in the field and in reviewing fieldnotes. Ethnographers might also feel less of an obligation to portray their subjects fairly (roundly), as there is not the same subject-level accountability.

My discussion here is not exhaustive and does not pretend to be. Rather, composite characters serve her as an example of one of many techniques to be borrowed from fiction that could offer a comfortability to research subjects when broaching more sensitive content areas.

Depersonalization

Amid discussion on the narrative construction of reality in my seminar with Rebecca Lester (Washington University in St. Louis, 2021), I did not want to reveal myself as a survivor of sexual assault, but thought it pertinent to share how giving a name to my experience dramatically changed my memory of the encounter. So, rather than leading with the narrative “I,” I described an “article” I had read about how rhetoric shapes experience, and how women who came realize themselves as survivors of sexual assault after the fact resituated the event as trauma and re-felt or re-experienced it as such.

There was no article, though there was a woman who had a very real experience that she (I) would have otherwise secreted. Disguising myself as a nameless, faceless character, I spared
myself the white hot shame of exposure that would have, at best,\textsuperscript{23} kept me from speaking my truth, and at worst,\textsuperscript{24} caused me significant emotional pain.

How might this be applied to the process of doing ethnography? I would imagine this functioning as a part of a larger effort toward collaborative ethnographies, where research methods are devised \textit{with} the research subject. In this way, a subject would be able to voice how they would be most comfortable contributing to the project, specifically how they would show up in the published work – as a composite character, a de-identified character that looks and sounds like they do – and how they would be comfortable framing their narratives in the ethnographic interview or field situation.

This is, again, a paradoxical recommendation: when we prompt subjects with such questions as 1) Tell \textit{this} experience as if it happened to another person, or 2) Tell a story of someone \textit{this} happens to, a number of things might happen. They might withhold knowing that you, the researcher, are aware that the “she/he/they” are being used in place of “I,” and feel similarly stuck with vulnerability. Conversely, if they, having agreed ahead of time to use the framings “I know someone who” or “I read” or “I saw,” put into practice this disguised disclosure, the researcher might not know the disguised “I” from what was truly observed or read. There can be a tension, in other words, between getting full information and getting traceable information. Which should we prioritize? This is a choice that each ethnographer has to make depending on what is at stake for both them and their collaborators.

\textsuperscript{23} For my sake
\textsuperscript{24} Again, for my sake, though, the order is likely reversed when considering the ethnography to be produced (best, the subject shared, and worst, withholding)
In Closing

We ask key informants to be tremendously vulnerable for our benefit, and while Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) work to ensure participant protection, narrative construction can result in re-traumatization or rumination on past trauma that is impossible to account for. As anthropological knowledge production is made possible by the availability and openness of research subjects, we as ethnographers should involve subject-level considerations beyond those mandated by the American Anthropological Association (AAA) in our research methods and writing. By this I mean going beyond the obvious – *do no harm* – and instead work with research subjects to devise practices that afford them increased comfortability or protection *before* beginning work, which seems, to me, a logical application of one of Anthropology’s main tenets: to meet people where they are.
Conclusion

Anthropological knowledge production is important and precarious work. Ethnographers gain access to their subjects commensurate with earned rapport or trust, and recreate encountered worlds in writing. The potential for knowledge production hinges on the things not learned or not appropriately attended to: the gaps in narrative that result from omissions, exclusions, and silences on the part of both researcher and research subject.

The discipline has evolved past the ambition for complete reconstructions, a development born of the Writing Culture debate and the increased understanding of anthropological knowledge as narrative knowledge, and narrative knowledge as contingent. However, this doesn’t mean that anthropology is a doomed discipline. One can produce academic knowledge without appropriating or subverting stories. In other words, a subject does not have to get caught in the crossfire if the ethnographer is willing and able to approach ethnographic research as a collaborative project.

Anthropologists risk the good standing of the discipline when they assume authority over a subject’s story and write what they want from what they gather, which is to say, paying little mind to the repercussions of their work for the people who made it possible. I speak, in this instance, of those violations of the aforementioned trust that are not protected against by IRBs: harm that is unintentionally done for the production of knowledge that results from “competing impulses and inevitable complications” (Benson 2010, 10).

Ethnographers must wrest the urge to make meaning from the impulse to create knowledge: a difference that is subtle yet poignant. Ethnographers can only write what they know to be true around them. There will be gaps. There will be incongruencies and glaring omissions. And that’s okay. To attempt narrative patches in ethnographic writing is to presume authority over
a subject’s story: a brand of omnipotence that no researcher possesses, not even those researchers who engage in autoethnography. This may sound somewhat contrary to what I argued above, but there is an important distinction. Using fictionalization in ethnography does not mean just making up what you want to be true, but instead is still firmly rooted in ethnographic data and requires appropriate supporting evidence.

Ethnographers must also be mindful of the material lost in the reduction of whole person to field notes and the subsequent translation of field notes to published narrative. To produce knowledge from human subjects is to treat real people as objects of study, and with that comes the risk of omitting encountered complexities for the sake of argument or task. Peter Benson (discussed in chapter one) did not intend to harm his informant; he prioritized the critical lens over details of a subject-researcher relationship, a prioritization normalized by anthropology’s historical disregard for subjects as potential readers of the ethnographies they make possible. In writing my brief ethnography for chapter one, I offered an alternative by adopting a more critical, distanced, viewpoint, prioritizing the what over the why or how. The result: an account that, while true, is without the contextualizing details that prove imperative to understanding the roundness of the scene, which is but a brief window into a life (part of a whole). With context, the scene softens, becoming something that is almost entirely new. We come to understand M and the severity of her approach at parenting her daughter, who we come to understand as having been, at that time, in the throes of anorexia and at significant risk to herself.

Ethnographers are bound by life narratives, and this carries with it a number of implications. I have suggested that elements of fiction writing may serve as a sort of remedial, specifically through the writing of composite characters and the further de-identification of subject and place. Using personal narrative construction (written, as a stand-in for the life
narratives constructed in the field – the basis for field notes and later ethnographic writing) I suggested that shame is something we must be attuned to during the fieldwork encounter. Shame is an aggravant, but also a sub-conscious protective mechanism that shields the vulnerable from disclosure or subsequent disappointment. If the discipline of anthropology aims to better protect its key informants, subjects, from more than the physical threats currently protected against (emotional), considering the reasons for deliberate withholding seems a fertile ground for further research.

Recommendations

The recommendations made in this thesis are not revolutionary and do not pretend to be: rather, they are the result of turning inward and assuming or pretending to assume (to the degree possible) the role of research subject. I asked myself such questions as: 1) How would you want to be treated in person and in writing? And 2) How would you reconcile your role as an object of study? That is, how would you want to be treated in writing, particularly in the instances where the ethnographer gleans something of your time together that is different from what you intended?

In the first chapter, I suggested devoting a portion of the “Methods” to the relationship between researcher and subject, going beyond the general – I lived and worked amongst X and participated in Y for some extended length of time, Z – to include those more sensitive or sentimental scenes surrounding relationship building. In doing so, the anthropologist might also get at their intention and whether or not they felt that their research or personal interests were at odds with their project (Goldstein 2022, 20). I see this as an opportunity to enrich academic narratives by creating a space for the material that complicates itself, and thereby might be left out for the sake of cohesion or argument. Bear in mind that the conflicts of interest that are likely to
arise might call into question the long-favored authority of academic voice; though, given its propensity for appropriation and subversion, this might not be such a bad thing.

In the second chapter, wrote into the challenges of experience and representation that sit at the heart of the ethnographic enterprise, and caution against the assumption of a subject’s motives or understanding beyond what is substantiated by observed behavior or recorded speech. This gets at the question of what the life narratives of our research subjects can reliably tell us: interpretations and conjectures about past (or even current) selves and experiences that are temporally and culturally contingent.

In the third chapter, I offered ways of thinking through one’s approach to research and writing that have the potential to be more mindful of the subject’s experience. While subjects agree to participate in studies knowing (at least in theory) the emotional territories involved, this fact should not absolve researchers of further responsibility. I urge researchers to ask themselves how they would feel in particular situations, and with this insight (in addition to the pertinent cultural and contextual information), tailor their methods accordingly.

Collaborative Ethnographies

Collaborative ethnography is an approach that “deliberately and explicitly emphasizes collaboration at every point in the ethnographic process, without veiling it – from project conceptualization, to fieldwork, and, especially through the writing process” (Lassiter 2005). In so doing, the process yields texts that are co-conceived and co-written with collaborators, affording them the potential to alleviate the opportunities for harm or causes of omission described in this thesis.
For example, in her article, “Voicing the domestic: Senegalese Sufi25 women’s musical practice, feminine interior worlds, and possibilities for ethnographic listening,” anthropologist Ali Coleen Neff writes of feminine vocal power from research born of “sensitive, collaborative methodology” (“Abstract” in Neff 2013). Neff describes her relationship to her “would-be subject” along with her methods as follows:

I was adopted into the home of Sokhna Khady and, in turn, became an extension of my would-be-subject's personal design. The power structure of researcher and researched, so clear over the classic anthropological camp table, fell away in the context of Sokhna Khady's house rules. As Sokhna Khady invited me into her home, she initiated a mode of co-affectivity in which each of us fostered her own resonant project. Ensconced in her home, we worked less as researcher and subject than as partners in the context of a Senegalese worldview that emphasizes overlapping fields of inclusivity: ethnicity, family name, Sufi order, region of origin, city neighborhood, social class, life stage.” (19)

Neff goes on to describe her twice-weekly visits to the home of Sokhna Khady, where the two found “occasional time to talk about her family, her work, and her theories of voice and power.” In the year following her return from Senegal, the two continued these conversations by phone every few weeks, plotting new directions for Neff’s research and Khady’s musical projects (Ibid p.89). As for her philosophy on writing, Neff includes the following:

In this ethnographic space I want to let Sokhna Khady’s story stand uninterrupted, to invite readers to trace its three cycles and the blessings by which they are buoyed. I want to stay true to the rhythms of her invocations of the saints; to her deep Wolof practices of phraseology, hyperbole, and repetition; to her griot’s tendency to circumlocute. I want to take up, in the textures of this ethnographic representation, the spaces of imagination and mystery that shape Senegalese practices of communication. Where the poetry of Sokhna Khady’s Wolof language and the immense character of her voice evade the reader, I draw attention to Sokhna Khady’s poetic composition: its outer form and style and its intricate inner significations. A world of meaning lay within. (Ibid.)

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25 Body of religious practice within Islam
Neff is careful to not disturb the “textures” of ethnographic representation, and in so doing, to limit those avoidable omissions born of a researcher’s attention or selection bias. What’s more, in engaging her subject throughout the planning, research, and writing processes, Neff significantly reduces her risk of appropriation or subversion and holds her reproduction accountable in its likeness to subjective reality.

What becomes of an anthropology that, like Neff, comes to know the project as belonging to someone or some group other than itself? And not in the way of savior complexes or voluntourism, where a desire to help is ruined by a craving for validation or an ignorance of local structures, but dedication to a collaborative ethnography that belongs equally to both researcher and subject. 26

Final Remarks

As a genre of writing, ethnography both shares critical elements with other forms of writing (such as journalism and fiction), and offers its own unique benefits and challenges. As ethnographers navigate potentially awkward or tricky fieldwork relationships, write down accounts of their observations and their own and others’ experiences, and then try to put the pieces together into a well-crafted, intellectually innovative, narrative whole, much inevitably will be lost. But the ethnographer’s job is not to simply reproduce material from the field. Our job is to gather the information and then convey what we think all of it means and for whom. To do this effectively requires us to reach beyond our own disciplinary boundaries, to lean into the interstitial space between science and the humanities where anthropology lives, and to embrace

26 Self, Patient, Survivor
rather than smooth over the tensions and disconnects that result. Ultimately, it is in these tensions, and the ways we work through them, that the power of ethnography resides.
The ‘self’ is an arrested moment in the ongoing dialectical movement between self and other; that this arrest depends on the typification of self and other through language; that the typification of other depends upon a third – a guarantor of meaning that permits the play of desire

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