SUOMEN ANTROPOLOGI: JOURNAL OF THE FINNISH ANTHROPOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Volume 48, Issue 1, 2024

Editors' note

Articles

Research reports

Book reviews

Afterthoughts

EDITORS' NOTE: IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO FEND OFF PREDATORS

We are once again delighted to bring you a new issue of *Suomen antropologi: The Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society*. This issue marks our final contribution as your editors-in-chief. Two years ago when we took over the journal, our primary aim was to maintain and develop the independent, community-organised, nonprofit open access publishing ethos started by our predecessors. In addition, we aimed to develop the editorial processes of the journal, making it as easy as possible for new members joining the editorial team.

Over the course of the six issues we have published as editors-in-chief, we think we have succeeded satisfactorily. The editorial team now consists of both old and new members, all of whom actively participate in the editorial work and development of the journal. We have succeeded in creating shared workspaces and documentation, allowing new individuals joining the team to quickly learn the various tasks, and, during our term, we have engaged in various open access initiatives. It is our pleasure to welcome and congratulate Suvi Rautio (University of Helsinki) on her appointment as the new editor-in-chief of *Suomen antropologi*, as she takes charge following this issue. Since joining the editorial team last year, Suvi has been a dedicated contributor to the journal's endeavours. Whilst we hand over the journal to her capable hands, we will also remain onboard as regular members of the editorial team, and look forward to supporting Suvi and ensuring a smooth transition. Needless to say, as editor-in-chief Suvi is free to lead the journal as she sees fit.

Relieved of our duties as editors-in-chief, we plan to complete some of the ideas we had for the journal, but lacked the time necessary to fully implement. One of these ambitions includes broadening the publication format of the journal to include HTML, allowing for better multimodal publishing, embedding into the text both sound and video.

We also take this opportunity to extend our heartfelt thanks to Matti Eräsaari and Laura Huttunen for their contributions to our editorial team. Matti Eräsaari was the editor-in-chief for the four years preceding our tenure and remained on the editorial team as an editor ensuring a smooth transition for us. After going above and beyond for the journal, Matti has decided to focus on his newly funded European Research Council project 'Properties of Units and Standards'. Congratulations, Matti, on the project! Similarly, Laura has worked as an editor of our journal for several years, alongside serving as a professor and head of her department. Given other

work responsibilities demanding her full attention, Laura has decided to resign from her position as journal editor. Thank you, Matti and Laura, for your time, efforts, and the expertise both of you have shared with us!

ON PUBLISHING AND PREYING

We want to remind our readers again that *Suomen antropologi* is a community-owned and managed nonprofit open access journal, which is funded and overseen by the Finnish Anthropological Society. The board of the society appoints the editors-in-chief, who then assemble the editorial team and who ultimately answer to the board and members of the society. The journal also receives a small public grant, paid by the Ministry of Education and administered by TSV, the Confederation of Finnish Learned Societies. TSV also administers the server space and the Open Journal Systems publication software used by *Suomen antropologi* and other Finnish community-managed journals. The editors-in-chief of *Suomen antropologi,* therefore, also report to TSV. The journal is run by the editorial team, but answers to both the society and TSV. The editors-in-chief and editors work on a voluntary basis, whilst the technical staff receive nominal payments for their work, payments made possible from the society's membership dues, a public grant, and occasional small grants. We secured one such small grant recently from the Finnish Association for Scholarly Publishing, for which we are grateful.

As editors, we devote our time to the journal because we firmly believe that community-controlled nonprofit open access publishing—by scholars for scholars—is the most ethical method of scientific publishing. Ours is a communal effort, and this journal is made possible by the labour our editors, editorial secretaries, language editor, and reviewers voluntarily provide. Similarly, the Finnish Anthropological Society is a volunteer-based community. We, therefore, ask and encourage our fellow scholars to engage in such efforts: that is, volunteer work which forms the backbone of a scientific public.

In order for community-owned and nonprofit open access publishing to thrive, scholars need to publish in them. As precarious and relatively early-career scholars, we understand that many early career researchers feel they need to publish in prestigious commercial journals, because our work and value is measured according to publications in high-ranking journals. Whilst we are committed to nonprofit open access publishing, we do not expect precarious junior scholars to bear the burden of the transition. Therefore, we appeal to our more established, tenured colleagues to actively participate in dismantling the exploitative frameworks currently underpinning the political economy of academic publishing. We encourage

a pivot towards contributing scholarly work to independent, community-administered, and not-for-profit open access journals.

It is nothing short of scandalous that, in 2024, we continue to see public funds funnelled into the coffers of commercial publishers. For the most part, these entities lay claim to the fruits of publicly financed research and levy substantial rents for publications, despite adding little or no value to them. This reality is particularly egregious given that today the means to publish openly and accessibly are more cost-effective and straightforward than they have ever been. The major commercial publishers are acutely aware of this reality, and, yet, persist in levying exorbitant article processing charges (APCs) and subscription fees from individual scholars and academic institutions alike—a clear manifestation of a strategy aimed at grabbing as much money as possible from the process and then running away with those profits safely in their coffers.

Our spam folders are bursting with advertisements from small predatory publishers and scam journals, all of which charge a couple of hundred dollars for a publication. But, these journals, predatory as they are, are small fish compared to the big commercial publishers, such as Routledge, which charges up to €10 000 for an open access edited volume they might not even properly peer review. Surely, these are the apex predators of academic publishing.

As volunteers of an independent, nonprofit open access journal, our mission is to offer a sustainable and ethically sound option to the current publishing paradigm. But, we cannot do it alone. We recognise that senior and well-established scholars may have limited time to dedicate to volunteer-driven projects, but they can exercise discretion in their publishing choices. We also rely on these scholars to help shift the metrics according to which we are rated. Evaluations, when necessary, should be based on the calibre of our research, rather than the mere prestige of a for-profit journal, a measure which should have no relationship to quality.

THIS ISSUE

This issue consists of three research articles—by William Wheeler (independent scholar), Phill Wilcox (Bielefeld University), and Ellen Lapper (Independent scholar), respectively—two research reports in the form of public lectures (*lectio præcursoria*) delivered by doctoral candidates during their public defences—by Tero Frestadius (University of Helsinki) and Saana Hansen (University of Helsinki)—and two book reviews—by Eeva Berlung (Aalto University) and Hector Sanchez (University of Helsinki). We also include in this issue an anthropological reading challenge put forth by Henni Alava (Tampere University) and Tuomas Tammisto (Tampere University).

In his article, William Wheeler examines bordering, border violence, and the notion of the abusive state, focusing on the case of an asylum seeker from Bangladesh to the United Kingdom. In his thick and harrowing description, Wheeler examines how Sanwar sought to gain asylum in the UK—a process that both brought back old trauma to the surface and created new ones, leading Sanwar to attempt suicide. Wheeler's article relies on ethnographic research, specifically his discussions with Sanwar and the documentation of his asylum-seeking process. Here, Wheeler offers a model of a closely observed and collaboratively created case study, complementing rather nicely two recent articles on border violence published in *Suomen antropologi* (Anderson 2023; Laakkonen 2023).

Phill Wilcox examines in her article an understudied mode of transportation—namely, cycling—in urban Laos. Wilcox's entry point to this topic is a European Union campaign designed to promote commuting to work via cycling in Laos. The well-meaning, albeit top-down, campaign was detached from the everyday lives of the inhabitants and, hence, unsuccessful. Based on her own research and experience cycling in Vientiane, Wilcox discusses who cycles and who does not in contemporary urban Laos. She shows there is an emerging and growing number of cycling enthusiasts for whom cycling is primarily a hobby, whereas commuting by cycling is done largely out of necessity by those without access to motorbikes and cars, vehicles for which Vientiane's infrastructure is primarily designed.

Ellen Lapper's article delves into the evolving field of digital death and the significance of online legacies in social media spaces, particularly in the context of mourning and memory. Here, Lapper highlights the challenges and nuances of posthumous personhood and the ethical implications of managing digital remains. Employing a reflexive, collaborative approach, Lapper's research emphasises the need for adaptable methodologies which respect cultural differences and the emotional complexities surrounding digital afterlives. Her study advocates for a closer partnership between researchers, participants, and software developers to navigate the preservation and ethical treatment of digital legacies.

In his *lectio,* Tero Frestadius presents his PhD thesis on public art, gentrification, and race in a segregated urban setting—namely, Los Angeles, California. In *A Bed Behind the Portrait: An Ethnography Around Images in Segregated Los Angeles,* Frestadius (2022) examines gentrification and urban transformation in Los Angeles through the lens of segregation, and how racialised hierarchies are built into the city over a long history. The thesis specifically focuses on one young mural artist who moves across various divisions and categories. As Frestadius himself notes, his analysis shows both how the divisions and categories are at one moment problematised and corroded by people and reasserted with great weight in the next.

Frestadius' thesis relies on highly nuanced, careful, and sensitive long-term ethnographic research, offering a fine example of how to present difficult themes in a thoughtful manner.

Saana Hansen in her *lectio* presents her PhD thesis on the economies of care of *injivas* (returning migrants) from South Africa to Zimbabwe. In *Economies of Care and the Politics of Return: Sustaining Life among* Injivas *and Their Families in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe*, Hansen (2023) examines the crises of and displacement within Zimbabwe by focusing on those who return. By examining how people who move over the border try to make do and 'mix things in order to survive', Hansen examines questions of how kinship and bureaucracies are built and build each other. Hansen employs the concept of 'economies of care' to examine the various, creative, and determined ways in which people make their lives liveable and how belonging—be it in terms of kinship or citizenship—is asserted in everyday life. Hansen's thesis is an important addition to the contemporary study of kinship, care, and the state as well as the study of migration.

Eeva Berglund reviews Bettina Stoetzer's (2022) book *Ruderal City: Ecologies of Migration, Race, and Urban Nature in Berlin*, and Hector Sanchez the volume co-edited by Synnøve K. N. Bendixsen and Edvard Hviding (2021) entitled *Anthropology in Norway: Directions, Locatons, Relations*. Henni Alava and Tuomas Tammisto introduce a reading challenge that is meant to inspire to read research and create communities of mutual support for reading.

TUOMAS TAMMISTO AND HEIKKI WILENIUS
Editors-in-chief

REFERENCES

Anderson, Timothy 2023. Life in 'Punitive Protection': The paradox of migrant detention in Estonia. *Suomen antropologi: Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society* 47 (2): 29–48. https://doi.org/10.30676/jfas.113085.

Frestadius, Tero 2022. *A Bed Behind the Portrait: An Ethnography Around Images in Segregated Los Angeles.* Ph.D. thesis. Helsinki: University of Helsinki. http://hdl.handle.net/10138/343711.

Hansen, Saana 2023. *Economies of Care and the Politics of Return: Sustaining Life among* injivas *and Their Families in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe*. Ph.D. thesis. Helsinki: University of Helsinki. http://hdl.handle.net/10138/352687.

Laakkonen, Ville 2023. Ágnostoi: Greece and the forensic bordering of Fortress Europe. *Suomen antropologi: Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society* 47 (2): 7–28. https://doi.org/10.30676/jfas.122031.

William Wheeler

'WHEN THEY'RE LYING, AND THEY SAY YOU'RE LYING, THEN THERE'S NO HOPE': ASYLUM SEEKING, TRAUMA, AND THE ABUSIVE STATE

ABSTRACT

This article explores the story of Sanwar, who fled Bangladesh following persecution for his sexuality, and spent five years struggling for asylum in the UK. Analysing our conversations together with his asylum paperwork, I show how trauma was apprehended in the asylum process, and how the process itself produced more trauma. Taking this trauma as diagnostic of state violence, I advance the notion of 'the abusive state': the disbelief Sanwar faced constituted gaslighting, echoing childhood abuse from his father, while the pressure to 'change his story', to perform as someone he was not, further figured as the impossible demand of a capricious, false authority. In the final section, I reflect on the moments when things fell apart and Sanwar attempted suicide, pointing to the ways in which suicidal subjectivities emerge in the asylum system. What might it mean to put suicide at the heart of our thinking, and feeling, about asylum?

Keywords: asylum seeking; trauma; abuse; the state; suicide; immigration law

INTRODUCTION

I first met Sanwar[1] in 2017, via a forum in Manchester bringing together third-sector workers and people who had experienced destitution. Shy and deferent, over time Sanwar shared his story: how he had fled Bangladesh after persecution for his sexuality; how upon claiming asylum he had been detained; how he had become street homeless when his asylum claim was refused; how the process made him suicidal; and how he was committed to supporting others in the same situation. Eventually, in summer 2019, Sanwar was granted asylum. Before that, he spent six years in the system, with no right to work, putting in fresh claims for asylum that were repeatedly knocked back, slipping between periods of destitution and periods of living on Home Office support totalling just over £35 per week. He attempted suicide several times. Just before he was granted refugee status, Sanwar agreed to participate in my research project examining the lived experiences of the asylum system. He was now completely open about everything, and wanted to share his story in the hope of making a difference.

This article examines Sanwar's life story through its entanglement with the legal

processes to which he was subjected. This is a story of bureaucratic violence, embedded within the wider picture of violent borders (Jones 2016). Anatomising the violence Sanwar faced in the asylum process, and the trauma it inflicted, this article advances the notion of the abusive state.

Such stories are all too common across the global North. Amidst racialised moral panics, where asylum seekers are scapegoated for deep-seated societal ills, people fleeing war and persecution face what activists and scholars call a 'culture of disbelief' within decision-making bureaucracies, and punitive policies that exclude them from the right to work and from mainstream welfare. A growing body of literature explores everyday life within the British asylum system as being subjected to violence: enforced poverty, as well as confinement and restricted autonomy in poor-quality, isolated accommodation, subject to the whims of Home Office contractors (Canning 2017; 2020). This is 'slow violence', a violence that is attritional and debilitating (Mayblin 2019; Darling 2022). Meanwhile, others draw attention to the violence of immigration law. As Nadine El Enany (2020) argues, this violence is twofold, both excluding racialised persons from the spoils of imperial plunder, and trapping them in regimes of recognition. As a 'failed asylum seeker', Sanwar was forced into destitution, excluded from participating in British society—but his only way out of his predicament was to go on engaging in a legal process of recognition that repeatedly failed to recognise his right to asylum.

This article brings both sets of insight together to explore the impact on Sanwar's life story of repeated refusals, repeated fresh asylum claims, and cycling between the poverty of asylum support and destitution. How, the article asks, might we anatomise the violence of this process? Addressing this question through the traumas Sanwar experienced, the article characterises this violence as abusive. After outlining Sanwar's traumatic upbringing and the events that led him to flee to the UK, I explore in detail how he was disbelieved in the asylum process—and how the process discredited him, establishing him in moralised terms as a 'failed asylum seeker'. I draw on ethnographies that examine the culture of disbelief from the inside, which variously emphasise the difficulties of establishing facts about events in distant lands, often with minimal evidence, and the intensely politicised atmosphere of decision-making (Campbell 2017; Gill and Good 2019; Good 2007, 2015; Kelly 2011).

As Roberto Beneduce (2015) stresses, asylum seekers' struggles over truth and falsehood are embedded within colonial histories of suspicion. The epistemological difficulties of 'proving' asylum stories leaves a space of uncertainty—a space which is populated with racialised assumptions about the devious migrant. As a result, bureaucratic disbelief is not an abstract identification of an untruth: it is a deeply moralised process of discrediting. If people are refused asylum, it is because, as the Home Office phrases it, they have 'failed' to establish a well-founded fear of persecution.[2]

As later sections of this article explore, Sanwar was traumatised by these processes, and this trauma offers insight into the nature of the violence he faced, as a specifically abusive form of violence. In his case studies from his work as a psychiatric doctor during the colonial war in Algeria, Frantz Fanon (2004) shows how colonial violence, amidst a total absence of trust on both sides, variously scarred psychic landscapes on both sides of the conflict.[3] Of course, the slow bureaucratic violence within the asylum system cannot be equated with the armed violence Fanon witnessed. Nevertheless,

amidst the colonial and racialised atmosphere of mistrust surrounding asylum, we can trace how his encounter with the asylum bureaucracy traumatically ruptured Sanwar's inner world.

That aspects of the asylum process can compound or repeat traumas from countries of origin is widely recognised (Canning 2021; McKenzie 2019). If trauma is characterised by its intrusion into the present, a past that is never really passed, it is unsurprising that the criminalised environment of seeking asylum should trigger traumatic memories. With Sanwar, however, this went beyond triggering past traumas: the trauma also lay in the present. What made the past traumas reverberate so devastatingly was the resonance between the childhood abuse he had experienced in Bangladesh and what he faced in the asylum system.

Indeed, the extended encounter with the asylum bureaucracy, this article argues, amounted to entrapment in abusive patterns of power. Beneduce (2015), exploring the moral economy of lying in a context where asylum seekers' stories are routinely disbelieved, poses two questions: What are the psychological effects of telling a true story and being disbelieved; or, conversely, of telling and embodying an untrue story to fit the bureaucratic category of a deserving refugee? As we see below, both questions are relevant to Sanwar. Being disbelieved entailed a manipulation of reality, or gaslighting, which resonated with experiences of abuse from his childhood. In terms of the second question, while Sanwar did not change his story, or who he was, when faced with refusal after refusal, he felt intense pressure to do so. This pressure to be someone he was not constituted another dimension of the abuse, the impossible demands of a capricious authority that also echoed his childhood experiences.

Despite everything, Sanwar pulled through the trauma—and ultimately won his case. This article also attends to the tissues of relations that kept his life liveable, in which he actively invested care and his aspirations 'to dwell in the world fully and intimately' (Willen 2019, 15). However, in the final section, I stay with the darkness, dwelling on the moments when things did not hold, when life became unliveable and Sanwar attempted suicide. After all, as Sanwar emphasised, there are many others in the asylum system whose suicide attempts are successful. How, then, do 'suicidal subjects' (Marsh 2013; Münster and Broz 2015) emerge through and in response to these abusive processes? And what might it mean to put suicidal subjects at the heart of our thinking, and feeling, about the politics of asylum?

TRUST AND CO-PRODUCTION IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS

At the start of the research process, a strong level of trust between me and Sanwar had already developed over our time in the destitution forum. In contrast to the mistrust characterising his encounter with the Home Office, this trust was key to shaping the knowledge co-produced between us. Over five informal, unstructured interviews, Sanwar and I explored his life story. Early on, he brought the file of his immigration paperwork and talked me through it. During later, loosely structured, conversations, I used some of these papers as prompts to explore his experiences and understandings of the legal processes in which he had been entangled. During the final conversations, I tested out some of my interpretations with Sanwar, which helped hone the key arguments around abuse.

Some of it, including traumatic events back in Bangladesh, he never talked about

directly, as if handing over the paperwork was a way of communicating some of the horror without reliving it. However, he told me clearly that he was happy for me to write about papers that we had not specifically discussed. Indeed, he maintains total openness about his story. He presents his story as one that needs to be heard, and stresses that he has entrusted it to me in order to make a difference. This feels, of course, like a huge responsibility, which I feel insecure in fulfilling—the more Sanwar insists that the story is entrusted to me, the more care it is incumbent upon me to take with it. I hope that I have remained true to the knowledge co-produced between us.

Within this process, I myself have not stood still. My own life events have informed my readings of some of what Sanwar shared. In closing with a discussion of suicides within the asylum system, I have been prompted by highly personal reasons. In autumn 2021, I lost a close family friend who killed himself. Alongside (and somewhat displacing) my grief, I have been left with an inchoate rage at the multiple failures of care that drove him to that point. And, in some sense, I envisaged this article as some kind of meaning-making in dealing with that loss, and that impossible tension between wanting to take the suicide as diagnostic of societal ills, and wanting to recognise the act as a decisive act that my friend could own—'the tension of agency' (Münster and Broz 2015).

At the same time, my loss attuned me to listen more carefully to the enormity of what Sanwar, during darker moments, imparted about suicides in the asylum system. There are political and ethical imperatives to foregrounding suicides in this context. Globally, borders and bordering processes enact a violence that is often deadly (Jones 2016). The tracing and documenting of migrant deaths afford a measure of human dignity to the dead and their loved ones, testifying to 'one of the great political failures of modern times' (Missing Migrants Project 2022). Suicides in the British asylum system are further casualties of violent borders—but amidst a dearth of data, this is a violence that remains hidden, elusive in its form.[4] Even when such suicides become publicly known, they rarely make waves. In some small way, Sanwar's story hints at how we might begin to apprehend, and mourn, these deaths. Documenting this story allows us to diagnose the abusive violence in which he and other suicidal subjects are entangled.

ASYLUM PAPERWORK

Sanwar called the night before our meeting to say that he had been granted refugee status. Usually quiet and reserved, he was brimming with joy. The next day, dressed in a black jacket and tie, hair gelled down, he proudly showed me his newly received biometric residence permit. He had already had one job interview, with another lined up.

Sanwar had brought all of his paperwork to this meeting. He laid it all out, talking me through his time in the UK: his detention in 2013 when he claimed asylum; his move to Home Office accommodation in Manchester following his release; the failure of his asylum claim; paperwork about his period of destitution in 2016; his fresh asylum claims and refusals; medical evidence from 2017 about his mental health and suicide risk. With some documents he chuckled: 'I didn't know I still had that!' For some papers, he made no comment. Handing me the court ruling on his asylum appeal, he simply told me to go and read the findings to understand everything the judge had found wrong with him. Other papers elicited more narrative, like the 2017 letter summoning him to Liverpool for a travel document—which

would make it possible to deport him. 'They make you more torture', he commented.

Finally, he laid before me an 11-page, typed document from 2019, an account of his life story, which he included with his final, successful, asylum claim. He was now much more stable. He had been advised by an LGBT support group to write about his feelings, the full account of why he was claiming asylum. Sanwar told me, 'And when I was writing this, halfway through, the post-traumatic stress came through…' He had to pause for three weeks before resuming.

SANWAR'S FINAL STATEMENT

I took the papers with me. I started by reading the long 2019 statement, plunging into the turbulent story of growing up gay in a relatively wealthy family in rural Bangladesh. The narrative had some linear progression—from the little boy's enjoyment when wearing his sister's clothes, through his confused adolescent realisation that he was not attracted to women, to his understanding that he was gay and that, this was, as he learned from his brother, a punishment from God. But the narrative was marked by false starts and doubling backs: periods of guilt; moments of clarity and acceptance; moments of sadness, revulsion at not being 'normal'; varying forms and degrees of concealment; respite in lyrically described relationships with gay friends and lovers, but relationships that remained fragile, always on the brink; an early atheism lapsing into praying in the mosque first weekly, then daily; hopes of a 'cure' followed by despair.

Amidst all the vicissitudes, there was a constant: the abuse from his father. The statement opens with his mother's death. Advised to have an abortion, she died two weeks after Sanwar's birth. His father blamed him for her death. Sanwar, too, he wrote, for a time wished she had had the abortion. His father beat him daily. This abuse was echoed in the bullying, the 'torture', he faced at school for being effeminate. Beyond the sheer physical and mental suffering, this punishment for existing was a form of 'developmental trauma', the consequences of which would be long-lasting. As Stolorow (2011) explains, without emotional attunement from the caregiver, the child represses parts of their emotional world. The distorted external reality ruptures the inner world, as the child internalises failure, resulting in 'isolation, shame, and self-loathing' (Stolorow 2011: 28). In his writing, Sanwar highlighted a further result of this developmental trauma: a lack of trust, stemming from the acute disjuncture between his inner emotional world and the world into which he was thrown. This early experience would reverberate through his experiences with the Home Office.

After his first romantic encounter with another boy, he provoked his father into beating him. He wrote:

After a couple of minutes he stopped and went to the other room, kept shouting… 'why you are still living, why you aren't dying, why you are having my food' etc. Then it hit me, that's right if I die, everything will go away.

Sanwar swallowed pesticides, his first suicide attempt. His sister found him vomiting and took him to hospital.

And, yet, he describes gradually accepting that he was gay. After some time, however, he was rocked by the suicides of three close friends. The first left him heartbroken. The second, who had gone to a shaman for a cure, left Sanwar devastated by guilt. The third left him angry: 'To me, He did not commit suicide, He was killed by so called religion, family prestige, fake honor.'

Sanwar too considered suicide. But he picked himself up, immersing himself in his

education, which promised escape from the community. Although he did not believe in God, he sought forgiveness, finding prayer therapeutic. After a year or so, things were a bit better. He was studying in college and had a new circle of friends. This period of respite ended catastrophically when they found out about his sexuality on his 18th birthday. Things deteriorated again. Here, the narrative breaks down: 'After got beaten, fight with my brother, Stupid police incident I lost everything in One night.' Evidently, this was the moment where Sanwar had to stop writing. Without going further into the details of that beating, he writes of fleeing his village, injured, following a *fatwa* from his brother, but with a substantial sum of money from his father—who was desperate to get rid of him.

Drifting from place to place, losing contact even with his sisters, he contemplated suicide. But seeing an ad for a student visa, he decided to apply, using the money his father had given him. Having got the visa, he returned to the village to say goodbye to his eldest sister and seek his father's forgiveness: 'From my birth, Desperate for a Father's love or approval.' The trip failed on both counts.

The rest of the statement details Sanwar's life in the UK. Unsure whether homosexuality was legal when he arrived in 2011, he was afraid to go outside. He knew nothing about asylum. Gradually, however, he emerged into a new life. His mental health prevented him from studying, but he found accommodation with other South Asian men where he was accommodated for several years in return for doing housework. He picked up some catering work, and earned enough to buy a smartphone. He started experimenting with dating apps. Entering a relationship with a Slovak man, Jan, he felt for the first time that he was treated 'like a respectful human being'. After a few months together, Jan told him that he could claim asylum because of his sexuality.

So, in December 2013, he claimed asylum. He was immediately detained. While he was in detention, the relationship broke down because Jan 'felt used': he felt that Sanwar was exploiting their relationship for his asylum case. After Sanwar's release and move to Manchester, he started attending an LGBT support group. He met someone there—but, realising that this man wanted to sleep with him just to claim asylum, 'I felt betrayed'. It was impossible to enter any relationship as an asylum seeker: 'It likes people hate us. Because we are living with their tax money. (...) I can't pay for anything on a date, I don't have a job. It's like Home office asking me swim without using my limbs.'

The statement concludes:

When I started writing this letter, I went through every single self-loathing moment. I tried to be brief but I really tried to explain. I had to stopped for this traumatic shocks. So if there is any discrepancy with Dates, I asked forgiveness. After all these years everything faded away, but my traumatic scenes still live within. If I had other motives, I could change my story. But I am fighting for a truth, not fiction. This is my last statement and last further submission. I struggled my whole life for a peaceful life, please show me mercy.

This last paragraph marks a striking shift. For most of the statement, there is no obvious addressee. The narrative reads as a working through of past traumas, building on the therapy he had received. Here, however, the text is obviously addressed to the Home Office. The explanation about trauma and discrepancy with dates speaks, as we see below, to the previous refusals of asylum. Most striking is the call for forgiveness and mercy. In earlier moments, he describes seeking the mercy of a God in whom he did not believe. And he had sought

the forgiveness of the abusive figure he calls 'my so-called father', another false figure of authority imposing unfulfillable demands. That he should address the Home Office in a similar way is deeply suggestive.

DISBELIEVED

Drafting this statement would have been unthinkable without the years of therapy and support Sanwar received from the LGBT support group. Previous iterations of the story had lacked the benefit of that therapy; some had emerged in intensely stressful contexts. I next turned to the asylum interview transcript, conducted in detention, where narrative fragments emerged in response to the Home Office interviewer's often hostile questions. Here, the traumatic beating at the hands of villagers, which would cause the narrative in the long statement to break down, was dealt with in painstaking detail. He was also asked about his life in the UK, about Jan, and about his knowledge of gay bars in London. Despite hours of questioning, when asked if he had described all of his problems in Bangladesh, Sanwar responded that there was much more to say. Indeed, his father's abuse was wholly absent.

Sanwar did not show me the Home Office refusal that came five months later, so I next turned to the tribunal ruling from March 2015, where his appeal against that refusal was dismissed. This document offers insight into the culture of disbelief, and its implications for those disbelieved within it. By now, there had been further iterations of the story: two statements prepared with his lawyer; his interview with a medical professional for a medico-legal report; and the account he gave when cross-examined by the judge. The statements prepared with the lawyer were consistent with the later, long statement. Nevertheless, the narratives were crafted to engage the relevant area of refugee law. His father's abuse, not directly relevant to his asylum claim, was omitted.

The judge found that Sanwar was neither gay nor had he been persecuted for it. Hanging over the case was his delay in claiming asylum. According to legislation, not claiming asylum immediately damages the claimant's credibility.[5] The judge was dismissive of Sanwar's attempts to explain that he knew nothing about asylum, remarking caustically that he was an 'educated and resourceful' man. She concluded that he had only claimed asylum because he had been unable to extend his stay as a student.

As is common, the judge just found much of his story implausible. Why, for example, would his father have given him all that money if he was so angry with him? Moreover, the judge highlighted inconsistencies between different versions of his story, especially the descriptions of the attack. Here, the lawyer drew heavily on the medico-legal report. Medical evidence seems to promise certainty where hard evidence is lacking (Fassin and d'Hallouin 2005; 2007; Kelly 2011). However, while it is obvious that suffering can leave both bodily and psychic scars, certainty about what caused those scars is elusive. Despite the increasing codification of medico-legal expertise, decisions about whether, say, a scar is 'consistent with' or 'highly consistent with' a particular injury remain, ultimately, arbitrary (Kelly 2011). In Sanwar's case, there was a further problem: the scars *did* tell a story consistent with *a* beating, but it was not, said the judge, consistent with the beating Sanwar described. The scars simply multiplied the narratives before the court. Moreover, the judge had a transcript of the doctor's interview with Sanwar, and she trawled through this to reveal still more inconsistencies.

The medico-legal report also included a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder

(PTSD). While a PTSD diagnosis implies a statement about causation—exposure to trauma—it does not say what the trauma was nor whether it amounted to persecution as defined in the Refugee Convention (Kelly 2011). Moreover, when trauma does not stem from a discrete event, it is even harder for clinicians to ascribe causation. In Sanwar's case, the doctor was faced with picking apart the developmental trauma of his father's abuse, the loss of his friends to suicide, his beating, *and* his isolation in the UK, his detention, and his break-up with Jan.

Even so, Sanwar's lawyer relied heavily on the PTSD diagnosis, arguing that PTSD's effect on recall explained the inconsistencies between narratives. The judge ignored this argument. She addressed the diagnosis only in relation to the lawyer's mention of suicide risk. The judge observed that Sanwar had only mentioned suicide, self-harm, and memory problems to the doctor. Because he had not talked about them in other accounts, his account to the doctor could not be 'plausible or credible'.

Evidently, there is a conflict in the authority between different sorts of expertise. Judges can be sensitive about clinicians making assessments of the truthfulness of the account—although they could hardly write the medico-legal report without doing so (Kelly 2011). Similar issues arise in religious conversion cases, where ministers are tasked with testifying to the sincerity of the asylum seeker's religious belief (Wheeler 2021). Although the case law on medical evidence has evolved, with strict guidelines developed,[6] decisions remain arbitrary: some judges are well-disposed to medical expertise; others are not.[7] Case law exists to justify either approach. In Sanwar's case, the judge simply used the medico-legal report to multiply the narratives before her, and thus reveal more inconsistencies.

Despite the judge's seemingly comprehensive dismissal of Sanwar's story, his lawyer saw grounds for appeal: the judge had ignored the substance of the medical evidence, which constituted an error of law.[8] However, in a further hearing in the Upper Tribunal ten months later, the judge sided with the First-Tier Tribunal judge, reiterating that the medico-legal report was based mostly on Sanwar's verbal account to the doctor, which was unreliable. Sanwar was not present at this hearing, which delved into arcane areas of case law about the treatment of medical evidence. He became 'appeal rights exhausted'—meaning that he had no further right to appeal the decision. He was now officially categorised as a 'failed asylum seeker'.

The dismissal of Sanwar's case corroborates arguments about the inherent uncertainty of medical evidence in asylum determination proceedings (Fassin and d'Hallouin 2005; 2007; Kelly 2011). To push this point further, when the burden of proof is on the asylum seeker, this uncertainty produces a grey area, a space for judicial discretion—a space which is all too susceptible to being filled with unspoken racialised assumptions about asylum seekers. For all her scepticism about the medical expert's excessive trust in Sanwar's account, the judge did not reflect on the assumptions underlying her own judgements about his untrustworthiness. The failure of the medical evidence went further than failing to prove his story: it was deployed to discredit him, establishing him as a figure not to be trusted. This would have violent implications that were both material—rendering him destitute—and psychic—inflicting further trauma.

'FAILED ASYLUM SEEKER'

By the time he became appeal rights exhausted in May 2016, it was more than two years since he had first claimed asylum. No longer entitled to Home Office support, he was evicted. The slow violence of life on asylum support (Darling 2022; Mayblin 2019) intensified as he was forced into destitution. He had no friends with whom to stay, and slept on the streets around Manchester. He described the impossibility of fitting in with other homeless individuals, most of them white British, almost all, he said, with addiction problems. 'Just one thing positive—I felt… free! I felt like there's nothing can be worse. It can be better, but it can't be worse.'

Advised by his lawyer, who stood by Sanwar throughout, he rapidly sought evidence for a fresh asylum claim. Sanwar was in a worse position than when he began: all of the reasons the judge had found to dismiss his appeal would now be held against him. He had to present new evidence, which, had the original judge seen it, would lead them to a different conclusion. Fortunately, Sanwar managed to acquire a witness statement from a close friend from Bangladesh, now a refugee in France. Because of the urgency, the fresh asylum claim was submitted quickly.

Having submitted a fresh asylum claim, he was now again entitled to Home Office support, 'section 4 support'. However, the Home Office did not believe that he was destitute. Since the culture of disbelief extends to decisions about asylum support applications, extensive evidence is required to document destitution. Sanwar, sleeping on the streets, had no such evidence. Moreover, when he had applied for a student visa five years previously, he had the substantial sum his father had given him. He had not accounted for where that money had gone. So, he had to appeal against the refusal of his section 4 application. Sanwar travelled down to the Asylum Support Tribunal in London, where, he said, the Home Office Presenting Officer shouted about him making things up and getting money from back home. The judge sided with Sanwar, remarking that he had obviously been sleeping rough. His support was reinstated.

Returning to the same room, he found it had been unoccupied while he had been on the streets.

Next, the Home Office rejected his fresh asylum claim without right of appeal, because the witness statement was not deemed credible. He again faced homelessness. Like many others, he was now stuck in a cycle of submitting fresh asylum claims just to keep his accommodation. The only evidence possible now was from his life in the UK: letters from the support group, photographs of him at Gay Pride. The response was always the same: the evidence was self-serving. The lawyer continued to raise mental health issues and the risk of suicide, but the Home Office responded, 'This would be adequately managed by the UK authorities'. Indeed, the threshold for leave to remain based on suicide risk is almost impossibly high.[9]

Although the repeated fresh asylum claims helped secure accommodation for him, it took time to prepare them each time, and there were still times when Sanwar faced eviction. Here, in a dark twist, his deteriorating mental health served as evidence to oppose eviction. In 2017, a mental health practitioner wrote a medical declaration detailing dissociative episodes, disorientation, a loss of appetite, insomnia, panic attacks, a 'marked lack of protective factors against suicide' and a recent attempt at self-harm. Without a pending fresh asylum claim, the threshold for section 4 support on medical grounds is extremely high, requiring

confirmation that the asylum seeker's health is too bad to travel to their country of origin. Understanding this legal requirement, Sanwar's doctor crafted the evidence appropriately: suffering panic attacks in confined spaces, he was unfit to fly. Even so, the Home Office stopped his support. But, Sanwar again won the appeal: 'Luckily,' he laughed, 'my medication was really high then, so I kept my section 4.' Despite representing insufficient evidence for leave to remain, mental ill-health, packaged up appropriately as evidence, was enough to keep him off the streets.

SANWAR'S INNER WORLD

As should be clear, multiple aspects of the asylum process proved traumatising. Sanwar told me how being taken to detention in a blacked-out minibus triggered memories of a horrific bus accident he had witnessed as a child. He became claustrophobic. Even after release from detention, seeing a bus left him afraid of deportation. By 2017, the repeated refusals and ongoing fear of homelessness, detention, and deportation had led him to a crisis point. He would awake in a sweat, suffering flashbacks and the sensation of being dragged to the airport. Eventually, he was committed to hospital after attempting suicide.

These traumatic effects offer insight into the abusive violence Sanwar faced within the asylum system. Beyond the sheer precariousness of his situation, two aspects of the process replayed the abuse he faced as a child, amplifying the developmental trauma he carried with him. First, there was the disbelief, which always referred back to the First-Tier Tribunal judge's findings about his credibility. If he read the refusal letters, Sanwar said, he would end up hospitalised with an overdose. If a healthy relationship to traumatic memories depends upon voicing them and receiving social validation (Kirmayer 1996), the bureaucratic refusal to recognise the traumatic memories Sanwar voiced evidently compounded the shame and repression he experienced. Some people, Sanwar emphasised, *can* read the letters. For him, however, 'I feel like I'm something criminal, I'm lying.' This, after all, had been established in the First-Tier Tribunal judge's demolition of his credibility, reiterated in all of the subsequent refusal letters. While he knew this punishment was false, on another level it was all too real because it structured his reality as a 'failed asylum seeker'. In the language of abuse, he was being gaslit, forced to inhabit a manipulated reality. As he told me, 'It would be ok if it was the trust. But when they're lying, and they're saying you're lying, then there's no hope.' His experience of the state resonated painfully with his premigration history of abuse, of being criminalised for who he was. As in his childhood, without trust in the shared parameters of reality, he was left hopeless.

Second, without further evidence to reopen the case about his persecution in Bangladesh, he felt pressured to 'change my story'. Sanwar told me confidently that with sexuality cases, 'the Home Office expect you to be sleeping around'. But, his status as an asylum seeker prevented any intimate relationships. The meagre section 4 support, not provided in cash, made it impossible to pay for dates. Moreover, Jan's sense of betrayal hung heavily over him, as did his own experience of feeling used for someone else's asylum claim. The pressure of the case creates material advantages from activities where sincerity is highly valued. It demands that you do something 'sincerely'—but fulfilling that demand necessarily introduces an 'insincere' motive. As I have explored elsewhere, similar

dilemmas face religious converts who must perform and document the sincerity of their beliefs (Wheeler 2021).

Sanwar was also advised to behave flamboyantly. Indeed, analyses of sexuality-based asylum claims demonstrate that the gay identity recognisable to the judicial-bureaucratic apparatus is emphatically white and middle class (Bennett and Thomas 2013; Held 2017; dos Ventos Lopes Heimer 2020; cf. Fassin and Salcedo 2015).[10] As Sanwar said, 'But I can't do this, I can't lie, because of my obsessive disorder. If I lie, I can't sleep, I get cranky.' The case placed pressure on him to perform an identity that was anathema to Sanwar. Growing up, facing impossible demands to be 'normal', he had learnt to embody concealment, to perform a masculinity that gave no hint of his sexuality. He had, he said, become a 'prude'. Now, he faced pressure to be 'out and proud'. The Home Office reflected back, in a mirror image, the impossible demands of his childhood. Sanwar could not unlearn his bodily hexis without betraying who he had become. Comparing his experiences from the Home Office and in Bangladesh, he stated, 'Different, but almost feeling the same, like there is nothing whatever I can do… I can't make society happy, or anyone. I'm a failure, something. It doesn't matter how much *truth* I tell (...) but, nobody, like, believes me, or treats me right.' Falsely produced as a liar, he felt that he had no option but to lie. Sanwar did not lie. But, the pressure to do so weighed heavily upon him. His encounter with the abusive state repeated and amplified past traumas.

In Beneduce's (2015: 562) analysis of the moral economy of lying among asylum seekers, 'a space where truth and falsehood become de facto indiscernible', he cites Frantz Fanon and Raymond Lacaton's (2018) explanation of Algerians' refusal to confess to crimes in colonial courts. Fanon and Lacaton (2018) argued that a confession, as the price for reintegration, would imply compliance with the social contract, an acceptance of the imposed hierarchies of truth and falsehood, of right and wrong. Sanwar's remark about the absence of trust, and his refusal to 'change his story', similarly highlights the intolerability of complying with a social contract that established a reality at odds with his own inner experience.

RECOVERY

Against the odds, Sanwar pulled through and found a way out. Some of the psychological damage, exacerbated by the asylum process, gradually healed—and this healing in turn helped him eventually win his case. Therapy played a major role in his recovery. Although he was aware of the PTSD diagnosis in the medico-legal report, for years he rejected therapy. However, hospitalised following a suicide attempt in 2017, he was forced to talk about his past, and gradually began to feel a 'little bit lighter'. In opposition, perhaps even resistance, to the asylum process that was turning Sanwar into a liar, therapy provided a space where his past experiences *were* granted recognition, giving Sanwar the chance to actively remake socially endorsed meanings.

However, the process of recovery, or 'retethering' (Lester 2013), went beyond therapy. Amidst widening social networks, he was becoming increasingly open about his sexuality. While the LGBT support group was evidently deeply important, what he talked about most with me was the context where we'd met: volunteering, which he began soon after arriving in Manchester. Amongst other roles, he spent several years at a homeless charity, working predominantly with British homeless. He described teaching managers about software, helping with accounting, applying for benefits

and housing. 'I start my job at 8.30, and some days I never see the sun, I go out in the evening! When my manager was off for two weeks, I handle everything, my god, I'm doing my job and her job!' Here, too, he developed a deep friendship with one of the staff, who would act as a witness in his final asylum claim. For Sanwar, volunteering resembled an 'inhabitable space of welcome' (Willen 2019): a space where he could not just survive but flourish, recover his dignity. It was a space where he could 'retether' himself or, in Sarah Willen's (2019: 15) words, 'ground [himself] by cultivating relations of care'. After a life of being criminalised for existing, it was, he said, the 'real human beings' he encountered in the charity that 'gave me hope that we are here for each other'. Overcoming the developmental trauma he had grown up with, he was at last finding himself able to trust others—and find validation, and credibility, as a human being.

In June 2019, Sanwar made yet another fresh claim. His lawyer urged restraint, but Sanwar decided to give everything he had. 'Living on £35,' he told me, 'on someone else's money, I want to do something for myself… so I didn't listen to my lawyer.' In addition to the long statement described above, he included eight witness statements from British friends who could testify about his sexuality, including from the LGBT support group, and a letter from a long-term doctor. When Sanwar was granted asylum just a couple of months later, the Home Office, as usual, did not explain their decision, but the statements from witnesses willing to testify in court evidently played a pivotal role. Indeed, within the racialised atmosphere of mistrust, having *British* witnesses who obviously trusted him was likely key to re-establishing his 'credibility' in the eyes of the Home Office.

SUICIDALITY AND ASYLUM

In short, that Sanwar pulled through after multiple suicide attempts, that he came to terms with his past sufficiently to write that 11-page story, speaks of something gone right, of the multiple sites of care and maintenance that kept his lifeworld liveable. But, the linear narratives of recovery that Sanwar, in cheerful moods, presented to me, elided the moments when things did not hold, when the narrative might have taken another turn. In this final section, I want to linger on those moments, when there was no inhabitable space of welcome, when life became unliveable, and when, in 2017, he again attempted to kill himself. In doing so, I am prompted by a gloomy conversation some months after Sanwar received his status, when he was facing eviction from his asylum accommodation and was again uncertain about his housing. He told me two stories about former housemates. One, who had been stuck in the system for 16 years, was an alcoholic. He disappeared one day. Two weeks later, he was found dead in his room. The second was a young man, a Christian convert, good-looking, but, according to Sanwar, devoid of hope. When he did not answer his door, Sanwar called the housing officer. But, it was a weekend and Sanwar's call was not treated as an emergency. Two days later, the housing officer came to find that the housemate had killed himself. Sanwar closed this story by remarking that suicide rates among asylum seekers were the highest in British society.

As I look back on that conversation, it feels as though Sanwar was asking me to take these narratives of suicide as revealing some inner truth about the asylum system. To linger on these darkest moments is not to downplay his story of recovery, his extraordinary resilience. Nevertheless, I am troubled by how the

existing literature on asylum often glides over suicidality. For example, Fiona Cuthill (2017) presents a rich and nuanced exploration of sources of resilience among asylum seekers. Her informants describe *others* who, not managing to stay strong, killed themselves. Those stories act as a foil for Cuthill's own informants' narratives of recovery. Cuthill remains silent about those others, and we are left with an implicit sense that if you are not resilient, you have somehow failed.

Of course, if suicidality has not always been taken seriously in the literature, this relates to the epistemological and ethical issues around researching it. As Freedom from Torture doctor Juliet Cohen (2008) highlighted 15 years ago, because coroners' reports do not include ethnicity, let alone immigration status, data remain lacking. We might critique how statistical data produce sociological facts. But here there are no data, no facts—and no issue. Further difficulties arise in exploring the inner world of the suicidé. I did not know Sanwar when he was suicidal nor have I observed his medical encounters. In our conversations, I have shied away from asking directly about his suicide attempts. When the conversation approached them, he steered away from the issue or closed it down. 'I lost control', he told me once. In this narrative interaction, he spoke as a recovered subject, formed in part through the medicalised discourses of recovery, reconstructing a past self who had failed, not dissimilar to Cuthill's informants' talk of 'others' who could not cope.

How, then, to respond to Sanwar's call to take suicide seriously? And how to avoid reducing the suicidal asylum seeker again to the victim of Home Office violence? How to tread the fine line between taking suicidality as 'diagnostic' of societal ills and structural violence, and acknowledging the complex emergence of 'suicidal subjectivities' that cannot be reduced to the workings of power (Münster and Broz 2015)?

Annika Lems (2019) explores the suicidal talk of three Eritrean teenagers in Switzerland. The young men had not been granted asylum. Even so, they were cared for in a well-provisioned educational institution, and the social workers and psychologists working with them were shocked at their talk of suicide, and sought explanations in their traumatic journeys to Europe. By contrast, Lems (2019) focuses on the existential boredom they faced in limbo in Switzerland, their foreclosed futures and stasis. She approaches their suicidal talk as commentary, or meaning-making, that itself helped them reassert agency, and thus move forward.

Lems's (2019) account is a persuasive corrective to the pathologising approach of the psychologists. And, yet, I am troubled, not least by the unsettling resonance with another story, in the UK, widely reported in the media, of four Eritrean teenagers, close friends, who, one after another, killed themselves (Taylor 2019a). Admittedly, even the limited findings of the inquests into those deaths revealed, compounding their precarious immigration status, catastrophic failures of care from social services and the National Health Service (Gentleman 2022; Taylor 2019b; 2021). This was not the case with Lems's (2019) interlocutors. Nevertheless, given the fine line between suicidal ideation and suicide attempts, I would query Lems's (2019) avoidance of the language of trauma. For Lems (2019), the psychologists' focus on the young men's traumatic journeys *to* Europe occluded the violence they faced *in* Europe. However, if trauma reverberates across time and space, how might it be amplified by the violence of European asylum regimes?

In Bangladesh and in the UK, Sanwar was punished just for being there. He faced

moments where he had no choice, or highly restricted choices, and where death seemed the only way out. As we have seen, both his father and the Home Office placed impossible demands that chiselled away at his hope. With the future closed off, Sanwar was consumed by a fear of deportation. This was a process more violent than the term 'existential stasis' would imply, bodily manifested in panic attacks, choking sensations, sweating, and insomnia. It was in this context that he emerged as a suicidal subject. Sanwar's suicidality was intensely diagnostic of the structures of power within which he was interpellated.

Yet, at the same time, I leave open the possibility that his suicide attempts were also an active bid for freedom. Recall the very first suicide attempt, when, faced with the beating from his father, Sanwar declared, 'if I die, everything will go away.' Like his father, the Home Office made it abundantly clear that his presence was not welcome—but perhaps both figures also at some level needed him. Rather than abandoning him, they needed to punish him, through unfulfillable demands, impossible choices. Might Sanwar's suicide attempts, profoundly decisive actions, paradoxically be thought of as a negation of the constricted possibilities for agency that were open to him?

Lems proposes that her informants' suicidal talk was a means of asserting agency in a world they had been 'thrown' into, a world that, in Heidegger's terms, 'is not of their making' (Lems 2019: 62). This is the tension that lies at the heart of existentialist thought. However, for Sanwar, it was not just that the world he was thrown into was 'not of his making': it was a false, distorted world, ruptured from and rupturing his inner world. Even were he to exert control over the world he was thrown into—say, by performing a flamboyant gay identity—this very assertion of agency might imply compliance with the intolerable social contract that established this warped reality. In such a context, might that third option, negation, be read as a bid for radical freedom—freedom as 'the limits of power' (Jaworski 2015)?

CONCLUSIONS

In *Against Paranoid Nationalism*, Ghassan Hage (2003) explores the twin imaginaries of nation-state as motherland and fatherland. The maternal, nurturing space of belonging is maintained, Hage argues, through the fatherly authority of border management. When the nurturing functions of the state that foster societal hope are in decline, there is an increasing turn to the defensive functions of order and security. Anxiety about the failure of the state to care for 'our own' is displaced onto anyone deemed as not belonging. This framework helps us understand how Sanwar's experiences of the Home Office might so painfully echo his experiences of his father. When he turned to the British state hoping for protection, he faced abuse, crushing his hopes. Echoing his relationship with his father, he was left with the sense that he should not exist.

Of course, the texture of Sanwar's traumatic experiences depended on the previous traumas he carried with him. For others, with different life histories, the violence may resonate differently, amplifying different past traumas. Yet, Sanwar's experiences throw into sharp relief the contours of this violence. The notion of the abusive state builds on Darling's (2022) idea of 'distributed violence'—a violence that is slow, attritional, exhausting; a violence that is dispersed across the Home Office and its subcontractors, where it is all but impossible to ascribe accountability. The violence Sanwar experienced was dispersed across different branches of the Home Office, private housing

providers, immigration courts, and so on. What the framework of abuse adds is that this distributed violence can *also* be experienced as intimate, as intensely personal.

Two dimensions of the abusive state emerge in Sanwar's story: coercive control and gaslighting. As El-Enany (2020) argues, immigration law is violent not only because it excludes, but also because it offers the tantalising possibility of recognition. Trapping people in complex, opaque processes, immigration law thus coercively shapes subjectivities, 'what people desire, consider themselves as entitled to and understand themselves to be' (El-Enany 2020: 28). It is not just that hope is withheld: it is offered, within set parameters, and *then* crushed. Emphasising the relationship between the asylum claim and access to Home Office support draws out still further how immigration law coercively controls its subjects. Until his final asylum claim, Sanwar was trapped into submitting weak asylum claims to ensure he maintained access to his accommodation and support. He was fortunate that his lawyer ensured that these claims remained consistent with his story; for others, rushed fresh asylum claims—although necessary for escaping or avoiding destitution—can damage the long-term prospects of gaining asylum. The capricious authority of the law exerts coercive control not only over actions, movements, and finances, but also over hopes, desires, and dreams.

Meanwhile, as a 'failed asylum seeker', Sanwar was gaslit, made to take on the responsibility for his own failure. He had no trust in the authority of the law that produced him as a 'failed asylum seeker'—but it had devastating real-world consequences. In this distorted reality, his truths became falsehoods that excluded him not only from refugee status, but from the most basic means of subsistence. The sense of hopelessness that drove him to attempt suicide lay both in the exclusionary power of the state, and in failures that he internalised and came to own.

For all the specificity of the politics of asylum, these insights have broader relevance. The capacity of bureaucracies for traumatising violence is not restricted to the asylum system. We could trace cognate cases of manipulated reality in the way austerity-driven welfare regimes produce benefits claimants as scroungers. More fundamentally, any institution that holds a duty of care—from hospitals to families to universities—also holds the capacity for abuse.

Before closing, I return to my very personal reasons for writing this article. I am prompted by the unsettling sense that the friend we lost fitted the demographic that the abusive politics of asylum is performed for—elderly, white, working class. He himself, I should state clearly, had no truck with that politics, those so-called 'legitimate concerns about immigration'. But he did have plenty of legitimate concerns regarding institutional failures of care. As the politics of asylum takes ever-darker turns, I am anguished by how the politics we are living through seek to displace such intimate concerns towards fear, resentment, and hostility. Since the onset of austerity measures in 2010, it has increasingly felt that the UK is at a breaking point, with the nurturing functions of the state in terminal decline. If care is about 'everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible' (Fisher and Tronto 1990: 40), we are evidently living through multiple systemic failures of care—and my friend's suicide speaks, in no small part, to that. But those failures, that breakdown, plays out in the miserable intimacy of a private lifeworld that has become unliveable. They do not easily translate into public anger. Instead, those failures are buried under, and any latent energy from them is channelled into, the

performance of a much more spectacular failure—the failure of 'our' borders to keep 'us' whole and bounded. That spectacular failure of the border does mobilise; it is intensely public. This is what sustains the abusive politics that greet Sanwar and others like him, that seems designed to strip them of hope, and turn them into the ultimate failure, the failed asylum seeker.

The emergence of suicidal subjects within this abusive politics is no accident. Yet, amidst the moral outrage and activism around asylum, suicide remains a marginal issue. With any suicide, knowledge is partial. Knowledge is even more partial regarding suicides that occur within the isolation of the asylum system—which is why, perhaps, they fail to make waves. What would it mean to consider these deaths by suicide in the loneliness of asylum accommodation alongside those drowned at sea, suffocated in container lorries, or dying of thirst in the desert?

Putting suicide at the centre of the politics of asylum means going beyond criticising the hypocritical failure of the British state—or any other state in the global North—to afford protection from violence elsewhere, including in its former colonies. Rather than, or in addition to, the traumatic after-effects of past violence elsewhere, suicides in the asylum system offer a damning indictment of the violence *here,* which, repeating and amplifying past traumas, can render lives unbearable. As indictment, suicides within the asylum system may be read as political acts. As decisive actions that reject the impossibly constricted parameters of agency imposed on these subjects, they might—perhaps—be read as bids for radical freedom, a final wresting back of control from the coercively controlling state. Any such reading, however, must remain provisional, open, and speculative. After all, there is a tension between freedom from the effects of power and freedom from representation (Jaworski 2015). For persons who in life were labelled as 'bogus' or 'failed'—or alternatively as 'vulnerable' or 'victim'—after death the question of freedom from representation becomes still more pressing.

I, therefore, close with the triad of emotions that Sanwar faced when three close friends killed themselves: heartbreak, guilt, and anger. The same emotions swirl in me as I reflect on what Sanwar imparted to me about the suicides contemplated, attempted or completed within the asylum system. First, there is the grief, at the lives lost, and at all that was lost while they were living—the loss of hope and aspiration within the unbearably constricted lifeworld from which suicidal subjects in the asylum system seek to escape. It is grief at the loss of the persons not allowed to be. Second, the guilt. The silences around these suicides speak of lives deemed not worth grieving (Butler 2004)—silenced by the double stigma of asylum seeker and suicidé. If I feel guilt, then, this guilt is not only at our complicity in this bordered world that violently sifts human bodies, but also at our failure to mourn these lives and to truly recognise what is lost within them. Finally, there is the anger—anger at the lost lives, at the petty cruelties and needless misery, at the cynical divide and rule that channels the pain of some into the abuse of others; anger at the constrictions on lifeworlds so intense that freedom is sought in death.

To this triad, we might add hope—given that Sanwar, against everything, found, in himself and in the networks he developed, the strength to pull through, to recover, and to escape the abusive power relations in which he was caught. Dwelling on such emotions might help mobilise imaginaries of how asylum might be different—both through radical change for the future and through creating spaces of welcome within, and of sanctuary from, the violence of the here and now.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I extend my heartfelt thanks in the first instance to Sanwar, for entrusting me with this material and sharing the depths of his experiences and insights. I would also like to thank all my other research participants who, though not mentioned here, have shared experiences that inform the writing here.

The research this paper is based on was conducted as part of a Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship. The paper was first presented as a seminar paper in the Social Anthropology Department at the University of Manchester. My thanks to everyone who participated in that seminar for their thoughtful and stimulating comments, and subsequent readers of the paper. Particular thanks go to Séb Bachelet, Jonathan Darling, Hannah Skoda and Madeleine Reeves. I would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers.

WILLIAM WHEELER
PH.D.
INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR
wahwheeler@gmail.com

NOTES

1 Sanwar's name and key dates in his story have been changed to protect his anonymity.

2 While the standard of proof is, in theory, lower than in criminal or civil proceedings, the burden of proof lies on the asylum claimant.

3 By contrast, Western PTSD-dominated models of trauma have been critiqued for depoliticising violence, reducing all survivors to victims (Fassin 2012; Fassin and Rechtman 2009).

4 My thanks to Jonathan Darling for pointing out this connection to me.

5 Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants, etc) Act 2004, section 8.

6 See JL (medical reports—credibility) China vs SSHD 2013 UKUT 00145 (IAC).

7 A report by Freedom from Torture (2011), one of the two leading charities producing MLRs, highlights the arbitrariness of outcomes. More recently, a Sri Lankan survivor of torture had his appeal dismissed by the FTT, UT, and Court of Appeal, on the basis that the MLR had failed to consider the possibility the torture was self-inflicted by proxy (SIBP). The appeal was only granted by the Supreme Court, on the basis that there is no evidence for SIBP happening in this context, and that the MLR *had* in fact ruled it out (KV (Sri Lanka) v SSHD [2019] UKSC 10).

8 Appeals against FTT decisions cannot address findings of fact, but must be rooted in an error of law, such as ignoring evidence or misapplying legislation. There is no automatic right of appeal against the FTT decision: permission must be sought first from another FTT judge, and, then, if they refuse, from an Upper Tribunal judge.

9 See J vs SSHD [2005] EWCA Civ 629 and Y (Sri Lanka) vs SSHD [2009] EWCA 362. Suicide risk must stem from an objective fear or one with some 'independent basis', *relating to the country of origin*: there is no space to talk about suicidal ideation emerging within the asylum process itself. Recently, case law has evolved slightly in MY (Suicide risk after Paposhvili) Occupied Palestinian Authority [2021] UKUT 232 (IAC), although this would have been unlikely to have helped Sanwar.

10 Dos Ventos Lopes Heimer analyses the seminal case of HJ (Iran) and HT (Cameroon) vs SSHD [2010] UKSC 31, where Lord Rodger declared, 'In short, what is protected is the applicant's right to live freely and openly as a gay man. That involves a wide spectrum of conduct, going well beyond conduct designed to attract sexual partners and maintain relationships with them. To illustrate the point with trivial stereotypical examples from British society: just as male heterosexuals are free to enjoy themselves playing rugby, drinking beer, and talking about girls with their mates, so male homosexuals are to be free to enjoy themselves going to Kylie concerts, drinking exotically coloured cocktails, and talking about boys with their straight female mates.'

REFERENCES

Beneduce, Roberto 2015. The Moral Economy of Lying: Subjectcraft, Narrative Capital, and Uncertainty in the Politics of Asylum. *Medical Anthropology* 34 (6): 551–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/01459740.2015.1074576.

Bennett, Claire and Felicity Thomas 2013. Seeking Asylum in the UK: Lesbian Perspectives. *Forced Migration Review* 42: 25–28.

Butler, Judith 2004. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. Radical Thinkers. London; New York: Verso.

Campbell, John 2017. *Bureaucracy, Law and Dystopia in the United Kingdom's Asylum System. Law and Migration*. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315444802.

Canning, Victoria 2017. *Gendered Harm and Structural Violence in the British Asylum System.* Routledge Studies in Criminal Justice, Borders and Citizenship. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315720975.

Canning, Victoria 2020. Corrosive Control: State-Corporate and Gendered Harm in Bordered Britain. *Critical Criminology* 28 (2): 259–75. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10612-020-09509-1.

Canning, Victoria 2021. Compounding Trauma Through Temporal Harm. In Monish Bhatia and Victoria Canning (eds). *Stealing Time: Migration, Temporalities and State Violence*. Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-69897-3_6.

Cohen, Juliet 2008. Safe in Our Hands?: A Study of Suicide and Self-Harm in Asylum Seekers. *Journal of Forensic and Legal Medicine* 15 (4): 235–44. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jflm.2007.11.001.

Cuthill, Fiona 2017. Repositioning of 'Self': Social Recognition as a Path to Resilience for Destitute Asylum Seekers in the United Kingdom. *Social Theory & Health* 15 (2): 117–37. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41285-016-0025-y.

Darling, Jonathan 2022. *Systems of Suffering: Dispersal and the Denial of Asylum.* London: Pluto Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2k4fx1d.

El-Enany, Nadine 2020. *Bordering Britain: Law, Race and Empire.* Manchester, United Kingdom: Manchester University Press.

Fanon, Frantz 2004 [1961]. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated from the French by Richard Philcox; with Commentary by Jean-Paul Sartre and Homi K. Bhabha. New York: Grove Press.

Fanon, Frantz, and Raymond Lacaton 2018 [1955]. Conducts of Confession in North Africa (1). In Frantz Fanon. *Alienation and Freedom*, edited by Jean Khalfa and Robert Young, translated by Steve Corcoran. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Fassin, Didier 2012. *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present.* Berkeley; London: University of California Press. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520950481.

Fassin, Didier, and Estelle D'Halluin 2005. The Truth from the Body: Medical Certificates as Ultimate Evidence for Asylum Seekers. *American Anthropologist* 107 (4): 597–608. https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2005.107.4.597.

Fassin, Didier, and Estelle d'Halluin 2007. Critical Evidence: The Politics of Trauma in French Asylum Policies. *Ethos* 35 (3): 300–329. https://doi.org/10.1525/eth.2007.35.3.300.

Fassin, Didier, and Richard Rechtman 2009. *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood.* Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Fassin, Eric, and Manuela Salcedo 2015. Becoming Gay? Immigration Policies and the Truth of Sexual Identity. *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 44 (5): 1117–25. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-015-0551-z.

Fisher, Bernice, and Joan C. Tronto 1990. Toward a Feminist Theory of Care. In Emily K. Abel and Margaret K. Nelson (eds). *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women's Lives.* Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Freedom from Torture 2011. Body of Evidence: Treatment of Medico-Legal Reports for Survivors of Torture in the UK Asylum Tribunal. Freedom from Torture: Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture. https://www.freedomfromtorture.org/sites/default/files/2019-08/body-of-evidence.pdf. <Accessed 23 January 2024>

Gentleman, Amelia 2022. Eritrean Teenager Who Killed Himself in UK Lacked Right Support, Inquest Finds. *The Guardian*, 7 January 2022. https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/jan/07/eritrean-teenager-who-killed-himself-in-uk-lacked-right-support-inquest-finds. <Accessed 23 January 2024>

Gill, Nick, and Anthony Good, eds 2019. *Asylum Determination in Europe: Ethnographic Perspectives.* Palgrave Socio-Legal Studies. Cham: Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-94749-5_1.

Good, Anthony 2007. *Anthropology and Expertise in the Asylum Courts.* Abingdon: Routledge Cavendish. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203945346.

Good, Anthony 2015. 'The Benefit of the Doubt' in British Asylum Claims and International Cricket. In Daniela Berti, Anthony Good, and Gilles Tarabout (eds). *Of Doubt and Proof: Ritual and Legal Practices of Judgment*, 119–40. Juris Diversitas. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing.

Hage, Ghassan 2003. *Against Paranoid Nationalism: Searching for Hope in a Shrinking Society.* Annandale, NSW: London: Pluto Press Australia; Merlin.

Held, Nina 2017. 'They Look at You like an Insect That Wants to Be Squashed': An Ethnographic Account of the Racialized Sexual Spaces of Manchester's Gay Village. *Sexualities* 20 (5–6): 535–57. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460716676988.

Jaworski, Katrina 2015. Suicide, Agency and the Limits of Power. In Ludek Broz and Daniel Münster (eds). *Suicide and Agency: Anthropological Perspectives on Self-Destruction, Personhood, and Power*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315611297.

Jones, Reece 2016. *Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move.* London; New York: Verso.

Kelly, Tobias 2011. *This Side of Silence: Human Rights, Torture, and the Recognition of Cruelty.* Pennsylvania Studies in Human Rights. Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt3fj3sz.

Kirmayer, Laurence J. 1996. Landscapes of Memory: Trauma, Narrative, and Dissociation. In Paul Antze and Michael Lambek (eds). *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, 173–98. New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315022222.

Lems, Annika 2019. Existential Kinetics of Movement and Stasis: Young Eritrean Refugees' Thwarted Hopes of Movement-through-Education. *Suomen Antropologi: Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society* 44 (2): 59–80. https://doi.org/10.30676/jfas.v44i2.77715.

Lester, Rebecca 2013. Back from the Edge of Existence: A Critical Anthropology of Trauma. *Transcultural Psychiatry* 50 (5): 753–62. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461513504520.

Marsh, Ian 2013. The Uses of History in the Unmaking of Modern Suicide. *Journal of Social History* 46 (3): 744–56. https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shs130.

Mayblin, Lucy 2019. *Impoverishment and Asylum: Social Policy as Slow Violence*. Routledge Advances in Sociology. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367823450.

McKenzie, Katherine C. 2019. Loud, Gray, and Arbitrary—The Compounding Trauma of Detention for Asylum Seekers. *New England Journal of Medicine* 380 (9): 807–9. https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMp1816400.

Missing Migrants Project 2022. Who We Are. Missing Migrants Project. https://missingmigrants.iom.int/who-we-are. <Accessed 23 January 2024>

Münster, Daniel, and Ludek Broz 2015. The Anthropology of Suicide: Ethnography and the Tension of Agency. In Ludek Broz and Daniel Münster (eds). *Suicide and Agency: Anthropological Perspectives on Self-Destruction, Personhood, and Power*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315611297-1

Stolorow, Robert D. 2011. *World, Affectivity, Trauma: Heidegger and Post-Cartesian Psychoanalysis.* Psychoanalytic Inquiry Book Series. New York; Hove: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.5840/heideggercircle20114510

Taylor, Diane 2019a. Teenage Refugee Was Fourth of Friendship Group to Kill Himself. *The Guardian*, 17 September 2019. https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/sep/17/teenage-refugee-was-fourth-of-friendship-group-to-kill-himself. <Accessed 23 January 2024>

Taylor, Diane 2019b. Eritrean Refugee, 19, Killed Himself as He 'Feared He Would Be Sent Back'. *The Guardian*, 8 November 2019. https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/nov/08/eritrean-refugee-19-who-killed-himself-feared-he-would-be-sent-back. <Accessed 23 January 2024>

Taylor, Diane 2021. Teenage Refugee Killed Himself in UK after Mental Health Care Failings. *The Guardian*, 7 April 2021. https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/apr/07/teenage-refugee-killed-himself-uk-mental-health-care-failings. <Accessed 23 January 2024>

Ventos Lopes Heimer, Rosa dos 2020. Homonationalist/Orientalist Negotiations: The UK Approach to Queer Asylum Claims. *Sexuality & Culture* 24 (1): 174–96. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-019-09633-3.

Wheeler, William 2021. Conversion Through Destitution: Religion, Law, and Doubt in the UK Asylum System. In Birgit Meyer and Peter van der Veer (eds). *Refugees and Religion: Ethnographic Studies of Global Trajectories*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350167162.

Willen, Sarah S. 2019. *Fighting for Dignity: Migrant Lives at Israel's Margins*. Series in Contemporary Ethnography. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Phil Wilcox

(NOT) ON YOUR BIKE: HOW URBAN LAOS DOESN'T MOVE

ABSTRACT

Laos is a country of seven million people in Southeast Asia, with its largest urban centre having a population of just under one million people. At a time of rising inflation and growing awareness of climate change, this article investigates how urban residents travel, why people do and do not cycle in urban Laos, and how cycling is promoted and crucially, by whom. Drawing on interviews, survey data, and other participant observation, this paper notes that the number of bikes in Laos is increasing, and cycling for fitness is becoming more widespread, which can be linked to aspiration and conspicuous consumption, but that promotion of cycling is driven largely by outsiders as part of broader attempts to develop Laos according to their own agendas. This is demonstrated by a European Union campaign which encouraged people to commute by bike, which was largely unsuccessful in Laos.

Keywords: *cycling, Laos, mobilities, development, infrastructure, commuting*

INTRODUCTION

On 16 June 2022, the European Union in Laos began a campaign promoting healthy, active travel which promises benefits to both people and the environment. The #BikeLikeABoss campaign encouraged participants to share photos of themselves cycling to work and to encourage friends and co-workers to do the same.[1] People participating in the campaign were urged to commute by bike, and in their work clothing with the EU Ambassador to Laos reminding participants of the importance of wearing a safety helmet whilst cycling via a post on Facebook. The campaign was promoted by influencers, members of foreign embassies, and international organisations. It was also covered in the Lao press in both Lao and English, promoting the additional benefit that not needing petrol would also mitigate against the ongoing crisis of fuel shortages, high prices, and rising inflation that have marked life in Laos throughout 2022 and beyond, with inflation hitting 40% in February 2023.[2]

I arrived in Laos in July 2022 for fieldwork after an absence of more than three years largely brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. During the time I was stuck in Europe, I had shifted from a person who commutes to work slowly on a bike to become a keen cyclist. Hoping to combine work with leisure, as well as needing a means of transport that did not rely on petrol, I decided to take a bike with me to think through what it means to

Figure 1. Caption: Poster for the #BikeLikeABoss campaign

different people to travel well in contemporary Laos. Arriving in the cultural centre of Luang Prabang, my fieldwork site for another project, I noticed more bikes being ridden around the historic city centre by people in fitness gear than I had ever seen before. With such a rise in bike use, I wondered whether transport habits in Laos were changing and, if so, what drove these changes. How do bikes feature in the imagination of urban movement and for what purpose? In other words, how can we explain the rise in bike use? I also wondered how many urban residents had any interest or even any knowledge of #BikeLikeABoss or any similar ideas about sustainable or green travel and if, in the urban Lao imagination, this has anything to do with how people move.

Scholars have long recognised that particular forms of mobility are interconnected with notions of modernity. As Harvey (2018) notes, the promise of mobility is potent, not only in terms of the physical object on or through which one moves, but because of the potential that it represents (see also Anand, Gupta and

Appel 2018; Hirsh and Mostowlansky 2022). In Laos specifically, High (2013, 2014) has noted a potent connection between consumption practices and notions of being a modern citizen.

But, whose version of modernity, and what does that look like in terms of mobility? This article considers why some forms of mobility in urban Laos are attractive and utilised over and above others, and what influences these. My central argument here is that campaigns to change how urban transport is done are largely driven by outsiders promoting their own visions of what movement in Laos should look like, and that this almost, if unconscious, imperialist logic has a mixed reception amongst the local population. I begin with providing the context to mobility in urban Laos and then present contextual data on how people actually move. I argue here that cycling in urban Laos is a desirable and desired mode of movement, but not in all situations. To do this for fitness or leisure is fine and connects with internationalist agendas promoting sustainability and awareness of climate change, but to do it out of economic necessity remains stigmatised, which links to social class and internationalist notions of class. Such an understanding demonstrates a link between cycling for fitness to notions of entrepreneurism or a neoliberal logic of bodily discipline and improvement, again a connection between movement and modernity, and the role of outsiders in promoting their specific agendas.

This article is based on fieldwork conducted in Northern Laos in 2019 and more recently for two months in July and August 2022. Both of these periods of fieldwork focused on larger projects, but throughout both of them and my earlier PhD fieldwork in 2015–2016, I had owned and utilised a bike to get around. In 2022, I decided to focus on this specifically and combined interviews with around ten individuals (both cyclists and non-cyclists) aged between 18 and 40, survey responses from five participants who identified as cyclists (some of whom were also interviewed), four surveys of traffic movements in Luang Prabang and Vientiane, and participant observation with local cyclists based in Luang Prabang.[3]

LAOS: FOR THE MOTORBIKE, NOT THE CAR

Laos, defined by the United Nations as a least developed country in 1971, is a largely rural society with much of its population dependent upon subsistence rice farming. Its population of almost seven million people live primarily along the river valleys, which cut through otherwise mountainous terrain. Laos was a colony of France, a colonisation that lasted just over five decades until 1953, leaving behind minimal infrastructure and very few roads outside major cities and roads connecting those same cities.

Unsurprisingly, the main cities are also located in the lowland valley areas. Vientiane, the nation's capital, is home to just under one million people and constitutes by far the largest urban area. From Vientiane, crossing into Thailand is straightforward by private motor vehicle or bus; until the opening of the high-speed Laos–China Railway in December 2021, Vientiane was also the only place in Laos with a train station, from which approximately 5 km of railway connected Laos to Nong Khai in Northeast Thailand operated by the State Railway of Thailand. Vientiane has a public bus network, and elsewhere the public transport connections are made by private shared minibuses or trucks with benches in the back known as *songthaew*. Even in Vientiane, associates commented that they do not use the buses because of the unreliability of the service, or the lack of comfort, ease of mobility of people and stuff, and personal safety.

This is not to say that public transport has never been a feature of public policy. Further north, the cultural centre of Luang Prabang has had seemingly endless debates about how to transport large numbers of visitors around and in and out of its historic centre. Luang Prabang is a city of approximately 50 000 people and is the premier tourist destination of the country with just over 860 000 visitors in 2019 before borders largely closed due to COVID-19 (Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism 2019). Luang Prabang was recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1995, and concerns were increasingly raised about large petrol-powered vehicles within the heritage space. One solution was an E-tuk-tuk scheme, a feature of urban life during an earlier period of my research. These were intended to travel frequently along regular routes, for which customers could buy a ticket. But, when I returned to Luang Prabang in 2022, the scheme had been abandoned. I did, however, notice signs for a bus to the train station. When I asked about this, I was told that it was unreliable and better to go by motorbike to avoid any risk of missing the train. When I called the contact telephone number, I was told that the bus was not running that day. It was entirely possible to buy a ticket for a shuttle minibus service going from train to town, but the other way around was seemingly impossible. This led a Lao interlocutor to comment that Luang Prabang, and Laos generally, is a place for motorbikes because they are quick, convenient, and relatively cheap. This is important because a private car is financially out of reach for much of the population, which survives on just a few dollars a day (Alston 2019). But, even if buying a vehicle is not possible for many, amongst my interlocutors many identified doing so as a future aspiration.

How people, and goods, get around cities is, therefore, an important and growing question, especially in the absence of a public bus network outside Vientiane. Motorcycles and motorcycle taxis are commonplace in Lao cities, as are shared or private tuk-tuk or *songthaew*. There is now an app to hire taxis on demand, which also features moto-taxis in some cities, although coverage is limited to the larger urban areas.[4] App-based services are not only limited to moving people. A food delivery service, Food Panda, is popular throughout Lao cities and promises quick delivery from a variety of urban eateries.[5] In the two months during which I lived in Luang Prabang in 2022, I used Food Panda frequently. Every single time, my food was delivered via a motorcycle courier, and I would see riders often hanging around the city centre waiting for orders. There is no concept here of cycling as work or as an integral tool for work, as seen elsewhere (Murthy and Sur 2022).

COUNTING VEHICLES IN LAO CITIES

Returning to Laos after several years away, I was keen to test and retest my assumptions on how urban Laos is moving, especially at a time of climate change, post-pandemic recovery, and especially for journeys in an urban environment.[6] I had long been the target of teasing by bemused Lao friends about why I preferred to cycle around Luang Prabang city, when even as a PhD student, surely, I could have afforded a motorbike. To me, the logical way to proceed was to count traffic, quite literally. Accordingly, I chose a main road leading to a major intersection in the centre of Luang Prabang and counted vehicles heading towards and away from the junction. I repeated this twice at the same time of day on two weekday mornings, noting that the second time, weather conditions were very wet. I also did this once in the afternoon. Finally, I also repeated this observation in central Vientiane on one occasion, a Saturday morning.[7]

	Luang Prabang 21 July 2022, 7:15–7:45	Luang Prabang 05 August 2022, 7:15–7:45	Luang Prabang 10 August 2022, 14:30–15:00	Vientiane 20 August 22, 10:30–11:00
Motorbikes	**394**	**209**	**302**	**316**
Cars and trucks	**47**	**55**	**91**	**428**
Tuk-tuks	38	31	28	15
Minivans	35	20	15	15
Bikes	11	4	7	0

Table 1. Results of traffic survey in Luang Prabang and Vientiane in July and August 2022

Even with this very limited amount of data, it is clear that a large number of urban movements still rely on motorcycle in Luang Prabang. Some motorcycles were likely E-scooters, but I am confident that these are relatively small in number. I photographed the motorbikes in a parking lot (see Figure 2) and very few appear to be electrically powered.[8] For motorbikes, this is particularly interesting at a time when the purchase of a basic motorbike has almost trebled in price in the last two years. Interestingly, my numbers from Vientiane show much higher use of car traffic, which may indicate that Vientiane is a more car-friendly city centre or more materially affluent or both, and a far more comprehensive study on movements and

Figure 2. Caption: Parking at the Luang Prabang Night Market in August 2022 (photo by the author)

motivations for modes of transport is long overdue. What is clear is that, when we combine motorcycle and car use, we can see that petrol-powered transport remains the norm. Given that these observations took place in the heart of two urban centres, I suggest that this also demonstrates that one's own, primarily petrol-powered transport, remains prominent and the success of campaigns for more active transport or public transport schemes remains limited.

(NOT) MOVING BY BIKE

Of course, the bike is not new to Laos. Talking to older people who recall the period before the birth of the contemporary Lao state in 1975, I heard about basic bikes being used for the everyday transport of people and goods, including the transport of essential supplies during the Lao Civil War (1959–1975). One interlocutor, now in her late seventies, told me that one of the most spectacular road accidents she had ever seen occurred in the centre of Vientiane and involved a large number of bicycles and an even larger number of people. Here, the road functioned as a place of encounter where people who would not normally encounter each other do so. Then as now, this is not a place of equal encounter where, as Yazıcı (2013) notes, hierarchies of traffic are prevalent, and smaller road users are vulnerable to larger vehicles or those not obeying the traffic laws, identified as a common problem in Laos amongst all road users. Nevertheless, for shorter journeys, especially those made by young people, the bike is a visible feature of urban and rural Laos. In a more recent publication, Sengvandy (2019), writing about his childhood in a remote mountainous area in the 1990s, recalls that access to a bicycle for the first time in his life was a seismic moment in his childhood, and transformed mobility for him and his family, allowing them to go places more quickly than had ever been possible on foot. After teaching himself to ride a bike along the streets of his village, he continued to cycle during essential trips for many years.

This picture of cycling as a necessity especially for younger people is still replicated in many areas of Laos. Outside various youth projects in Luang Prabang when classes or activities were taking place, I would often see lines of parked single-speed bikes. But, this did not explain who I could see cycling around the centre of Luang Prabang, usually in the early morning and evening. To learn more, I took to the road and cycled after the bikes I would see passing by, typically ridden by people in Lycra under the age of about forty. These cyclists were welcoming to me, another Lycra-clad cyclist, and told me that, for them, this was mostly about physical exercise. They suggested that a reason for the upsurge in people cycling for fitness related to people seeking new forms of exercise, especially after heavy restrictions on the freedom of movement during COVID-19.

When I talked about cycling more generally in Laos with Lao friends, my interlocutors told me repeatedly and firmly that in general, going places by bike is done for fitness, or for short journeys such as to the markets by older people or, most likely, children cycling to school. They were keen to stress that in the case of going to school, to do this as a teenager, especially on a basic bike, is an expression of poverty and should be avoided if at all possible. Otherwise, 'people will think you are poor'. To go to school by bike or on the back of a friend's bike because no other option is available is not a good look for many Lao. Along a similar vein, many Lao friends found it difficult to believe that I own neither a motorbike nor a car and prefer to go by bike whenever possible.

I began a conversation with one young interlocutor by asking, 'What do *you* think is the best way to travel in Laos?' He responded with no hesitation that, in his opinion, by plane, train, and car, and in that order. When I asked why, he told me that these methods are convenient, fast, and, in the case of the train, something new for him. He then asked me what I was doing later that day, and when I said that I planned to visit a village around 10 km away by bike, he wasted no time in questioning why I considered this a good way to travel: 'But *why*? It is so *slow*.' When I asked what he thought about groups of visitors to Luang Prabang hiring bikes and cycling around the city, he said that these people are different; they are just visiting and are not local. Bike hire for tourists is common within the historic centre, even though a lack of bikes with gears makes it difficult to travel very far or fast. For many visitors, moving slowly and appreciating traditional culture are major parts of the appeal of a visit to Luang Prabang generally, even if this is not always shared, or understood, by residents (Berliner 2012; Wilcox 2020).

Travelling slowly was something positive in the opinions of the members of a local cycling club. Its founder had returned to Luang Prabang from studying overseas, during which time he had experienced cycling for leisure and was keen to share this with friends upon his return. I had met this young person on a previous visit to Laos and had started following him on a fitness app. I noticed that he and others (all male and under the age of thirty) would cycle after work and at weekends over distances of mostly under 50 km. Once in Laos, I joined them for an evening ride, taking along the bike I had brought with me, which led to a long discussion about wish lists for future bikes and who looks cool on what sort of pedal-powered machine. As we left Luang Prabang behind us, I asked them about their experiences of cycling in Laos. All were clear that, when they cycle, they are often assumed to be foreign. 'People shout "hello" at us when we are cycling.

Figure 3. Caption: Author on an evening ride with local cyclists. Photograph by Her Vang and reproduced with permission.

They speak to us in English. They are surprised when they realise that we are also Lao, just like them.' This was my experience too, although, because I am so obviously foreign, it was not a big surprise to me when people greeted me with 'hello' or '*falang*', the Lao term for white foreigner. One local cyclist shared with me that cycling had allowed him to see places in new ways because, when one travels slowly, one has more time to appreciate the scenery in a way that is not possible when travelling at speed.[9]

This interlocutor talked at length about cycling and being a cyclist as part of his identity. He bemoaned that, one evening, he had not had enough time to change into what he termed his 'cycling uniform' before joining us on a group ride. Cycling as a marker of difference and a reflection of consumption choices is something I came across elsewhere as well. When I cycled 8 km out of the city to a Lao dentist, the receptionist offered to take care of my bike inside the surgery while I was having my teeth checked, explaining that he is also a cyclist and, therefore, understood the importance of bike security, but also enjoyed looking at a bike he had not seen before. At the end of the appointment, he asked if he could take a photo of my bike to show other cyclists with whom he had started to cycle during the evenings after the lockdown ended. 'They will be so jealous. They will think that it is my bike and ask me where I got it'.

Figure 4. Caption: The author's bike in Laos (photo by the author).

When I asked cyclists about from where they got their bikes, they explained that the cyclist who had returned from abroad had brought several with him via Thailand, while others were bought or received from foreigners who had left or borrowed and then shared between them. When I offered to leave behind some cycling accessories and a kit I had brought with me including a pair of functional basic sports pedals, these were very gratefully received. I was told they would be distributed amongst people keen to start cycling or bikes in need of spare parts, of which there are many and most spare parts need to be procured from Thailand, or less frequently, Vietnam. I also learned a considerable amount from them about appropriate cycling equipment for Laos. Because evenings are short there, riding after work means cycling in the dark, which they said also works well because the temperatures are cooler. However, this means that a good pair of lights is essential, and recommended I buy a flashing rear light for maximum visibility.[10]

Among all of the Lao cyclists I met, I asked about why they cycled and why they thought other people do not. None were aware of the #BikeLikeABoss campaign, but all described themselves as enjoying cycling. They were keen to encourage others to do so as practices that care for the environment and health. One explained, 'Last year I went cycling across the Lao northern provinces for my last teenage years and one reason for it was also to inspire the young people to be interested in cycling.' In the cycling club, several told me that they are concerned about climate change and regarded cycling as a way to do something good for the planet. It is worth pointing out that all the cyclists I travelled with are male and although they did sometimes talk about women that they knew who are interested in cycling, this is unusual. They mentioned the difficulties of encouraging more women and girls to cycle partly due to questions of safety, but also due to aesthetics, since many women reject ideas of being outside in the sun for long periods if it is not necessary. One cyclist, who described himself as a close friend of the Lao student who had returned from overseas with a bike, was rather surprised when I suggested that another reason for a lack of women's cycling might be access to some women-specific kits, given that it is cut rather differently to reflect differences in the female physique. They also talked of the difficulties around the shortage of quality bikes in Laos, which makes travelling by bike difficult in mountainous terrain, even for short distances.

We see here an enthusiasm for cycling, but not for making daily journeys to school or work, in which case a stigma that one is doing it because one is poor remains prevalent. When I asked why more people did not cycle, most cyclists told me that there is not yet a big enough culture of cycling in Laos and situated this as a more significant barrier to cycling than issues such as safer roads. When friends and associates saw me cycling, some were interested. But, in general, my interlocutors agreed that it is hard to cycle in Laos for functional rather than for fitness purposes, even if it is indeed a good way to save money. The climate is hot and contrary to the exhortations of the #BikeLikeABoss campaign, cycling in one's work clothing is a sure-fire way to arrive at work feeling rather sweaty and uncomfortable. One reaction to the EU campaign encouraging people to cycle to work was, 'Laos is too hot to do that. Imagine if you are a teacher or [have] other careers mingling with people. It is not fun. You will smell bad.' Another individual also dismissed the idea as not useful for Laos, and an idea conceived 'in an air-conditioned room'.

DRIVING (SPECIFIC) CHANGE FROM THE OUTSIDE

What do EU bureaucrats campaigning for cycle commuting and a Lao returnee encouraging his friends to take up cycling have in common? Other than enthusiasm for moving by pedal-powered transport, they are both forces seeking to change Laos based on ideas conceived somewhere else and then exported to Laos, often without much reference to Lao people, their agency, and their aspirations. One could well argue that, of course, green transport is not a bad idea *per se*, but the logic of outsiders promoting assertive agendas in the apparent best interests of someone else is a stark one. When we consider the ideas of others against the backdrop of Laos as a least-developed country and a long-standing recipient of overseas development aid, this is unsurprising. Phraxayavong (2009) noted that aid can constitute a proxy battleground, in which different actors attempt to realise often competing agendas. Regarding mobility specifically, Wollin (2023) notes that to think of how other people move and should move is an act of trying to order other people's mobilities in ways that the recipients of these messages may not share. As with the EU campaign for cycling in Laos, there is often a large gap between strategies for mobility planned in one place and what happens when they are transferred to another. Clearly, the campaign is not for everyone. Only those with a bike, a camera, and a reasonable level of digital literacy would be able to take part anyway. Furthermore, this is before we consider that, by encouraging people to document their cycle commute to work and in their work clothes, this means people have an actual job away from their home, but at a commutable distance and a need for specific work clothing.

Encouraging people to think or act 'like a boss' is worth pausing over and connects with notions of living well in the neoliberal world. It speaks directly to ideas of personal aspiration, and the notion that everyone should aspire to be more than what one is currently—in other words, to become something else. Of course, many people dream of becoming the CEO of a company or a boss, which is a perfectly acceptable position to which to aspire. Moreover, the figure of the boss is a special one, somewhat above or unique from others over whom that boss figure may have direction. In other words, to be a boss is a sort of space-making through a process of being and becoming *someone*. The class notions of the EU campaign come sharply into view here and could hardly be clearer.

Bosses also have purchasing power to have stuff, to use resources, and to be seen to be embodying this lifestyle of choice and possibilities. But, if cycling is not a choice, then it is unsurprising that cycling is rather unattractive to many people, especially if it is a marker of poverty or a low social status. During my PhD research in 2016, I went with some Lao colleagues to dinner after a work event. Everyone else moved off towards the dinner venue at speed down the road on their motorbikes whilst I was left cycling along with a female Lao colleague who told me that she felt sad that she had been left behind and that nobody wanted to go at the speed at which she was able to move. 'I have no money for a motorbike, so I have to cycle. Why are **you** cycling? I mean, it is nice that you ride with me, but still.' We arrived at the dinner around half an hour later than everyone else and this particular colleague walked in behind me and stayed with me all evening.

This notion of consumer goods as a representation of material affluence, or a lack

of it, mirrors work by High (2014). High's interlocutors in Southern Laos recognised that to be poor is to be cast aside or overlooked not only because of a lack of material possessions but also what one could achieve through a particular standing that accompanied understandings of what it is to be *someone* or to have a certain status in society. To have an expensive bike is the sort of thing a boss might have or an image a boss might covey. Even if the boss analogy falls short, these are the actions of someone who has choices. Several times, Lao friends asked to try out the bike that I had brought with me. I was told that my bike was somehow different from what is commonly available in Laos, which made cycling it for everyday use acceptable, particularly since it was pedalled by someone so obviously foreign.

The connection between the EU campaign and aspiration is not only about the tangible. A good person and good leader also takes care of themselves and values personal and bodily integrity (Lomborg and Frandsen 2016; West 2015). In a recent study, Beck and Nyíri (2022) note that, in the late socialist context, having opportunities to choose to do nothing or have free time are the essential markers of being middle class. More free time, in which one can go by bike wherever one wants, is exactly what my cyclist enthusiast interlocutors desire. One of the Lao cyclists often grumbled to me that he would love to ride his bike more, but just did not have time. For the cyclists who rode with me in Laos, they can choose to travel by bike any distance they want and, in so doing, they actively choose slower forms of travel as a way in which to spend their leisure time. Going back to the boss figure continues to provide a handy analogy, because bosses may well have exactly that sort of free time and the opportunities to use it for whatever life pursuits they choose.

There is a strong internationalist dimension in promoting specific visions of what it means to live and move well, which can hardly be overstated. This is the message that the EU campaign encouraging people to cycle is hoping to convey: that, in commuting by bike, one is a responsible citizen who cares for one's environment and, through regular physical exercise, also oneself. This is someone who has leisure time, pays attention to health and safety issues, and also takes personal responsibility for their own self and the wider environment, setting a good example in the process. The role of outsiders in promoting specific agendas in Laos can hardly be overstated. It is worth returning to how the EU ambassador used the campaign to remind people to cycle whilst wearing a helmet, a legal requirement for motorbike travel which many Lao still flout with regularity, regarding it as not a very serious matter. By contrast, the prevailing narrative from the outside is that awareness of these things and the associated action has become the hallmark of what it is to be a modern, or civilised, person. There is almost a neo-colonial logic here, in demonstrating that Lao people not only need to do more cycling, but also must do it *like this*.

I see a strong connection here between an apparently cringe-worthy slogan and common images of what it is to be part of modernity or of other people's specific aspirations for modernity, as well as the long journey to get there involving bikes and cycling helmets. My suggestion is that having the option to go by bike if one wishes to do so is also representative of having the means and the ability to make consumption and mobility choices, which are not necessarily available universally or are perceived not to be. While aspiration may be universal or near universal (Jackson 2011), the focus of those aspirations varies and remains diverse, even

Figure 5. Caption: EU in Laos Facebook post celebrating the ambassador's participation in the campaign.

when we only consider mobility. Amongst my interlocutors who still made urban journeys via motorbike, I asked them why this is, especially at a time when fuel is so expensive? Would you go less often with a motorbike or find another way to move about? One shared that he might make fewer journeys or try to go with a friend so that they could share the costs. 'I would not go by bike. To go to the city is too far and too hot.' Another said, 'Sometimes we just cannot go somewhere, or we just wait for a few days.' These voices are not convinced that cycling is synonymous with their versions of aspiration and desirable future-building.

VISIONS OF A BETTER CLIMATE

The cyclists who pedalled with me did not need the EU campaign and had found the inspiration to cycle from someone they knew well. Where they converged (albeit unknowingly) with the EU campaign was in their acceptance that this is a good idea, for themselves and the wider environment. They recognised that they had choices, and this is what they chose to do. One cyclist I met in Vientiane told me that he considered cycling to be better for himself, for the city, and for the environment. He was concerned about toxic air from the growing

number of vehicles, as well as space for bicycles to use the roads.

Elsewhere, some of the other cyclists identified that they were concerned about climate change. This reflects a wider growing awareness in Laos and comes at an interesting and important time when the Lao government is increasingly aware of the growing problems caused by climate change (Government of Laos 2021; Government of Laos 2019). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) noted over a decade ago that, while Laos is not a major contributor to climate change, it is likely to be disproportionately affected by its consequences (Government of Laos 2009; Government of Laos 2021). In policy, Lao authorities have had a Climate Change Decree since 2019 (Government of Laos 2019), and recently confirmed a target for Laos to achieve net zero emissions by 2050 and are mainstreaming questions of climate change into all areas of life (Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment and Department of Climate Change 2020). This is particularly important, as Laos is becoming ever more vulnerable to extreme weather events, particularly droughts and flooding (Maniphousay 2022).

Taking responsibility for oneself, one's choices, and one's actions has become a common sentiment of our times. We are all, in different ways, encouraged to think about our consumption choices with regard to the planet and in terms of sustainability. Of course, these small actions will not address the damage made by major polluters in any meaningful way. But, this logic is apparent when we look at how movement is presented in Laos by outsiders if it is thought of as part of a larger picture: that is, as a personal commitment to do *something* to offset rising fuel prices, to take care of the planet and oneself, and to internalise the need to take small actions as a moral obligation, even if in light of how little Laos contributes to climate change being told to bike like a boss seems even more cringeworthy. Taking responsibility without much explanation as to what that means is a feature of the official Lao government policy on climate change, which now makes caring for the environment and mitigating the effects of climate change a task for the entire population.

The expanding policy landscape on climate change to which I referred above represents the acceptance of a problem that has come sharply into view albeit driven by outsiders and a top-down approach to dealing with it. Moreover, awareness of something is not always matched by action. Laos has a new high-speed train line linking Laos and China, but this is marketed more as a way to travel from one place to another quickly and as a way to complement air travel on the same routes, rather than primarily in environmental protection terms. Similarly, in July 2023, the food delivery business Food Panda, referred to above, ordered thirty E-scooters for deliveries in the capital and plans to expand this to one hundred before the end of 2023. In discussing this development, the managing director noted the importance of contributing to the success of meeting UNDP goals for the reduction of carbon emissions (Visapra 2023b). Thirty or even one hundred E-scooters is not a very large number, but demonstrates at least a token commitment by company bosses to small actions in the direction of addressing climate change. Again, a boss takes such matters seriously.

While the policy landscape of Laos shows an increasing awareness of climate change, this is not always mirrored in other areas of transport policy. The high-speed Laos–China Railway is marketed as a way to travel quickly to places where previous options to travel fast were limited to air travel alone. A new airport in Laos is set to open for passenger transport

in the coming months, close to an area of Laos that has a high amount of Chinese investment, something frequently criticised online mostly by foreigners, sceptical of the benefits of this sort of development and the associated environmental costs (Barney and Souksakoun 2022; Harlan 2021; Rowedder 2019; Visapra 2022).

I am not suggesting here that local people are not concerned about the environmental impacts. Instead, I am arguing that the promotion of certain forms of travel in terms of their environmental impact is absent from official statements and policies in Laos. Where links are made between transport and environmental issues, these come from outsiders and, here again, we see the role of outsiders in both creating messages of travel as a sustainable choice, but also as the audience of these messages. On the ground, climate change has appeared on the agenda, but exactly what people are supposed to be doing in relation to it remains unclear. Concrete promotion of actions, at least around transport and agendas of sustainability, does not come from the Lao authorities.

CONCLUSIONS

At the time of writing in mid-2023, seemingly nobody is making statements that they #BikeLikeABoss in Laos, with references to the campaign online all but a brief memory to those interested in such things. The lack of positive reception to the EU campaign and the number of cyclists remaining minuscule for anything other than fitness or commuting out of economic necessity might indicate how far certain outsiders consider Laos and its population to be. Perhaps a new campaign is forthcoming. By any reckoning, even in the days of 40% inflation, a meaningful alternative to moving around urban Laos by motorbike for everyday purposes has yet to be found. For leisure and exercise, the interlocutors who contributed to this article continue cycling, planning excursions to new places, and reporting that interest in what they do and where they go is increasing and from a wider variety of people. Several have added other fitness practices such as gym sessions to their exercise routines, and post about their fitness successes on social media. As I noted here, this is indicative of the conspicuous consumption of fitness activities as part of their leisure time. In other words, these interlocutors are finding their own ways to pursue their aspirations.

I have argued here that interest in cycling is increasing in Laos. The number of bikes on the roads in urban areas is increasing, but this interest remains largely driven by outsiders at least initially, and there is some way to go towards expanding the culture of cycling in Laos. Importantly, interest in cycling relates to cycling for fitness, not everyday commuting. I argued here that this is related to what leisure time people have and what choices they have in spending that time. Most everyday journeys continue by motorbike or by car, although further research is needed on these patterns, especially around how this varies in different cities. I have also demonstrated here that, whilst official concerns are becoming more prevalent in relation to climate change, these are not linked to modes of mobility amongst the everyday population. There is no revolution in bikes, specifically as a future green transport for a wide variety of journeys.

I left Laos after two months of research and cycling at the end of August 2022 having learned a considerable amount about how Lao people do and do not move. Throughout that period, I found people bemused at although helpful towards a large, white, middle-aged foreigner taking to Lao roads on a sporty bike.

Having found the logistics of taking a bike in and out of Laos by air on the national airline relatively straightforward, I suggested to the airline via Facebook that they do a feature in their magazine about Laos as a cycling destination for tourists. The airline magazine is owned and operated by elite Lao, who showcase aspects of Laos to an audience of largely middle-class Lao and foreigners. I realise that my action plays entirely into the arguments I have advanced here, namely of foreigners promoting their agendas for improvements to Laos, whether or not it is really of interest to Lao people. But I hoped that it might bring in much-needed revenue at a time when many Lao people would appreciate some additional income. My suggested intervention went acknowledged, but entirely unanswered.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Professor Holly High for discussing some of this material, as well as three anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments. I also extend a sincere thanks to all of the cyclists who contributed their thoughts to this article.

PHILL WILCOX
RESEARCH ASSOCIATE
FACULTY OF SOCIOLOGY
BIELEFELD UNIVERSITY
phill.wilcox@uni-bielefeld.de

NOTES

1 See Chinda Boutdavong (2022) for an example of the campaign and details of coverage.
2 Inflation rose steadily throughout 2022, but this represents a new high (Visapra 2023a).
3 I have extended the notion of the walking interview here (Evans and Jones 2011), utilising what I term the cycling interview. I agree with Evans and Jones that what people say may be influenced by where they say it, noting that some of my participants were exceptionally enthusiastic about cycling while we were cycling, but as keen cyclists generally, they were similarly optimistic off the bike.
4 The Loca Lao app is available in Lao and English (https://loca.la).
5 Food Panda Laos is available in Lao, English and Mandarin (https://www.foodpanda.la/en/).
6 Frustrated residents of Vientiane took to social media again in August 2022 to complain about fuel shortages and high prices. See, for example, Phonevilay (2022).
7 In Luang Prabang, I positioned myself outside Joma Bakery in Baan Houaxieng, watching traffic heading in both directions around the busy intersection. In Vientiane, I sat in Patuxay Park facing the Ministry of Agriculture watching traffic coming along Lane Xang Avenue from the direction of the Presidential Palace. In all situations, I did not count people walking, simply because it was too difficult to keep track of slow-moving people and faster-moving vehicles at the same time and my focus was on wheeled transport. Further research is needed to ascertain the number of people walking and their motivations. Additionally, further research can and should focus on how many motorbikes have passengers.
8 At the time of writing, a second forum on electrical mobility had concluded in Vientiane. Whether this will produce meaningful changes is a vital area of research in the coming years. See Advertorial Desk (2023).
9 This group has ambitious plans for multiday tours across Laos and even beyond. Despite their enthusiasm and aptitude for bikes, none of them used a bike to travel to work or a place of study.
10 This is advice that I still need to follow through on before any further research, as such a light system is illegal where I live. The advice about lights made me smile, as some years earlier, I had had to source a set from Vietnam in view of these being unobtainable in Laos.

REFERENCES

Advertorial Desk 2023. Second Electric Vehicle Forum in Laos Spurs Cooperation for Clean Energy Future. *The Laotian Times* 11 July. https://laotiantimes.com/2023/07/11/second-electric-vehicle-forum-in-laos-spurs-corporation-for-clean-energy-future/. <Accessed 29 January 2024>

Alston, Philip 2019 *Visit to the Lao People's Democratic Republic: Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights*. United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24710&LangID=E. <Accessed 29 January 2024>

Anand, Nikhil, Akhil Gupta and Hannah Appel (eds) 2018. *The Promise of Infrastructure*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Barney, Keith, and Kanya Souksakoun. 2022. Going under: Belt and Road Megaprojects and Sovereign Debt in Laos. *New Mandala*. https://www.newmandala.org/going-under-belt-and-road-megaprojects-and-sovereign-debt-in-laos/. <Accessed 29 January 2024>

Beck, Fanni, and Pál Nyíri 2022. 'It's All for the Child': This Discontents of Middle-Class Chinese Parenting and Migration to Europe. *The China Quarterly*: 251.

Berliner, David 2012. Multiple Nostalgias: The Fabric of Heritage in Luang Prabang (Lao PDR). *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18 (4): 769–786. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2012.01791.x.

Boutdavong, Chinda 2022. #bikelikeaboss Promotes Cycling's Benefits for Health, Environment. *The Laotian Times* 16 June. https://laotiantimes.com/2022/06/16/bikelikeaboss-promotes-cyclings-benefits-for-health-environment/. <Accessed 29 January 2024>

Evans, James, and Phil Jones 2011. The Walking Interview: Methodology, Mobility and Place. *Applied Geography* 31 (2): 849–858. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apgeog.2010.09.005.

Government of Laos 2009. *National Adaptation Programme of Action to Climate Change*. Vientiane, Laos: National Environment Committee.

Government of Laos 2019. *Decree on Climate Change. No 3211*.

Government of Laos 2021. National Strategy on Climate Change in the Lao PDR: Vision to the Year 2050, Strategy and Programs of Actions to the Year 2030. Vientiane, Lao PDR.

Harlan, Tyler 2021. Green Development or Greenwashing? A Political Ecology Perspective on China's Green Belt and Road. *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 62 (2): 202–226. https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2020.1795700.

Harvey, Penny 2018. Infrastructures in and out of Time: The Promise of Roads in Contemporary Peru. In Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta, and Hannah Appel (eds). *The Promise of Infrastructure*. Durham: Duke University Press.

High, Holly 2013. Experimental Consensus: Negotiating with the Irrigating State in the South of Laos. *Asian Studies Review* 37 (4): 491–508. https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2013.794188.

High, Holly 2014. *Fields of Desire: Poverty and Policy in Laos*. Singapore: NUS Press.

Hirsh, Max and Till Mostowlansky (eds) 2022. *Infrastructure and the Remaking of Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Jackson, Michael 2011. *Life within Limits: Well-Being in a World of Want*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Lomborg, Stine, and Kirsten Frandsen 2016. Self-Tracking as Communication. *Information, Communication and Society* 19 (7): 1015–1027. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1067710.

Maniphousay, Vilakone 2022. Climate Change Adaptation in Lao PDR. In Joy Jacqueline Pereira, Mohd Khairul Zain and Rajib Shaw (eds). *Climate Change Adaptation in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-6088-7_5.

Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism. 2019. *Statistical Report on Tourism 2019*. Vientiane, Lao PDR: Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism, Tourism Development Department, Tourism Research Division. https://wearelao.com/sites/default/files/Statistical-Report-on-Tourism-2019.pdf. <Accessed 29 January 2024>

Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, and Department of Climate Change. 2020. *The First Biennial Report of the Lao PDR*. Vientiane, Lao PDR: Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment.

Murthy, Manas and Malini Sur 2022. Cycling as Work: Mobility and Informality in Indian Cities. *Mobilities* Forthcoming.

Phraxayavong, Viliam 2009. *History of Aid to Laos: Motivations and Impacts*. Chiang Mai: Mekong Press.

Phonevilay, Latsamy 2022. Laos Sees Renewed Fuel Shortages as Pumps Shut Down in Vientiane Capital. *The Laotian Times* 2 August. https://laotiantimes.com/2022/08/02/laos-to-see-renewed-fuel-shortages-as-pumps-shut-down-in-vientiane-capital/. <Accessed 29 January 2024>

Rowedder, Simon 2019. Railroading Land-Linked Laos: China's Regional Profits, Laos' Domestic Costs? *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 61 (2): 152–161. https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2019.1704813.

Sengvandy, Siphan 2019. *Fire in the Straw: A Khmu Boy in Laos*. Luang Prabang, Laos: Big Brother Mouse.

Visapra, Phontham 2022. Bokeo International Airport's Construction to Wrap up by 2023. *The Laotian Times* 31 October. https://laotiantimes.com/2022/10/31/bokeo-international-airports-construction-to-wrap-up-by-2023/. <Accessed 29 January 2024>

Visapra, Phontham 2023a. Laos Reports Inflation Rate of 40.30 Percent in January. *The Laotian Times* 6 February. https://laotiantimes.com/2023/02/06/laos-reports-inflation-rate-of-40-30-percent-in-january/. <Accessed 29 January 2024>

Visapra, Phontham 2023b. Sustainable Delivery: foodpanda Introduces Eco-Friendly E-Bikes in Laos. *The Laotian Times* 10 July. https://laotiantimes.com/2023/07/10/sustainable-delivery-foodpanda-introduces-eco-friendly-e-bikes-in-laos/. <Accessed 29 January 2024>

West, Liam Richard 2015. Strava: Challenge Yourself to Greater Heights in Physical Activity/Cycling and Running. *British Journal of Sports Medicine* 49: 1024. https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2015-094899.

Wilcox, Phill 2020. 'Don't Ever Change'? Cultural Heritage and Social Development in 'Timeless' Luang Prabang. *Journal of Cultural Heritage Management and Sustainable Development* 10 (3): 317–327.

Wollin, Elisabeth 2023. Rural Mobilities and Urban Norms. *Suomen Anthropologi* 47 (1): 52–63. https://doi.org/10.30676/jfas.87775.

Yazıcı, Berna 2013. Towards an Anthropology of Traffic: A Ride Through Class Hierarchies on Istanbul's Roadways. *Ethnos* 78 (4): 515–542. https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2012.714395.

Ellen Lapper

DIGITAL DEATH: METHODS AND COLLABORATION TOWARDS A SHARED ANTHROPOLOGY

ABSTRACT

This paper reflexively unpicks digital ethnographic methods employed during ongoing online fieldwork on 'digital deaths'. To do so, this research delves into the digital afterlife, exploring the fate of online traces and social media profiles after death, and how social media has changed our relationship with death and grieving. Anthropological studies of online death and grief faced new challenges even before COVID-19 moved research projects online. These include shared vulnerabilities and the ethnographer's position, online field sites, omnipresent online traces and posthumous personhood, and ethical algorithms and duty to the dead. By transparently detailing my research methods whilst conducting research with Facebook and Instagram users navigating loss, this article contributes an honest and extensive debate on processes, challenges, ethics, and research collaboration. Guided by visual and media anthropology, I advocate for a set of methods rooted in shared anthropology (Rouch 1995) which fosters ongoing dialogue with participants. Thus, this article offers a new perspective on digital death, rooted in collaborative storytelling and reflexive methodologies, facilitating discussions on a still-contentious subject in certain societies. Leveraging the benefits of digital ethnography's multi-sited nature, the research widens its geographical reach and comments on the sociocultural impacts of digital death.

Keywords*: digital afterlife, digital death, digital ethnography, social media, reflexive ethnography, shared anthropology, grief, methodology*

INTRODUCTION

FIG 1: Screenshot of Chadwick Boseman's announcement from his X (formerly Twitter) account on 29 August 2020. Screenshot taken on 31 August 2023.

In August 2020, the announcement of actor Chadwick Boseman's passing via his X (formerly Twitter) account became the most-liked X post to date, currently, with 6.8 million likes (Boseman 2020). Add 1.9 million reposts and a stream of comments, the post became not only an announcement of the news, but also a site of remembrance for friends and fans—a form of what has been termed *parasocial grieving* (Bingaman 2022 [2020]; Akhther and Tetteh 2021).[1] The benefits to this kind of communal grieving online stem from various opportunities presented by *internetworks* (Sofka 1997), including the removal of physical obstacles and temporal limitations, and the alleviation of isolation through collective support. In the case of a celebrity death, which likely reaches a wider audience, mourning in this publicly communal form on social media can allow distant users to cope with disenfranchised grief (grief unacknowledged by societal norms), and potentially remain anonymous as they do so (Sofka 1997). Yet, with the ever-changing nature of the internet and the blurred lines between public and private, challenges arise, often related to grief's unexpected shift online and hastily developed technologies. In addition, the 2019 outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing deaths globally at a time of physical separation, exacerbated many of these underlying notions. Added to that too came the viral spectacle of Black death following the 2020 murder of George Floyd and the resurgence of #BlackLivesMatter, unveiling

a pressing need for further studies within the field of digital death and the digital afterlife across sociocultural differences.

The internet is changing the way we interact with death and grief (Sofka 1997; Walter, Hourizi, Moncur and Pitsillides 2011; Lapper 2017). Clumsily, unexpectedly, and often paradoxically ubiquitous to the loss of a physical presence, encounters with a digital death are proliferating. Here, 'digital death' refers to the passing of an individual, the subsequent loss of an online presence, and the digital afterlife. This article first details scholarship into death online and digital ethnography before interweaving several methodological challenges with findings from ongoing research with Facebook and Instagram users navigating loss. By transparently detailing my research methods, I aim to contribute an honest and extensive debate on processes, ethics, and challenges, bringing learnings from visual and media anthropology (Rouch 1995) to the digital realm to explore forms of online collaboration (Pink 2017). After reading a draft of this paper, one participant—Peru-based Maria who lost her father—noted that the importance of such research is its ability to open the dialogue in response to 'our society being very evasive and dodgy about death.'[2] She hopes this will lead to a more fluid protocol and procedure when someone passes, or even a digital will. As research findings fed back directly into my methods, the article describes an attempt to bridge the gap between the two. In doing so, I seek to contribute to research on the impact of our digital remains after we pass away and increase accessibility through storytelling (Narayan 2020), whilst also exploring the ethical challenges faced by researchers in this field. How can a reflexive approach assist future scholars and methodologies? Is collaborative storytelling of grief possible via the internet?

SCHOLARSHIP

Scholarship into online grief and mourning are widespread, proliferating, and diverse. For instance, Harju and Huhtamäki (2021: 4) note the richness of approaches in this multidisciplinary research field 'from post-mortem data privacy and data governance to explorations of digital memorials and symbolic immortality.' Death is social (Walter et al. 2011); thus, much research has focused on the communication of a death online across various platforms, from blogs and social media sites (DeGroot and Carmack 2012; Brubaker, Hayes and Dourish 2013) to dedicated grief forums (Hastings, Musambira and Hoover 2007) and the discussion on *parasocial grieving* as mentioned previously. There is no doubt that online environments afford new possibilities for managing grief (Kasket 2019), and my previous research with England-based Facebook users found that the technological shield offered by social media helps people grieve online in ways they would not face-to-face, masking our vulnerability (Lapper 2017). Online memorials allow the bereaved to continue their interactions with the dead (Refslund Christensen and Gotved 2015), leading to what has been coined *continuing bonds* (Klass, Silverman and Nickman 1996). Such ongoing interactions extending after death can create a *posthumous personhood* and allow the bereaved to maintain meaningful relationships (Meese et al. 2015), even to the extent that chatbots resurrect the dead, termed *thanabots* (Henrickson 2023). Technological interventions maintain the dead's online persistence, but also expose their vulnerability, which necessitates a moral duty towards them on behalf of the living (Stokes 2021), questioning their right to privacy. Platform-specific research has allowed scholars to delve deeper into how sites such as Facebook enable

the expansion of public mourning—temporally, spatially, and socially—rather than disrupting tradition (Brubaker et al. 2013). However, Facebook's intermingling of unexpected encounters (such as learning of a death, grief itself, and algorithmic prompts) with more casual everyday content can be jarring (Ibid.). This can also be applied to other social media platforms. Caring for digital remains can be viewed as a form of embodied labour (Kneese 2023), extending the idea of digital presences as collaboratively crafted entities after death, which also invites opportunities from outside services to manage afterlives (Savin-Baden and Burden 2019). However, due to the hasty unravelling of the COVID-19 pandemic and the aggravation of physical distance, recent memorialisation techniques have often been implemented employing a 'make do and mend' approach (Pitsillides and Wallace 2021). This method resulted in unsatisfactory functionality, further adding to the 'bad deaths' COVID-19 has come to symbolise regarding the discomfort of the deceased, especially at a time of isolation, which also placed subsequent distress on the bereaved (Carr, Boerner and Moorman 2020). As Mason-Robbie and Savin-Baden (2020: 20) state, 'Most current research merely focuses on grief and mourning, with little research exploring the sociocultural and sociopolitical impacts.' Applying critical race theory in combination with digital studies (Noble 2018; Tanksley 2022) offers a valuable lens via which to examine an often-overlooked area in the digital afterlife field regarding the racialised and oppressive landscape of the internet and the viral spectacle of Black death (Sutherland 2017). This also points to the need for a greater interrogation of the wider sociopolitical and sociocultural context, particularly amongst marginalised groups.

Ethnographically researching digital death across the vast expanse of the internet is a colossal task and one that is constantly evolving with the development of digital technologies. Even prior to COVID-19's impact, which forced many projects online, anthropological studies into death and grief via the internet faced new challenges, both to explore as a researcher and to reflect upon methodologically. With increased online living, the digital death phenomenon is not slowing down. As a result, methodological tools needed for research must keep up. The *digital environment* (Frömming et al. 2017) is one shared by researchers and participants. Thus, ethnographies of digital worlds must engage with new forms of collaboration; re-think traditional anthropological ideas of the field site, researcher, and participant(s); and develop new theoretical tools to understand the *digital materiality* of our environments (Pink, Horst et al. 2016; Pink, Ardèvol, and Lanzeni 2016). As Frömming et al. note, this demand for reciprocity often allows digital ethnographies to become 'journeys into the self' (2017: 16). Consequently, the reflexivity presented in this article is important. Moreover, as we co-inhabit the digital world with our research participants (Pink 2016 Frömming et al. 2017), I place emphasis on a methodology based on *shared anthropology* (Rouch 1995)—borrowed from a filmmaking technique introduced by Jean Rouch in which through 'feedback screenings' protagonists become active and regular participants. To date, methodology scholarship has largely focused on research results over research processes (Kaufmann and Palmberger 2022); thus, I have chosen to transparently detail my research methods and interweave methodological approaches with stories and findings.

SHARED VULNERABILITY AND THE ETHNOGRAPHER'S POSITION

Anthropologist and writer Ruth Behar's (1996) call for reflexivity in ethnographic storytelling, embracing personal revelations by the ethnographer, challenged traditional objectivity in anthropology. The right to tell participant stories is intertwined and should engage with our own issues of representation. Considering this, my research and paper are intentionally reflexive. This aside, my interest in the digital afterlife stems from my personal experience of losing my father in 2015. To underpin my research, I have employed Alisse Waterston and Barbara Rylko-Bauer's (2006) concept of *intimate ethnography*—a method of situating family stories at the centre of ethnographic enquiries and expanding outward. Over the years since my father's passing, much akin to his physical belongings, I have continued to notice ways in which his digital presence seeps through. Even as I write this, I am trying to sort out his HSBC bank account because he had not responded to their emails. These physical, bureaucratic, and digital presences should be easy to solve, but often prove challenging. Chuck the shoes away, remove the account holder, delete the Facebook page. Sounds simple. But the emotional ties, the ubiquitous nature of the latter, and complicated procedures leave room for human error. The rise of digital media introduces elements beyond human oversight; yet, often, without human intervention, omnipresent data can become 'immortal'.[3]

As an ethnographer, I questioned whether I could access intimate participant conversations without sharing my own misfortune. In my call for participants, I candidly stated that my personal experience of loss had driven my motivation, hoping that this would ensure trust, understanding, and establish a common ground of vulnerability. Moreover, as someone outside of academia, this has become my personal research project, shared in both academic and non-academic circles, in various formats.[4] To ensure accessibility, I have maintained a colloquial tone, both here and throughout the research.[5]

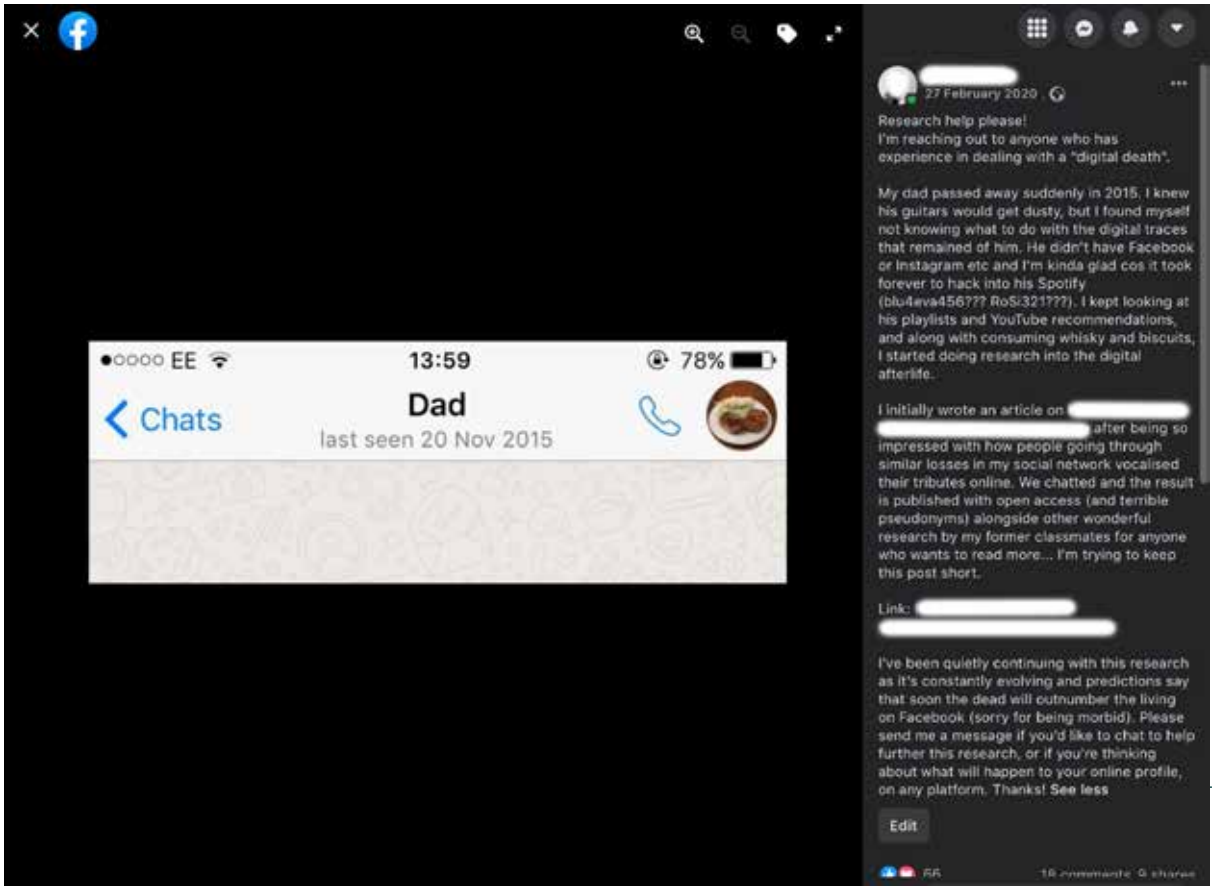

FIG. 2: Figure of open call posted on my personal Facebook profile, February 2020.

I publicly posted an open call on my personal Facebook and Instagram profiles, inviting people to contact me directly. Roser Beneito-Montagut et al. (2017: 676) advocate for the use of personal social media accounts for online ethnographies, 'since this would allow for a symmetric relationship that places both the researcher and the participant on the same level of reciprocity.' However, could this ensure trust? Traditional ethnographic methods in anthropology emphasise the importance of 'hanging out' (Jovicic 2022). What happens when this shifts to online-only encounters with strangers? Given the mix of respondents from my social networks—both people I knew personally, and those I did not—a combination of approaches were needed for effective trust-building.

KEEPING UP WITH AN ONLINE FIELD SITE

> I'm overwhelmed. Some people have left comments, others have sent me direct messages on Instagram and Facebook. There are tags too, supportive comments, friends have shared the post and people have expressed 'interest' in my research. A friend responded, people in my network but am no longer in contact with responded, even people I don't know have ended up in my 'request' message box on Facebook. I'm very grateful, just overwhelmed at how to stay on top of the various channels of communication. (Fieldnotes, February 2020)

Navigating an online field site is simultaneously a treasure trove and a minefield. Benefits include the *temporal* and *spatial proximity* (Hine 2000), yet, unlike traditional fieldwork, online field sites lack clear entry and exit points due to technology's permeability—one rarely logs out. Anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski (1932 [1922]) stressed the importance of maintaining distance between one's everyday culture and that under study, yet this is now virtually (excuse the choice of word) impossible with online fieldwork. Ethnographers of virtual worlds fit data collection in-between other tasks (Boellstorff et al. 2012), causing burdens. We talk about learning from and getting closer to our participants in the field, but little thought has been placed on digital *distance* and the need for the online ethnographer to adjust to two different rhythms at once (Bengtsson 2014).

To circumvent the fatigue of an online field site, I planned to meet participants in-person, if possible, yet when I hit 'post' in February 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic struck Europe, forcing digital-only ethnography. The pandemic-induced intensity to which people spent time online, and the heightened death count worldwide, affected traditional approaches to grief and mourning. New coping mechanisms became prevalent, funerals were held online, and I struggled to remain responsive and open to the ever-changing, unprecedented discourse. Employing Pink, Horst et al.'s (2016) use of indirect research questions in ethnography, I invited participants to broadly share digital death experiences and allowed them to guide the discussion (Brubaker et al. 2013). From their responses, I refined and shaped my questions—both on the spot and subsequently, including throughout the writing of this article. Sustaining participant–researcher contact is often easier online than with a physical field site (Frömming et al. 2017), and this study became a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995), spanning global platforms, with participants united by their dislocation and experiences. However, I encountered pros and cons to this approach.

Unrestricted by a geographical location, I welcomed all 39 initial responses to my posts, via both the comment function and direct messages on Facebook and Instagram.[6] Between February 2020 and September 2021, extensive Skype/Zoom/Facebook video interviews were conducted with seven people from China, Egypt, Mexico, Peru, Poland, the UK, and the US. All of these participants identify as female.[7] The initial call lasted between one to two hours, and verbal consent was obtained to record the conversation (video and audio), with assurance of private use only for this research. Regular contact has been maintained wherever possible to involve the participants in the research process, detailed later under shared anthropology. Whist incredibly enriching, I was unprepared for the vast cultural differences and approaches to death. However, having grown up in the UK, where death is often an uncomfortable subject, I was pleased to learn about more open outlooks.[8] Plus, pandemic restrictions aside, the cost-effective, rooted nature greatly benefits self-funded, independent researchers. Whilst the internet's role regarding its wider social context must be considered—such as worldwide disparities impacting access—digital ethnographies help shift anthropology away from physical, colonial-style explorations by white men, overcoming its earlier failures.

OMNIPRESENT ONLINE TRACES AND POSTHUMOUS PERSONHOOD

In May 2021, Chadwick Boseman's X (then Twitter) account posted again (Boseman 2021). I scrolled through the comments: short videos, heartbreak emojis, plenty of 'miss you' comments, and many sentiments of shock at this resurrection—'This tweet scared the shit outta me for a sec lol.' What happens to our social media accounts after passing is a complex and contested matter. For some users, there appeared to be no issue in interacting with a late profile and the tributes continued. For others, the unsettling nature of this post after death proved difficult to handle, plainly highlighting grief's diversity and the individual and personal responses to loss.

Intervening using a dead user's account is one of the many ways the dead can maintain a posthumous personhood and 'some sort of social life after death' (Meese et al. 2015: 413). James Meese et al. consider two other areas for posthumous personhoods: autonomous and semi-autonomous software, and by using artificial intelligence (AI) services. They suggest that each questions our existing boundaries between life and death, with the flatness of the screen adding to the blurred lines. This activity can prove tricky for less familiar engagers to decipher if the user is dead or not—even more so when they do not have celebrity status and a quick internet search cannot verify their suspicions. UK-based Daisy shared her experience of losing her father in 2016. He was a highly active Facebook user who enjoyed uploading photos; 'He was like my biggest fan,' liking and commenting on everything. After his passing, she mentioned there might be 'people out there who were his Facebook friends who will never know [he died] as well because we didn't memorialise it. So that's kind of a bit awkward.'

Notions of a posthumous personhood arose with several participants. Jenny, a US-based Facebook and Instagram user who lost her active Facebook-using mother in 2017, knew the password of her mum's account and logged in after she passed.

> I didn't realise that she had her status to be visible to people when she would log on.

> So, I logged in, and this was soon after she passed away, and people were like, what the hell. (…) They were freaked out, they really thought it was her…

Echoing the startled responses of Chadwick Boseman's following, unchanged profiles might not reveal a user's passing if others continue to use the account. Jenny's intervention was short-lived, disturbed by the disturbance. Yet, others shared different experiences, further revealing the ambivalence towards posthumous personhoods. Spain-based Ana, whose family lives in Romania, spoke of the large funeral culture back home, and the difficulty of being away when someone dies. Her teenage cousin passed away in 2018, and his mother continues to use his Facebook account. Ana shared:

> I cringe every time she likes a post of mine from his profile and his name appears (...) It really makes me uncomfortable to see his name pop up on a regular basis, have it like my pictures and posts and knowing it's not actually him. I think it's a mixture of sadness, awkwardness, and discomfort that I feel every time my aunt interacts with me through his name. As for her, it might well also be a refusal to let go, but probably also a great comfort.

Although Ana is aware of the user behind it—unlike Jenny's mum's network or some of Chadwick's followers—a level of discomfort remains. Yet, for her aunt, it points towards the continuing bonds theory (Klass et al. 1996), reminding others of her son. The difficulties and uneasiness arise when people are misaligned on their views towards the dead online. I exchanged Instagram messages with Filipo, a UK-based user who lost his friend and his grandad. Compared to my other participants, he had stronger feelings towards the 'immortality' of a digital presence:

> In all honesty there's something about someone's digital presence I really push against after people die
> I think part of my grieving process is really trying to accept the reality that the person isn't there anymore
> And getting that to sink in as fast as possible
> And I found that those online things they left behind give the idea that a piece of them is still around, but it doesn't feel tangible or real and for me just muddied that water of mentally adapting to the reality
> Does that make sense? It's kinda like when they prepare a body to be buried and from a distance, they look normal but when you look closer it's an imitation of what they were.

Filipo's final comment underscores how others, intentionally or not, can alter the identity of the deceased, whether that is through embalming or the upkeep of their social media profile. Much like the mortuary care he describes, it also touches upon how 'caring for digital remains is a material, embodied practice, most certainly a form of labor even if it is also an act of love, undergirded by structures of obligation and kinship ties bound by affective bonds' (Kneese 2023: 95). The complexities and demands of posthumous care can have varying impacts on the bereaved; Filipo admitted to unfollowing a friend as it was causing him more pain to see the profile displaying 'remembering Steve'. He explained, 'And I feel guilty for doing it cause rejecting his profile felt like a rejection of him I guess?' Similarly, another UK-based participant, David, regretfully deleted the phone

number and text messages of his late brother shortly after his passing, thinking the reminders would be too painful and it would remove the possibility of an unexpected encounter (Brubaker et al. 2013). Actions driven by intense emotions may seem irrational, and, particularly with grief, when our feelings change over time; we may not be able to read their correspondence at first, as Peru-based Maria explained about her late father's emails, or opposingly, we may incessantly check their Facebook profile, and then perhaps our engagement dwindles.

At the outset of my research, I searched for the late profiles participants told me about, but I quickly stopped doing so, feeling intrusive and wrong. Yet, without the knowledge these people had passed, would I have had the same reaction if I were stalking a supposedly living profile? The anthropology of social media activity often involves lurking and passive observation, offering unbiased data (Ugoretz 2017), yet raising ethical concerns, with some scholars claiming it is deceptive and full consent should be obtained (King 1996). With this in mind and in an effort to evade online field site fatigue, I 'lurked' only at the beginning; primarily, I engaged via a more active means (video calls).

ETHICAL ALGORITHMS AND DUTY TO THE DEAD

Melanie, an active Facebook user from the UK, was one of the first to respond to my post. She began, 'My mum passed away and her two Facebooks are still going as we don't have the passwords. People forget she died and still wish her a nice day on her birthday etc.' I reflected on this unexpected encounter (Brubaker et al. 2013): Does this mean her mum's perpetual existence online is more convincing than her offline void, at least to her Facebook network? Or are we becoming increasingly reliant on digital reminders as means to remember to the extent that it overrides our own judgement? In this instance, wishing a deceased person a happy birthday on Facebook just because a push notification tells us to and their page is still active becomes an automatic, often unquestioned gesture—and one that can have ongoing consequences for grief. This could be a form of automation bias (Bridle 2018), which, with the advent of artificial intelligence, raises worrying concerns—remembering is becoming optional. Furthermore, we are already becoming the automated bots: wishing a dead person happy birthday because they are still on Facebook—we are making the mistakes for which algorithms are criticised. Melanie's mum's unchanged profile makes it more difficult for her Facebook friends to come to terms with, or even remember, their loss. Perhaps at some point the realisation will arrive that this person is no longer active, yet for close friends or relatives like Melanie who have not forgotten their loss, it becomes another burden. Do you interfere and correct the well-wishers or let it continue at the risk of others seeing and joining in the birthday greetings? Such beliefs are reminiscent of Filipo's muddied realities, yet potentially stronger before a profile has been memorialised.

The trauma associated with death can carry heightened consequences when it is out of our hands and/or algorithmically triggered online. On the spectacle of Black death and its shift to the internet, Tonia Sutherland (2017: 34) remarks how the 'repetition of (re)membering and rituals of memorialization reinscribe racist ideologies and the trauma of the death event.' The documentation of violent deaths circulate, live on through a Google Image search, and reinscribe the systemic racism present in society. The automated content moderation of social media giants relies on algorithmic biases which traffic Black death for profit through virality and

hyper-circulation (Tanksley 2022; Noble 2018), with little respect for the individual, the people involved, and recipients' mental health.

In February 2023, Brianna Ghey, a 16-year-old transgender girl, was tragically murdered in Warrington, England. Several UK media outlets used her deadname and, due to age restrictions in the Gender Recognition Act (GOV.UK 2023) in England preventing Brianna from legally identifying as female, she will remain misgendered on her death certificate. The power of others to misconstrue and deliberately alter the identity of the dead are especially prevalent in the digital era where information spreads rapidly. Although they can be successfully used as tools in the fight for justice, Instagram and Facebook also serve as breeding grounds for hate crimes, and circulating information has the power to hijack crafted narratives. Applying this idea to a social media profile as a curated digital presence of an individual, what happens when that persists after death and others have the potential to imperceptibly overwrite it (Stokes 2021)? Daisy recounted the tale of an acquaintance whose mum had difficulty preserving the memorialised account of her late daughter because her daughter had uploaded several photos of herself in skimpy outfits. However, her daughter had chosen to portray herself this way, and her mother felt guilty for both denying her late daughter any privacy and trying to alter the way she wished to be seen. Actions such as this raise interesting questions such as the dead's entitlement to privacy. Jenny's curious 'hacking' (as she called it) of her late mum's Facebook profile revealed private conversations, causing upset: 'I went in thinking, like, this will be a good thing for my grieving. But then I didn't realise maybe this will make me angry at people when this is not my place to be.' Daisy thought it would be 'weird' if she had her dad's password, acknowledging that sometimes there are things you really want to see, but maybe you should not. Whilst there are laws in place to govern the privacy of living persons, the data of the dead are less clear-cut (Kasket 2019)—and this extends beyond social media.[9] Kim Kardashian (2020) received a hologram of her late father for her birthday, from her then-husband, Kanye West. Not only did her father not consent, but West manipulated the deceased's voice to flatter himself—prompting a viral spectacle that challenges our memories.

I contemplated these incidents from a research perspective. How can we safeguard the deceased's identity against alterations, detect this hijacking, and navigate algorithmically triggered content? What new complications develop regarding the privacy rights of the dead given the increase in digital personal data? Instances like Melanie's mum's posthumous birthday wishes and Ana's cousin's interactions underscore how others can inadvertently perpetuate their 'immortal' presence. Like Kanye West's hologram or Brianna Ghey's gender alteration, at times, 'multiple and conflicting narratives of the deceased exist' (Brubaker et al. 2013: 153), highlighting our moral obligations towards their digital remains (Stokes 2021). Taking Safiya Umoja Noble's application of critical race theory scholarship, which requires additional attention in digital afterlife research, 'we need to interrogate how the spectacle of social media often swallows whole the story, and spits back little to dismantle systems of violence' (Umoja 2018: 159). The internet is not neutral, and, as researchers in this field, we must remain vigilant against manipulation, consider the algorithmically oppressive and racialised landscape of the internet as well as its offline context, and respect personal boundaries regarding the dead online. Consequently, engaging in deeper ethnographic research outweighs passive online observation.

FAITH IN TECH GIANTS

Dealing with tech giants is an unavoidable task for social media anthropologists. Since I began this paper, Facebook and Instagram merged into Meta and Elon Musk transformed Twitter into X, underlining the changing and contested space within which this research takes place—and ultimately proving how our data are not owned by us. In relation to digital death and the potential loss or preservation of sacred assets, I explored various options with participants.

In 2007, Facebook introduced the memorialisation for user profiles if alerted to a death, and in 2015 they announced a Legacy Contact feature, allowing the pre-passing appointment of a profile manager (Facebook 2023a). Melanie, despite being an active Facebook user, was unaware of this possibility; others often viewed it as an additional hassle, with unclear procedures and outcomes. Jenny revealed, 'No. I haven't done it [memorialise mum's profile] because I… I think it freezes the account. No, you can't post on it.' Jenny reflected on other family members who had passed away; the family thought it best to leave all accounts open. She continued, 'Yeah, I don't think you would [access it] in the same way, and I think it may delete the messages. Maybe it deletes the feed…' Jenny's uncertainty and hesitation are tied to the potential risk memorialising may pose to her mum's Facebook data. In fact, Facebook (Facebook 2023b) claims to preserve the content that the user shared and depending on the account's privacy settings, friends can continue to write on the memorialised timeline. Of course, this requires putting trust in the hands of a tech giant. Unlike other bureaucratic faff involved when someone passes (for example, my ongoing dispute with HSBC), there is an emotional attachment to a Facebook page as a (collaboratively) crafted identity of an individual, possibly full of images and memories. As a result, there is more at stake if something becomes inaccessible or lost, and I found elements of this insecurity shared across several participants.

Facebook and similar platforms were built for the living, not the deceased. As a result, the space can become contested through ad-hoc memorials (Pitsillides and Wallace 2021). Daisy spoke of her late father's sudden void in Facebook activity and her ambivalent feelings towards the reminders left behind—his profile remains unchanged. She found solace in the photos he shared, albums he created, and could not imagine deletion—this personal archive amounts to a huge digital footprint and ongoing place of exchange for them. She elaborated, 'they come into your head just randomly, quite lovely memories. But they're usually linked to that sort of media, like photographs or some kind of post or something,' highlighting the command digital media has over our memories and the way his online presence continues to dictate her offline memories. However, algorithmic prompts like 'send a message to [dad]' mirror Melanie's mum's birthday prompts, challenging the sanctity of the grieving process.

Daisy felt there was a 'clinical' nature to Facebook's memorialisation procedures, and the term struck me. Whilst her father's profile holds personal memories and an emotional attachment, Facebook sees it as just another profile—one participant in the world's biggest social networking platform, which boasted almost three billion monthly active users in the second quarter of 2023 (Statista 2023). Despite clinical interludes, whilst dealing with HSBC (with around 39 million customers worldwide (HSBC 2023)), I spoke personally to an advisor from their bereavement team—an impossibility with Facebook. The complete lack of human interaction for a site purporting to connect

people, where reporting a death requires you to cast a form into the ether, can only be described as clinical. The intimate, emotional value of data stored on Facebook is arguably higher than any banking data, yet the procedure is far from being personally tailored. Why should it be the profit-driven tech giants who decide our fate?

At another point, Daisy said, 'I think we would have to memorialise it at some point, but when you're dealing with grief (...), I didn't really want to deal with things.' Unlike banking, notifying Facebook of a death is deemed less urgent. Melanie and Daisy highlight how it is possible, although not ultimately desirable, to delay it until a better time in the grieving process due to the emotional investment and procedural uncertainty. Similarly, Jenny prefers her mum's profile unchanged as the family often write to her mum and tag her in photos, reflecting the theories of continuing bonds (Klass et al. 1996) and posthumous personhoods (Meese et al. 2015).

With the growing prediction that deceased profiles on Facebook will eventually outnumber the living (Öhman and Watson 2019), a bereavement team for Facebook's vast user base would prove challenging. Now, the new ruling class, termed the *vectorialist class* (Wark 2019), owns and controls information—they are the ones profiting from our willing submission of data. Are the growing number of un-memorialised dead profiles, and their valuable insights, in danger of deletion? After all, who will pay for their upkeep?

My participants' experiences and my position as a researcher highlight our lack of power against the tech giants. The vast amount of stored data holds emotional significance for individuals like Daisy and indispensable insights into our current means of interacting for future anthropologists and historians. How do we, as researchers, navigate this collective history left behind by the dead online before it is too late? What are the dangers of leaving responsibility to the tech giants considering the biases already present in society (Sutherland 2017; Noble 2018; Tanksley 2022)? There is 'a heightened need for a critical surveillance literacy in social media' (Noble 2018: 152), necessitating a close collaboration between researchers, participants, and technology developers to best harness digital technologies for everyone involved.

DATA STORAGE

As communication increasingly occurs through smartphones on social media platforms, the transition to a mobile online field site is almost inevitable (Goggin and Hjorth 2014). This portability is challenging to the researcher, and, amidst the various forms of communication—Facebook comments and private messages; Instagram comments and private messages; and recorded video calls—I began to lose track. Fuelled by the content of my conversations—the risk of deletion and data preservation—it made me realise how quickly our digital trace can mount, if, even I as a conscious researcher, was struggling to keep up with my own footprint. I manually extracted and updated my ongoing conversations for analysis into a Word document, alongside fieldnotes. From here, I was able to begin coding and extracting themes from the emerging data following a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2014), allowing previous literature to inform—but not be forced upon—the research. This process, whilst basic and cumbersome without qualitative research software, was crucial given the similar conversations I was having with my research participants.

Li was one of the first participants with whom I had a long Facebook call. Having grown up in China, she is now based in Europe and uses

several different social media platforms, noting a difference between China and Europe. After losing her father, she discovered his account had vanished from the Chinese social media platform QQ, and changing her computer led to the loss of their chat history.

> This is also a sad part in that digital era that you just can't keep this data forever. Otherwise, you have to do it earlier, like you have to save and download or whatever. But if you didn't pay attention, they will be gone (...) you don't even notice.

A separate analysis is required to delve deeper into platforms such as QQ. Nonetheless, Li's comments remain applicable to the broader issues of data storage. Her reflections challenge the notion of digital 'immortality'; data are not always permanent, rather they are subject to decay (Harju and Huhtamäki 2021). The *vectoralist class* (Wark 2019), mega-corporations, and larger entities are inconsiderate towards individual sensitivities like bereavement. Yet, with their ubiquitous nature and slippery intangibility, digital presences require us to react quicker; they can be quickly suppressed. Paradoxically, their characteristics also make them effective lurkers, hidden in areas you were not aware of, waiting to catch you off guard; 'persist[ing] without such decay' (Brubaker et al. 2013: 158). The fix, then, is not always quick or easy. Welcome or unwelcome, comforting or disturbing, these ambivalent feelings are akin to offline life, only the speed at which technology races ahead is unforgiving towards grief.

Daisy expanded on the emotional attachment to her dad's Facebook:

> There was a time (...) when I realised how many messages I actually had on Facebook Messenger, and it was actually really lovely. They were actually better than some of the physical things I had. The Facebook Messenger messages were like letters (...). It's very rare to be sending letters.

Once the initial pain had subsided, Daisy found comfort in these messages as time passed, although she revisits them less frequently now. This sentiment was shared across numerous research participants. As Josefina, a Mexico-based Facebook and Instagram user, said about her late father,

> It's tiny, tiny gifts. I think sometimes you are strong enough to go through it and sometimes it's just… I think it's been like two or three years that I haven't checked his Facebook account because, I don't know, I don't feel maybe strong enough to see if it's… because if it's not there then you will feel super bad.

Daisy spoke of these tiny gifts as 'nuggets', envisioning the anticipation of discovering new things about her father in the future. However, will these nuggets remain reliably available given they are at the mercy of tech giants? Elon Musk's (2023) announcement in May 2023, revealing X's plan to delete inactive accounts with vague intentions of archiving, intensifies the fragility of preserving our digital legacies. Josefina inserted a poignant realisation, after reading a draft of this paper in November 2021, adding another layer of complexity to this narrative: 'I'm not friends with my dad on FB [Facebook]. I didn't remember that, and the other day I went to his profile and I realise that I can't post on his wall or do anything and that we can never be friends on FB anymore, and this is quite a feeling.' Unable to interact, this sentiment encapsulates the emotional weight

of confronting the limitations imposed by the platform and those in control.

Li's experience of losing her late father's QQ chats prompted her to adopt a proactive approach in preserving moments with her living relatives. She takes screenshots whenever she calls her grandma and stores them offline. Jenny also recorded her mother's voice before her passing and has since continued recording her father. As my fieldwork progressed, I realised the importance for anthropologists to consider data storage as an inherent research method. Ethical advice on internet research extends beyond the participants themselves to include researchers' storage and dissemination of gathered data (Boehlefeld 1996). Thus, each of my videoed conversations were recorded and stored on an external encrypted hard drive for confidentiality, just as I did with my fieldnotes.

PUBLIC VS PRIVATE

With the availability and accessibility of a vast amount of information, it is unclear whether the internet is a public or private space, necessitating careful consideration when employing digital methods, especially in sensitive areas like death and bereavement research (Carmack and DeGroot 2014). Moreover, a user's ability—normally, the author of a post—to change Facebook post visibility settings, in spaces other 'friends' believe to be private, introduces an additional layer of complexity.

The way some users feel comfortable sharing personal information online can relate to a phenomenon called the privacy paradox. Broadly speaking, the privacy paradox describes how quite often people's intentions concerning privacy do not align with their behaviour (Kokolakis 2017; Kasket 2019). Previous research revealed that some Facebook users were critical of sharing grief online, certain that it was attention-seeking (Lapper 2017), which correlates with Spyros Kokolakis's (2017: 1) research on the phenomenon: 'individuals reveal personal information for relatively small rewards, often just for drawing the attention of peers in an online social network.' However, my previous research (2017) simultaneously revealed that several participants found sharing grief online to be a comfortable outlet as it helped elicit consoling responses and share memories of a late individual, as can also be seen here. Daisy found solace in her father's Facebook friends (ones she had not met in person, but who had become aware of his passing) offering condolences to her and her sister via his friends list due to their shared surname. Grief sharing online was common amongst active users, aligning with Brubaker et al.'s (2013) conclusion that users' attitudes to Facebook in other contexts influence its suitability for mourning.

Social media breaks down the barriers between the public and the private. Research demonstrates that these blurry boundaries create spaces where the set-up of isolated exchanges in front of a computer, or a smartphone, masks the publicity shared information; people aim for privacy yet underestimate Facebook's public nature (Barnes 2006). Adhering to digital media research ethics often involves pseudonyms and anonymising any recognisable identity markers (Bruckman 2002), but this becomes problematic when research is conducted in a public and traceable space (Markham 2012). Annette Markham proposes *fabrication* to protect participant privacy, reframing its negative connotations as an ethical method for researchers to embrace their agency. In this paper, I employed minor fabrication, pseudonyms, and identity disguising to ensure confidentiality. Each time I had a public discussion on Facebook and Instagram, I thought I should point out the public visibility, in case users were not aware of

the exposure; but, at the same time, I did not want to appear patronising. Those with whom I engaged via comments were mostly users who I had observed as being active in my network. I also observed mutual support amongst users; a user I did not know reached out to another in my network (it appears they were not friends) to provide advice on Facebook's page memorialisation. Whilst I did not want to deter the growing support network, I was wary of the visibility of personal information, and suggested we could talk via Facebook's private Messenger function. Occasionally, I also initiated Messenger conversations, leading to fruitful exchanges at times, whilst other times yielded no response. Perhaps I was delving in too deeply, too quickly, or perhaps the arena of visibility and sharing with other users was more comfortable. Regardless, this experience spurred contemplation on my methods and the tools we use to interact.

Twice, conversations with less familiar participants dwindled. Both were keen to share written thoughts via Facebook Messenger, and I was cautious not to force a video call, so I mirrored their Facebook messages, adapting my approach as I built trust. Nancy K. Baym (2015) talks about the importance of the temporal structure of online communication and the distinction between synchronous and asynchronous communication. The latter involves a delay, and can be seen in instances such as emails, Facebook wall posts, and Instagram comments. This stands in contrast to video calls on Zoom or via instant messaging—although delays can also occur in the latter, and rapid interactions can speed up traditionally asynchronous methods. For one participant, our asynchronous exchanges resulted in quick yet poetic reflections, solidifying the written formulation's ability to compose ourselves better. But I was keen to delve deeper, especially given that we did not know each other personally; I longed for the surrounding informal conversation. However, a delay at my end broke the conversation and trust. This incident influenced my methods and raised unresolved dilemmas about response times and setting boundaries within the online field site.

Here, I briefly include a comparative discussion on Zoom. Whilst there are advantages in Zoom's wide-reaching ability, Baym (2015) goes on to discuss real-time media's failure in hosting large groups. Maria's experience with a Zoom memorial service underscores the challenge of creating privacy and intimacy within large group settings. She called it, 'a weird interaction', but one that was also emotional. She explained that, whilst it was great that everyone could join, even unexpected guests like a half-brother with whom they were not close, its weirdness lay in the fact that everyone was otherwise talking at the same volume, to everyone or to no one. Sometimes people forgot their microphones were on, everyone was chatting at once, and it was impossible to have side conversations; if you wanted to speak, you turned your microphone on and announced to all. Of course, Zoom offers the private messaging function and breakout rooms, but engaging with these creates formality and removes spontaneity from interactions.

In contexts where public and private boundaries are blurred, researchers face the challenge of weighing potential benefits against the risk of exposing participants in traceable spaces (Carmack and DeGroot 2014). A smaller-sized ethnography can mitigate these challenges, allowing deeper engagement with clearer participatory dynamics and individual variations. Careful consideration must always be given to ensure no harm is brought to participants (Thomas 1996).

SHARED ANTHROPOLOGY

Collaboration is integral to this ongoing research project and, as mentioned at the outset, I have applied filmmaker and anthropologist Jean Rouch's (1995) concept of *shared anthropology*—creating cinema based on collaboration and participatory methods—to this research. Rouch's technique involved 'feedback screenings' with the people with whom he made the films, and he would then make changes to the films based on their remarks. Luke Eric Lassiter (2005) and other scholars also advocate for a collaborative process at every stage of ethnographic research. When doing ethnography online, collaboration became vital to ensure trust and understanding at a time when offline exchanges were impossible. Applying these techniques, a draft of this paper was shared with participants in November 2021 for their approval, consent, and if they wanted to add anything before the final submission. I marked out the parts which were directly related to them, although they were welcome to read the entire text and thus context. At times, I have inserted footnotes and comments where participants' feedback or additional information was added—inspired by John Creswell's (2013) theory of *member checking* to validate the researcher's findings and allow participants to fill in areas that are missing. Participant approval was key; as a result, I have not included quotes shared by two participants who did not respond when I sent a draft of this paper. The slow-paced approach to this research—from initial interviews in 2020 to final revisions following peer review in 2023—allowed for sustainable collaboration, validation, and distance. However, rapid technological changes posed challenges, constantly making elements redundant. Regardless, this process has encouraged my interest in the action as opposed to the end result, 'I prefer to emphasize storytelling over stories—the social process rather than the product of narrative activity' (Jackson 2013: 37). I am fascinated by the unfinished processes: a constant dialogue between the narrator and the narrated, the self and the other, and the public and the private. This approach further paves the way for a shared anthropology as the stories are exchanged with participants who simultaneously add to and subtract elements from the conversation. Moreover, regular sharing and updating has helped strengthen the relationships with my participants.

Given the project's consistently malleable nature, I agree with Colin Young (1974: 133) in that there cannot be only one methodological approach: 'Any intellectual discipline will outgrow its early enthusiasms and change its methodologies.' I believe this adjustability also extends to ethical guidelines. Some scholars argue for formal rules (King 1996), others follow a teleological approach to guidelines (Boehlefeld 1996; Thomas 1996), and others recognise ethics as emerging out of a participatory process with the group under study (Allen 1996). I draw from the teleological approach, whilst leaning towards Christina Allen's negotiated ethics—some guidelines are important for research integrity, but researchers must still recognise each unique research context and involve participants throughout. Regularly revisiting my fieldnotes allowed offline reflection on effective and adjustable methods, like being responsive whilst still maintaining boundaries.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND LIMITATIONS

As noted previously, I engaged with a diverse global cohort. Whilst the taboo surrounding death has been shifting with internet prevalence (Sofka 2020), nuanced distinctions in attitudes

emerged within my study. Yet, additional research is required to fully understand these sentiments; considering the offline contexts of internet research can enhance the whole ethnography (Davies 2007). For Josefina in Mexico, she believes that due to their Day of the Dead, they have a more open attitude to mortality—and this also extends to the digital afterlife. On this day, they create altars for their late friends, photograph them, upload them to Facebook and Instagram, and tag their remembering profiles.[10] However, she also attributes this to the prior digital relationship she had with these friends, in comparison to her father, with whom she never had a digital relationship. In addition, she states:

> I think it creates a certain kind of feeling of community—like, you are not alone in this. If I post something like 'hey, I miss you' then another friend would say, 'hey, I was also thinking of him and I also miss him.' And then maybe you would say, 'well, let's have a drink for him' or things like that. It creates this kind of feeling that maybe... I don't know, maybe this digital thing, it's easier...

The immediate, interactive sense of community fosters continuing bonds with departed loved ones and ensures they remain present across their social media networks. As noted, the impact of prior digital relationships on engagement levels along with cultural differences demands further research for a more sufficient analysis.

CONCLUSIONS

We might be catching up with technology, yet we are becoming increasingly entangled as we do so. Conflicting sentiments arise, our memories are tested and challenged, and our relationship towards the dead online complicates. Whilst some find solace in continuing their bonds with the deceased, others, namely, UK-based Filipo who unfollowed his late friend's Facebook profile, feel these digital presences complicate their grieving. This research is testament to grief's diversity. Most of my participants were unsure as to how to handle their own digital remains, and I, too, remain undecided.

The rapidly changing nature of the internet and uncertainties arising out of death's shift online constantly pose new challenges in digital death research, necessitating a continually evolving set of methods. Being reflexive (Behar 2003), open and adaptable to emerging factors, and transparent strengthens research methods, and detailing these experiences can assist future scholars in the field. A participatory process at every stage of the research is not only integral for ensuring no harm is brought to participants, but it also reinforces the research's validity through techniques such as member checking and Rouch's (1995) shared anthropology. Working towards a shared anthropology digitally follows a similar trajectory to offline research through regular communication, and clearly exchanging with participants removes the need for passive, unethical lurking, allowing the researcher to engage in deeper ethnographic research. Moreover, my openness (not only through my shared misfortune) became particularly vital when building trust online, especially amongst people with whom I was previously unacquainted. The constant online availability removes geographical barriers, however, and care must be taken to prevent exhaustion from an online field site. The technological shield and privacy paradox aid the sharing of grief online, and this research's lengthy timeframe removes impatient demands. Whilst further steps can be taken, this approach encourages the dismantling of hierarchies and provides opportunities for

a more collaborative form of storytelling online. Yet, barriers remain in collating and shaping the research outputs; ultimately, the question of authorship still stands, and I do not expect all participants to freely read the entirety of this academic paper in order to provide feedback. Furthermore, with this academic paper as the current research's only output, the issue of accessibility remains unresolved.

By conducting a multi-sited ethnography, and drawing from critical race theory, I have addressed the sociocultural and sociopolitical impacts which are underexplored in the field of digital death and the digital afterlife. The internet is not neutral, algorithmic prompts can be insensitive towards grief, and the ability of others to hijack and craft identities of the deceased are increasing phenomena, which demand greater oversight regarding the privacy of the dead. Thus, navigating an online field site requires attention to detail to authentically understand certain scenarios. This is where additional offline research can enhance digital ethnographies by strengthening findings and authenticity, and provide opportunities for easier collaboration such as through in-person workshops.

As I collate fragments of my research from the internet's depths across multiple platforms, I recognise the importance of maintaining oversight and ethical data management. Particularly within the hands of mega-corporations, the urgency of downloading and saving data to regain (some sense of) control is evident. Online personal data are often taken for granted as 'immortal', but recurring instances—from Li's loss of her dad's QQ chats to Elon Musk's sweeping statements regarding X's account deletion—demonstrate how such data are not permanent and invariably remain out of our control. Markham's (2012) fabrication methods have proved useful in protecting participants' privacy, and I appreciated rather quickly that publicly available content does not imply consent for wider sharing. Themes like cultural differences, the racialised landscape of the internet, the privacy of the dead, and legal procedures related to afterlives require further research—further highlighting the sprawling, rich nature of this field. In addition, the emergence of companies offering 'immortal' promises and digital afterlife management add other dimensions. Combining research findings with methodological challenges contextualises the research and highlights the significance of a reflexive approach, whilst maintaining a wider audience through storytelling. To close, I must stress that this research is ongoing, mimicking the unfinished processes that live on after death, and the need for an adaptable set of methods. Thus, the question of collaborative grief storytelling via the internet is more than a methodological query, rather an incomplete exploration into the evolving landscape of technology, mortality, and human emotions. On that note, I must again call HSBC—the issue with my late father's account remains unresolved.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to the people who shared their stories for this research—from brief messages to those who engaged via video call and read a draft of this paper. Their willingness to contribute freely is much appreciated. The initial opportunity to write this paper emerged from the EASA 2020 panel *Methodologies off- and online: doing ethnographically ethically in the digital age* and I wish to thank the panel organisers for facilitating this ongoing discussion. Additionally, the peer review process

significantly enhanced this paper; I am delighted they embraced the spirit of collaboration and generously guided the re-submission of this final article, thank you.

ELLEN LAPPER
VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGIST
INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR
ellenlapper@gmail.com

NOTES

1 When writing a draft of this paper in 2021, Chadwick Boseman's same post had 7.7 million likes and 3.1 million reposts (formerly retweets). Investigating the cause for this drop is beyond the scope of this essay, but serves here to highlight the ephemeral nature of the internet and who controls it.

2 To protect and respect the identity of the participants, all names used here are pseudonyms.

3 As Harju and Huhtamäki (2021: 5) note, '[d]espite "afterlife" implying eternal existence, data have a life cycle and are not permanent or forever lasting, but like all material things, are subject to disappearance and decay.' The use of immortal has, therefore, been placed in inverted commas, since it is often implied, yet should not be taken for granted.

4 Recent examples include exhibition format at PACT Zollverein, Essen (2022) and Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris (2021), as well as conference presentations at DGSKA (2023), RAI (2023), EASA (2020), BSA Social Aspects of Death, Dying and Bereavement (2020).

5 Given my background in visual anthropology, I aim to create a visual representation of this research to increase accessibility. As a result of their parallel development, methods relating to the written and visual elements often intersect—for example, a shared anthropology. Similarly, both draw from experimental ethnography, a term, which 'has begun to circulate in post-colonial anthropological theory as a way of referring to discourse that circumvents the empiricism and objectivity conventionally linked to ethnography' (Russell 1999: xi).

6 The Facebook post received 66 Likes, 9 Facebook 'love' reactions, and 9 shares—some calling for participants, others resonating with my prior research (I also shared my 2017 paper). The Instagram post received 107 Likes and 13 comments including research suggestions and expressions of support and connection. Whilst there may be multiple motives for engaging with the 'Like' button, with liking the content being the most obvious, 'Liking' also expresses support and maintains relationships (Levordashka, Utz and Ambros 2016).

7 Upon sharing a draft of this paper with Josefina, she added: 'At the beginning, you mentioned that you only had participants identify as female, but later I saw a Filipo participating and was called a he, just this confused me a bit.' To clarify, although those with whom I engaged via video call identified as female, this paper includes messages exchanged with people of other genders, like Filipo.

8 'It is not surprising that exposure to death, in whatever form, often discomforts us. The industrial and medical revolutions drove a wedge between the living and the dead, shunting the dying into hospitals and the deceased into climate-controlled mortuaries and large, purpose-built cemeteries in the suburbs' (Savin-Baden and Mason-Robbie 2020: 28).

9 To delve into this topic is too broad for this paper, and regulations vary per country. In addition, despite procedures such as the Facebook Legacy Contact, there has been little uptake, which the lack of information and reluctance to deal with one's own death may explain (Morse and Birnhack 2020).

10 After reading a draft copy of this paper in November 2021, Josefina reflected on the ease with which digital media allows more frequent and immediate interactions on the Day of the Dead, 'How do we share with the other family members? Social media: Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp. And talking about and laughing about our loved ones, [we] would have a hectic night visiting all (...) gave warmth to our hearts.'

REFERENCES

Akhther, Najma, and Dinah A. Tetteh 2021. Global Mediatized Death and Emotion: Parasocial Grieving—Mourning #stephenhawking on Twitter. *OMEGA – Journal of Death and Dying* 87 (1): 126–145. https://doi.org/10.1177/00302228211014775.

Allen, Christina 1996. What's Wrong with the 'Golden Rule'? Conundrums of Conducting Ethical Research in Cyberspace. *The Information Society* 12 (2): 175–188. https://doi.org/10.1080/713856146.

Barnes, S. B. 2006. A Privacy Paradox: Social Networking in the United States. *First Monday* 11 (9). https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v11i9.1394.

Baym, Nancy K. 2015. *Personal Connections in the Digital Age. Second Edition.* Polity: Malden, MA.

Behar, Ruth 1996. *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart.* Boston: Beacon.

Behar, Ruth 2003. Ethnography and the Book that was Lost. *Ethnography* 4 (1): 15–39. https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138103004001002.

Beneito-Montagut, Roser, Arantza Begueria, and Nizaiá Cassián 2017. Doing Digital Team Ethnography: Being There Together and Digital Social Data. *Qualitative Research* 17 (6): 664–682. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794117724500.

Bengtsson, Stina 2014. Faraway, so Close! Proximity and Distance in Ethnography Online. *Media, Culture & Society* 36 (6): 862–877. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443714531195.

Bingaman, James 2022 [2020]. "Dude I've Never Felt This Way Towards a Celebrity Death": Parasocial Grieving and the Collective Mourning of Kobe Bryant on Reddit. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying* 86 (2): 364–381. https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222820971531.

Boehlefeld, Sharon Polancic 1996. Doing the Right Thing: Ethical Cyberspace Research. *The Information Society* 12 (2): 141–152. https://doi.org/10.1080/713856136.

Boellstorff, Tom, Celia Pearce, T. L. Taylor, and Bonnie Nardi (eds) 2012. *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Boseman, Chadwick 2020. X. https://twitter.com/chadwickboseman/status/1299530165463199747. <Accessed 31 August 2023>.

Boseman, Chadwick 2021. X. https://twitter.com/chadwickboseman/status/1397585337896030215. <Accessed 31 August 2023>

Bridle, James 2018. *New Dark Age. Technology, Knowledge and the End of the Future*. London and New York: Verso.

Brubaker, Jed R., Gillian R. Hayes, and Paul Dourish 2013. Beyond the Grave: Facebook as a Site for the Expansion of Death and Mourning. *The Information Society* 29 (3): 152–163. https://doi.org/10.1080/01972243.2013.777300.

Bruckman, Amy 2002. Studying the Amateur Artist: A Perspective On Disguising Data Collected in Human Subjects Research on the Internet. *Ethics and Information Technology* 4 (3): 217–231. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1021316409277.

Carmack, Heather J., and Jocelyn M. DeGroot 2014. Exploiting Loss?: Ethical Considerations, Boundaries, and Opportunities for the Study of Death and Grief Online. *OMEGA – Journal of Death and Dying* 68 (4): 315–335. https://doi.org/10.2190/OM.68.4.b.

Carr, Deborah, Kathrin Boerner, and Sara Moorman 2020. Bereavement in the Time of Coronavirus: Unprecedented Challenges Demand Novel Interventions. *Journal of Aging & Social Policy* 32 (4–5): 425–431. https://doi.org/10.1080/08959420.2020.1764320.

Charmaz, Kathy 2014. *Constructing Grounded Theory*. London: SAGE.

Christensen, Dorthe Refslund, and Stine Gotved 2015. Online Memorial Culture: An Introduction. *New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia* 21 (1–2): 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1080/13614568.2015.988455.

Creswell, John W. 2013. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*. London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi: SAGE Publications.

Davies, Charlotte Aull 2007. *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others.* New York and London: Routledge.

DeGroot, Jocelyn M., and Heather J Carmack 2012. Blogging as a Means of Grieving. In Tatyana Dumova and Richard Fiordo (eds). *Blogging in the Global Society: Cultural, Political and Geographical Aspects*. Hershey, PA: IGI Global.

Facebook 2023a. *What will happen to my Facebook account if I pass away?* Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/help/103897939701143/. <Accessed 28 February 2023>

Facebook 2023b. *About memorialised accounts*. Facebook. https://www.facebook.com/help/1017717331640041/. <Accessed 28 February 2023>

Frömming, Urte Undine, Steffen Köhn, Samantha Fox, and Mike Terry (eds) 2017. An Introduction. In Urte Undine Frömming, Steffen Köhn, Samantha Fox, Mike Terry (eds). *Digital Environments: Ethnographic Perspectives across Global Online and Offline Spaces*. Bielefeld: transcript.

Goggin, Gerard, and Larissa Hjorth 2014. *The Routledge Companion to Mobile Media*. London: Routledge.

GOV.UK. 2023. *Apply for a Gender Recognition Certificate*. GOV.UK. https://www.gov.uk/apply-gender-recognition-certificate/who-can-apply <Accessed 14 February 2023>.

Harju, Anu, and Jukka Huhtamäki 2021. '#hellobrother needs to trend': Methodological Reflections on the Digital and Emotional Afterlife of Mediated Violence. *International Review of Sociology* 31 (2): 310–341. https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2021.1947951.

Hastings, Sally O., George W. Musambira, and Judith D. Hoover 2007. Community as a Key to Healing After the Death of a Child. *Commun Med.* 4 (2): 153–163. https://doi.org/10.1515/cam.2007.019.

Henrickson, Leah 2023. Chatting with the Dead: the hermeneutics of thanabots. *Media, Culture & Society 0* (0): 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437221147626.

Hine, Christine 2000. *Virtual Ethnography*. London: Sage.

HSBC 2023. *About HSBC*. https://www.about.hsbc.co.uk. <Accessed 1 September 2023>

Jackson, Michael 2013. *The Politics of Storytelling: Variations on a theme by Hannah Arendt*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, University of Copenhagen.

Jovicic, Suzana 2022. The Affective Triad: Smartphone in the Ethnographic Encounter. In *Media and Communication* 10 (3): 225–235. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v10i3.5331.

Kardashian, Kim 2020. X. https://twitter.com/KimKardashian/status/1321955644736303104 <Accessed 28 February 2023>.

Kasket, Elaine 2019. *All the ghosts in the machine*. London: Robinson.

Kaufmann, Katja, and Monika Palmberger 2022. Doing Research at Online and Offline Intersections: Bringing Together Digital and Mobile Methodologies. In *Media and Communication* 10 (3): 219–224. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v10i3.6227.

Kneese, Tamara 2023. *Death Glitch: How Techno-Solutionism Fails Us in This Life and Beyond*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

King, Storm, A. 1996. Researching Internet Communities: Proposed Ethical Guidelines for the Reporting of Results. *The Information Society* 12 (2): 119–128. https://doi.org/10.1080/713856145.

Klass, Dennis, Phillis R. Silverman, and Steven Nickman 1996. *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*. Philadelphia: Taylor & Francis.

Kokolakis, Spyros 2017. Privacy Attitudes and Privacy Behaviour: A Review of Current Research on the Privacy Paradox Phenomenon. *Computers & Security* 64: 122–34. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cose.2015.07.002.

Lapper, Ellen 2017. How Has Social Media Changed the Way We Grieve? In Urte Undine Frömming, Steffen Köhn, Samantha Fox, and Mike Terry (eds). *Digital Environments: Ethnographic Perspectives across Global Online and Offline Spaces*. Bielefeld: transcript.

Lassiter, Luke Eric 2005. *The Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Levordashka, Ana, Sonja Utz, and Renee Ambros 2016. What's in a Like? Motivations for Pressing the Like Button. *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media* 10 (1): 623–626. https://doi.org/10.1609/icwsm.v10i1.14768.

Malinowski, Bronisław 1932 [1922]. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagos of Melanesian New Guinea*. London: Routledge.

Marcus, George E. 1995. Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24: 95–117. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.an.24.100195.000523.

Meese, James, Bjorn Nansen, Tamara Kohn, Michael Arnold, and Martin Gibbs 2015. Posthumous Personhood and the Affordances of Digital Media. *Mortality* 20 (4): 408–420. https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2015.1083724.

Markham, Annette 2012. Fabrication as Ethical Practice: Qualitative Inquiry in Ambiguous Internet contexts. *Information, Communication & Society* 15 (3): 334–353. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2011.641993.

Morse, Tal, and Michael Birnhack 2020. The Posthumous Privacy Paradox: Privacy Preferences and Behavior Regarding Digital Remains. *New Media & Society* 24 (6): 1343–1362. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820974955.

Musk, Elon. 2023. X. https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1655608985058267139 <Accessed 31 August 2023>.

Narayan, Kirin 2020. Ethnographic Writing with Kirin Narayan. In Carole McGranahan (ed.). *Writing Anthropology: Essays on Craft & Commitment*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Noble, Safiya Umoja 2018. Close-Up: Black Images Matter: Critical Surveillance Literacy in Social Media: Interrogating Black Death and Dying Online. *Black Camera: An International Film Journal* 9 (2): 147–160. https://doi.org/10.2979/blackcamera.9.2.10.

Öhman, Carl J., and David Watson 2019. Are the Dead Taking over Facebook? A Big Data Approach to the Future of Death Online. In *Big Data & Society* 6 (1). https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951719842540.

Pink, Sarah 2017. Foreword. In Urte Undine Frömming, Steffen Köhn, Samantha Fox, Mike Terry (eds). *Digital Environments: Ethnographic Perspectives across Global Online and Offline Spaces*. Bielefeld: transcript.

Pink, Sarah, Elisenda Ardèvol, and Dèbora Lanzeni 2016. *Digital Materialities. Design and Anthropology*. Oxford: Bloomsbury Academic.

Pink, Sarah, Heather Horst, John Postill, Larissa Hjorth, Tania Lewis, and Jo Tacchi (eds.) 2016. *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice*. London: SAGE.

Pitsillides, Stacey, and Jayne Wallace 2021. Physically Distant but Socially Connected: Streaming Funerals, Memorials and Ritual Design During COVID-19. In Panagiotis Pentaris (ed). *Death, Grief and Loss in the Context of COVID-19*. London: Routledge.

Rouch, Jean 1995. The Camera and Man. In Hockings, Paul (ed). *Principles of Visual Anthropology*. Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Russell, Catherine 1999. *Experimental Ethnography*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Savin-Baden, Maggi, and David Burden 2019. Digital Immortality and Virtual Humans. *Postdigital Science and Education* 1: 87–103. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-018-0007-6.

Savin-Baden, Maggi, and Victoria Mason-Robbie 2020. *Digital Afterlife: Death Matters in a Digital Age*. Boca Raton: CRC Press.

Sofka, Carla 1997. Social Support "Internetworks," Caskets for Sale, and More: Thanatology and the Information Superhighway. *Death Studies* 21 (6): 553–574. https://doi.org/10.1080/074811897201778.

Sofka, Carla 2020. The Transition from Life to the Digital Afterlife: Thanatechnology and Its Impact on Grief. In Savin-Baden, Maggi and Mason-Robbie, Victoria (eds). *Digital Afterlife: Death Matters in a Digital Age*. Boca Raton: CRC Press.

Statista 2023. Number of Monthly Active Facebook Users Worldwide as of 2nd Quarter 2023. *Statista*. https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/. <Accessed 1 September 2023>

Sutherland, Tonia 2017. 'Making a Killing': On Race, Ritual, and (Re)membering in Digital Culture. *Preservation, Digital Technology & Culture* 46 (1): 36–40. https://doi.org/10.1515/pdtc-2017-0025.

Stokes, Patrick 2021. *Digital Souls: A Philosophy of Online Death*. London: Bloomsbury.

Tanksley, Tiera 2022. Race, Education and #BlackLivesMatter: How Online Transformational Resistance Shapes the Offline Experiences of Black College-Age Women. *Urban Education* 0 (0): 1–29. https://doi.org/10.1177/00420859221092970.

Thomas, Jim 1996. Introduction: A Debate about the Ethics of Fair Practices for Collecting Social Science Data in Cyberspace. *The Information Society* 12 (2): 107–118. https://doi.org/10.1080/713856137.

Ugoretz, Kaitlyn 2017. *A Guide to Unobtrusive Methods in Digital Ethnography*. Unpublished. https://www.academia.edu/38419837/A_Guide_to_Unobstrusive_Methods_in_Digital_Ethnography. <Accessed 30 January 2023>

Walter, Tony, Rachid Hourizi, Wendy Moncur, and Stacey Pitsillides 2011. Does the Internet Change How We Die and Mourn? Overview and Analysis. *OMEGA – Journal of Death and Dying* 64 (4): 275–302. https://doi.org/10.2190/OM.64.4.a.

Wark, McKenzie 2019. *Capital Is Dead: Is This Something Worse?* London and New York: Verso.

Waterston, Alisse, and Barbara Rylko-Bauer 2006. Out of the Shadows of History and Memory: Personal Family Narratives in Ethnographies of Rediscovery. *American Ethnologist* 33 (3). 397–412. https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.2006.33.3.397.

Young, Colin 1974. Observational Cinema. In Paul Hockings (ed). *Principles of Visual Anthropology*. Berlin and New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Tero Frestadius

LECTIO PRÆCURSORIA

A Bed Behind the Portrait: An Ethnography Around Images in Segregated Los Angeles

15 June, 2022, Univeristy of Helsinki

ABSTRACT

A lectio præcursoria is a short presentation read out loud by a doctoral candidate at the start of a public thesis examination in Finland. It introduces the key points or central argument of the thesis in a way that should make the ensuing discussion between the examinee and the examiner apprehensible to the audience, many of whom may be unfamiliar with the candidate's research or even anthropological research in general.

'Honoured Custos, honoured Opponent,
members of the audience'

The title of the dissertation I will defend today is 'A bed behind the portrait: an ethnography around images in segregated Los Angeles'. By now, I have written many first sentences like this to introduce this research, to try to capture the readers' attention, and to urge them to read on, or in this case, to continue listening.

Here is the sentence I originally wanted start out with today: 'This is an anthropological study of people doing art in a transforming city, where the divided urban space of yesterday was predicted to give way for more open and inclusive patterns of coexistence and interaction'.

But, this is just a difficult way to say that this thesis is about art in a segregated city becoming gentrified. The introduction to the final version of my dissertation begins with the following words: 'This ethnography moves around art to trace out how people make do with differences historically fixed into their urban surroundings'.

This is verbose and horribly vague, but it reinforces the title and makes it absolutely clear that this is an urban ethnography with a focus on art and people doing things around it.

For the abstract, which needs to be more concise, I wrote: 'The research examines the legacy of segregation at the center of urban America in 2017'.

This is still rather general. But, it is straightforward and compact. No hovering around art works or 'differences fixed into urban surroundings', **but** the 'legacy of segregation at the center of urban America in 2017'. This is all American apartheid, riot gear, and burning buildings. Of course, I would have wanted to say, 'urban America **today**' to tap into and foster this sense of urgency that for the last ten years has surrounded these issues, and which I have also felt following media reports of police violence from the United States. To say 'today' would also imply that this account of events that took

place in Los Angeles in 2017 is still somehow relevant today, five years later. I leave that up to the reader to decide. But to be specific, I am stuck with 2017, a year when no buildings were set on fire in LA—by protesters, that is.

Now, I have put a lot of work into first sentences because it has been rather important for me to come up with a sufficiently dramatic and effective introduction to a dissertation that in fact makes for a *very boring read*. You might think that boring is good, that it offers certain proof that this is rigorous scientific research, which is often detailed and boring. Well, this is not that kind of boring. Personally, I think this research is so boring for a few related reasons and it is these reasons that I want to talk about today. First, aside from the occasional uprisings, there is something very boring about the legacy of segregation in urban America. And, second, there is something exceptionally boring about the way I have chosen to write about it. Segregation has been researched to death and I have nothing to add to this line of inquiry. The truth is that this could have been a dissertation about 'gentrifying Los Angeles' or 'transforming Los Angeles'. I chose to focus on segregation because it has helped me to understand Los Angeles as a city and to understand people's reactions to the changes, to all the 'gentrifying' and 'transforming' taking place in LA in 2017.

In my work, I approach segregation as the process via which a hierarchical racial taxonomy from the eighteenth-century becomes a material form in an American city. The story goes that during a crucial moment in United States history—before and after wars when much of urban America was being built—an evolutionist racist ideology is reproduced in a study on the effects that different racial and national groups had on land-use values in cities. These findings were then used to craft lending standards at the federal level, which in turn were adopted by real estate and insurance industries across the US. Thus, the Federal Housing Administration institutionalised racial discrimination in cities and formalised a racial hierarchy in urban space in the United States, including in Los Angeles. This is not the most dramatic story, even in this rather simplistic form, but it has carried grave consequences. The effects of racial segregation in American cities have been seen for decades through disparities in wealth and the concentration of poverty, schooling, policing practices, spatial politics that works in the logic of designated territories, a sense of isolation, and day-to-day experiences of suspicion, resentment, and hate. Like I said, this is nothing new and, in 2017, versions of this story were presented by journalists, scholars, neighbourhood organisers, and housing activist in Los Angeles who were now rallying against the gentrification of the segregated geography.

To gain a better sense of the Los Angeles I became familiar with in 2017—the city and the neighbourhoods that this work focuses on—you need to add to this segregated urban landscape a crisis in affordable housing and a surge in the homeless population. These populations erected makeshift camps, sometimes set up by the building sites marking the expansion of public transit and the boom in transit-oriented development supported by city officials. These city officials were in turn supported by the developers building the shopping malls and market-rate housing in these long-disinvested neighbourhoods. You need to add Donald Trump being in office, news of white supremacist rallies across the country, and no end to officer-involved shootings of young Black and Latino men. You need to add coffee shops, art galleries, artisan donuts, and vintage clothing stores, speculators, white people in jogging outfits, and real estate tours on bicycle. And, of course, you need to add international artists painting

beautiful murals on top of it all. The outcome was a rather tense situation, where many people felt sufficiently threatened to declare that they would stand their ground—that is, those who thought they had some kind of ground to stand on.

Doing socio-scientific research about urban space, public art, gentrification, or police violence for that matter in a city where racial categories have informed the spatial distribution of people, it is obviously useful to talk about the populations depicted by these categories. It is also self-evident that this level of abstraction is essential for social justice work and advocacy work surrounding such issues. This is something that social scientists are intimately familiar with, for the social sciences are often about generalisation, about simplifying complex social phenomenon. In light of the history of segregation it made perfect sense to treat communities as if they were synonymous with populations and territories, to talk about people as if they were synonymous with communities and cultures, to point out that white people were now jogging and walking their dogs in neighbourhoods that Black people had once fought hard to move into, neighbourhoods that Latinx artists and entrepreneurs had brought to life with art and culture. But, it is this talk in terms of categories, populations, and communities—connected with the strong sentiments involved, and this ever-present sense of confrontation—that takes me to the second reason why this study can be such a boring read—specifically, that is, the way in which I have chosen to write about it. More precisely, I mean by this my passion for seemingly trivial detail and my focus on the efforts of a single person.

As tensions rose, this discussion around gentrification in the media and in public oratory tended to grow more polarised and more coarse-grained. The actors involved in the narratives circulating developed from persons into abstractions, portraits of categories carrying the full weight of history with them. While this occurred, my own research led me through more familiar, more easily recognisable social scenes where very few people spoke in unison or ever fully agreed on anything for that matter. In fact, they were often debating the same issues, figuring out spatial politics, issues of race, identity, and entitlement, ownership, and representation, only with more circumstance and nuance involved. These discussions took place in meetings of all sorts, in front of murals being painted, or around art projects. In my dissertation, I have tried to grant proper space to these reflections in all of their detail, to display what the distanced view on the disenfranchised did not. The ideal way for me to account for the practicalities and the ever-so-significant particulars involved relied on focusing on the efforts of a single person. This person was Nery, a son of Guatemalan parents born in Los Angeles who was trying to make a living by painting murals on walls. During the time that I followed him in 2017, Nery was all over the place, trespassing across all these supposedly rigid lines, enforcing and drawing borders in the next moment, and then critically dismantling them. Following Nery's attempt to establish a public art nonprofit and his various engagements around arts turned into a topsy-turvy ride that for me seemed to pierce right through these clear-cut narratives about what was happening in the city.

Nery wanted to paint the courtyard of the new vegan coffee shop, just as he had painted the walls of the corner store that was really just a front for a local drug seller's point of operation. He had organised against an upcoming development, the same development that was now paying him to paint a communal mural. He

both supported and ridiculed local organisers and activists, in whose rhetoric of decolonisation and empowerment he was well versed. But, he also sometimes switched to the creativity and art-talk that accompanied the changes taking place in the city, according to which all walls could be repainted. That is, focus points could be created out of thin air, and blighted areas could be transformed overnight. The point I am trying to make here is that Nery was far from the internally resolved, coherent subject that in some media stories was displaced from his own neighbourhood through gentrification. Unlike some of the people in New York Sudhir Venkatesh (2014) discussed in his book *Floating City*, Nery was not so much floating on top of the spatial and racial divisions around him, as much as he was using them to move his weight around. Nery's method of movement depended on the gravities of the situations around him and, although he did not get to where he was going, he was exceptionally well skilled in manoeuvring around South Los Angeles. After all, he had grown up in this shifting landscape of gang territories that teaches one at a very young age to read and to manipulate subtle signs in space, space that is always political in more ways than one, and which, therefore, always has a grey area allowing for undetermined movement.

To someone who has not read the work, this might sound exciting, like 'anything can happen here'. Well, it was not and not much actually happened. The segregated landscape had across years acquired a mass, a heaviness and durability that offered resistance to change. Thus, while this thesis sometimes reads like a corrosion of categories and divisions that appear to be so at odds with the social complexity of the place, with people's experience and self-understanding, the same categories and divisions re-emerge on the next page. They were built into the city as were the relations between people living there, and they continued to help to make sense of the environment. Together with the social complexity, this ensured that making anything happen took a lot of tiring, mundane work and had a very good chance of ending up in a bitter dispute over boundaries and ownership. This process of divisions breaking down, falling apart, and becoming reinstated recurs in the dissertation's primary ethnographic accounts of people doing art. The first of these is an account of a communal art project on gentrification and the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Los Angeles riots. This project demonstrates how images intentionally or in all innocence provided a tangible form to social formations and how this made it difficult to create effective public representations that would not run counter to more intimate and volatile social realities on the ground. Secondly, the same process recurs and was commented on in the works that young aspiring artists displayed in galleries across the city. Here, art provided a means for self-reflection, a capacity employed by young artists trying to break into the art market with or without an ethnic or place-based label attached to them or their work. In their travels across social contexts, these artworks enabled the artists and their audience to critically examine the 'operational infrastructure' of their own making and reception to quote Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov (2013: 5).

Thirdly and most importantly, a common thread running through the study is the description of a dispute around a single wall in Historic South Central, historically an African American neighbourhood now populated by recently arrived Central American immigrants. I have tried my best to unpack the layers involved in the intentions and actions around this wall, the conflicting claims about the significance of the location that for one moment brought together world-renown street artists, activists,

business owners, historians, and local teenagers. The funny thing is, that while the events around the two consecutive murals painted at this street corner brings together, in my mind, the effects of speculation, the housing crisis, and the legacy of segregation in a fairly unexpected and even comical manner, the final mural painted on the wall loyally reproduces an image of Black and brown unity that from the outside looks like a very conventional representation of ethnic division and cooperation. However, I suggest that reading through this sometimes boring and sometimes tedious description that is my thesis can make a difference here. It can help to show that the conventionality displayed in the image was intentional and hid from view the serious social and moral complexity involved in the mural's making. It also helps to show that while seemingly fixated on the past and on colour, the mural was also one person's investment in the future, and that this message of solidarity was also a form of property laden with potentiality. Linking together various forms of social agency, the mural also served as a relational enactment offering people perspectives on one another. Fundamentally, we humans are creatures with fuzzy edges, creatures who live their lives in relation to and—to a varying degree—inside each other.

This research is an ethnography based on interviews, recordings, photographs, and detailed notes made during eleven months of fieldwork in Los Angeles. It is not a theoretical work in any meaningful sense, nor a scientific one, although I have stayed true to the material at my disposal. This work is based on the naïve belief that we people have the capacity to internalise each other's points of view—however imperfectly—and that to try to do so is worth the trouble.

Thank you.

TERO FRESTADIUS
PH.D.
SOCIAL & CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI
tero.frestadius@gmail.com

REFERENCES

Ssorin-Chaikov, Nikolai 2013. Ethnographic Conceptualism. *Laboratorium: Russian Review of Social Research* 5 (2): 5–18.

Venkatesh, Sudhir 2014. *The Floating City: A Rogue Sociologist Lost and Found in New York's Underground Economy*. New York: Penguin Books. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0092055x15620157.

Saana Hansen

LECTIO PRÆCURSORIA

The Economies of Care and Politics of Return: Sustaining Life Among Injivas and Their Families in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

4 February, 2023, University of Helsinki

ABSTRACT

A lectio præcursoria is a short presentation read out loud by a doctoral candidate at the start of a public thesis examination in Finland. It introduces the key points or central argument of the thesis in a way that should make the ensuing discussion between the examinee and the examiner apprehensible to the audience, many of whom may be unfamiliar with the candidate's research or even anthropological research in general.

Madam Custos, Madam Opponent, Ladies and Gentlemen, I am happy to welcome you all to this defense.

In August 2018, when I started my eight-month-long fieldwork period in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe had just held historical elections, the first since Independence in 1980 in which Robert Mugabe was not a candidate. Ten months earlier, after 37 years in power, Mugabe had been forced to step down by the army and his own party. For multiple reasons, the decades since independence have been marked by political and economic conflicts and state violence, a lack of formal employment opportunities and the HIV/AIDS pandemic that overstretched kin networks to care for the needy. This caused intense out-migration and reliance on remittances. According to some estimates a quarter of Zimbabwe's population has left the country, mostly for South Africa (UNDP 2010).

Two weeks after my fieldwork started, the ruling party and Emmerson Mnangagwa, who had been in power since Mugabe's sacking, were declared to have won the elections. During my fieldwork, this 'New Dispensation' continued to use violent and lethal measures against those who did not agree with the election results, or those who protested against the tripled fuel price. Kilometer-long fuel queues, a lack of medicine and skilled workers, fluctuating currency rates, and increasing inflation occurred. Newspapers warned Zimbabwe of 'being at the crossroads of horror' (Daily News 2019), stating that 'the hope for the economy [was in] the hand[s] of the Zimbabwean diaspora' (Sunday News 2019). Yet getting passports and other ID documents to cross borders safely constituted a key challenge, although it did not stop people imagining or practicing mobile ways of life.

This is the political and economic space during which the majority of my data was collected. Together with many others, I call

it a crisis, or rather a situation of multiple, overlapping crises (see eg. Chiumbu and Musemwa 2012, Hammar 2014, Hammar et al 2010, Jaji 2021, Raftopoulos 2009). Given these conditions, Southern African migration scholars Jonathan Crush and Daniel Tevera (2010: 2) have asked 'who, why, and indeed how, anyone could stay in Zimbabwe?'. While migrant realities in South Africa are relatively well documented, accounts of return migration remain invisible in policy and scholarly accounts.

This was the starting point for my research. It motivated me to look at the outcome of the endemic crisis and displacement *inside* Zimbabwe, through the lens of those who return. Consequently, this dissertation that I defend today is about those who return from South Africa to Zimbabwe at various stages of their life-cycle – from the beginning to the end. It is an account of how people live in, rather than through crises (cf. Vigh 2008), and how they repair and continue life-sustaining relations and practices in both intimate and bureaucratic fields. These are – as the study demonstrates – often empirically inseparable in daily life. Further questions that have guided my research include, for instance: How are the ideals and experiences of belonging, as both citizenship and kinship, reshaped, and co-constituted in such conditions? What kind of institutions, subjectivities, categories, and conceptualizations of care have grown out them, and what kind of historical tales do they have? How is the image of a caring state constructed and maintained even though the state is also experienced through fear and suffering?

To address these questions, the study draws on nine months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in two periods: between August and September 2016 and from August 2018 until March 2019. Most data were collected in Bulawayo, but also in Johannesburg and border zones. The majority of my interlocutors were low-income Zimbabweans who had migrated to South Africa, people locally referred to with the historically and morally loaded term *injiva.* While some of them continued to live in South Africa, most had returned to Bulawayo – usually due to their difficulties in finding or maintaining livelihoods in South Africa. Besides *injivas* themselves, the ethnography also encompasses their families and the formal and informal bureaucrats that they encounter, representing the domains of migration management, cross-border mobility, child and community care, education, and family law. In addition, the study utilizes media and archival resources, as well as state documents and reports.

In principle, I think that one task of an ethnographer is to understand how people themselves experience and conceptualize life. Therefore, I use the term *injiva* instead of other alternatives, such as 'border jumper' or 'illegal migrant'. Although such state-centric labels *are* also locally recognized and reproduced, the term *injiva* captures aspects of reality that do not fit into such framings. Rooted in the colonial labour migration of men, today the *injiva* term also refers to the women and children who move to South Africa – and those who return. It continues to carry expectations of success and remittances, the ability to take suffering and risks, and to improvise. Yet, in lived reality, *injivas* often face great pressure and challenges if they are to fulfill this ideal.

Another local key term that runs throughout the thesis is *kiya-kiya* and its synonym *ukuhlanganisa*. My interlocutors defined them as 'mixing things in order to survive', 'running around and closing up economic gaps', 'making oneself useful', or just 'making a plan for today'. They refer to the urgent need to organize life so that needs are met today and is also a key attribute of

a successful *injiva*. Jeremy Jones (2010) has identified *kukiya-kiya* as the core to economic actions in 21st-century Zimbabwe. Building on his work, I argue that *kiya-kiya* does not only characterize people's efforts to generate *money* in the present. In situations where planning short and long-term futures is difficult, people make *zigzag* arrangements with other forms of making do that go beyond the labor market and economic production.

The thesis develops an analytic of 'economies of care', which forms the thread of this research. It helps to take advantage of the intensity of fieldwork and to problematize these complex 'mixing and matching' processes, and the multiplicity of relations, institutions, interactions, and rationalities through which people try to 'to hold things together in a livable way', to borrow from Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2011: 10). Certainly, the chapters of this dissertation illustrate how, in order to 'maintain, continue and repair life-worlds', as Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher (1990: 40) have defined caring, people claim access to various resources. These touch on concerns over practical childcare arrangements, access to remittances, spiritual and physical protection during journeys and border-crossings, agents and practices that can secure the dignified repatriation of infants or dead and dying bodies and safe journeys to the afterlife, and those facilitating access to global humanitarian care regimes and to custodial and maintenance rights. Entangled in these, a range of 'economies of mediation and fabrication', to use Madeleine Reeves's (2019: 26) terms, were critical.

At the center of economies of care is the endurance, creativity, and determination embedded in people's efforts to make a livable life. Indeed, crises, as Amanda Hammar (2014) has argued, do not only cause disruption and displacement. Paradoxically, they also generate new forms of life and living that coexist with various forms of everyday struggles. At the same time, lives are not just randomly organized in terms of daily labour to establish a sense of continuity and belonging but draw on and reconfigure historically constructed ideas and institutions of care. In short, economies of care and making-do operate at the intersection of logics, moral ideas, and affects, across time and space, and over generations.

The thesis begins with explanations of the key concepts of 'the state' and 'kinship' as central and intertwined domains in economies of care. Kinship and kin members, both dead and alive, were typically the first resort for those who needed care, which forced me to face my rather outdated understanding of what kinship studies in contemporary anthropology entail. Instead of looking at what kinship is – or is not – the material pressed me to think about how kinship is used to make claims on resources: how it is made and unmade; and how the lines of exclusion and inclusion have been revised when cultural and religious ideals are challenged by the practical pitfalls of daily life: for instance, in situations where one does not know where one's children will live next.

The dissertation also demonstrates how economies of care encompass not only the terrain of kinship, but also political and bureaucratic practices shaped by the crises, and various global child welfare institutions, categorizations, and ideologies: for instance, in relation to a 'child's best interest', and 'vulnerability'. Although the term 'state' was often used to refer to the ruling party, experienced through violence and mistrust, the study has shared the anthropological understanding that the state-in-practice works at different levels, in different subject areas, with different portfolios and operated by a variety of state agents (eg. Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014, Das and Poole 2004, Ferguson

and Gupta 2002, Hagmann and Péclard 2010, Sharma and Gupta 2006). Acknowledging that the everyday is an arena where learn something about the state, I accompanied my interlocutors through various governmental encounters to make sense of how the state was reproduced, and how the state agents themselves perceived their work, negotiated often conflicting demands made on them, and interacted with their 'clients' or 'cases'.

It is argued that states, in general, are doing less in terms of the care and welfare of their citizens and that 'the resources they are able to extract and distribute are becoming smaller' (Sharma and Gupta 2006: 22). It is questionable, however, whether Zimbabwe or other formerly colonized states, have ever been able—or willing—to address the needs of most of the population. Nevertheless, the thesis demonstrates that although the Zimbabwean state has very little resources to distribute as material care, the power that the state agents embody seems to be based on their authority to mobilize and distribute resources that the state does not supply itself, including family resources in the form of maintenance and custodial orders, right to mobility, or international aid. Indeed, despite neoliberal transformations, global aid is also dependent on the state structures and state agents, rather than replacing them as such – since, unlike international aid, the state does not work according to project cycles.

Furthermore, as the final chapters of the book indicate, state agents do not always only work only through their formal mandates and state frameworks. Their actual work—and legitimacy—also draws on their affective registers through their cultural understandings of kinships and care, meaning they might be able to attend to local care needs that do not fit into state or NGO frameworks. As an outcome, the state can also come to be experienced as potentially caring.

The dissertation pays considerable attention to various forms of registration that emerged as common in state encounters. Historically, documents were tools to monitor and govern the mobility of the Black population. In its refashioned form, documentation is a mundane state act that has persisted even through conditions of crises—one which low-income, urban Bulawayoans must navigate, particularly those who were, or claimed to be, vulnerable, and on behalf of those who are born or die. Let me focus on birth registration, to present one empirical example of the functioning of economies of care, shedding light on the mutual interaction of state- and kin-making, transnational frames, and the creativity embedded in them.

After decades of 'orphan' policy issues, birth registration is becoming an increasingly central topic in global development and among policy makers (Wood 2019). For instance, one of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal is to provide legal identity for all by 2030. Indeed, birth registration has become an indicator to measure the progress of countries in areas such as children's rights or good governance. In practice, a birth certificate is a primary form of access to political identity, a precondition for other citizenship rights, a key to access school examinations, justice, voting, a bank account, or further ID and travel documents. Without a birth certificate one does not legally exist.

However, as in many former colonies, birth registration rates in Zimbabwe remain low—between 30 and 40 percent according to different sources. Indeed, the birth registration of children who were sent back from South Africa or 'left behind' in Zimbabwe was a

common concern among my interlocutors. Reasons for undocumentedness were multiple, but usually linked to cross-border migration and the Zimbabwean state's incapacity to provide citizen certificates, creating conditions of illegality, but also new ways to navigate such conditions. For instance, many women came back to Zimbabwe to give birth, returning to South Africa before registering the infant, while others borrowed someone else's authentic papers to assure a safe birth in South Africa. Under these conditions, while many children had no birth certificates at all, some had become formally registered in families and lineages where they did not customarily 'belong'. This had great impact on how both state and kin were experienced. For example, while it could cause misfortune for papered and 'real' families when children—and adults—who had been kinned, to use Signe Howell's (2003) term, had the wrong surname, it could also provide protective status, secure child grants or pensions—or bring surprises at the time of inheritance.

'Getting the birth registration straight' according to the official procedures was often costly, dangerous, or practically impossible. However, there were commonly known ways to navigate the registration procedures. One was to draft a believable birth narrative. This mostly required assistance from someone, usually an ordinary civil servant, who had knowledge of the official protocols, as well as eyewitnesses, affidavits, and new – invented – dates and places of birth. A central concern was to rehearse the narrative, to piece the details together into a coherent, believable, solid testimony. The people assessing such narratives were not necessarily interested in people's authentic, 'truthful' identities and the material facts of births or deaths. Instead, what mattered most was that the presentation of life was 'made believable'. This example demonstrates how the mundane state act of birth registration is simultaneously an important kin act, creating membership in both state and kin groups, but also could involve a great deal improvisation and brokerage.

To finish, I hope that my research has honored the experiences of my interlocutors, reflecting their realities in a manner that uncovers their complex life-worlds, tracing the historical tales of their life-sustaining practices and relations, and providing tools that can be used in other contexts of dislocation and crises. I further hope that the work problematizes preconceptions and taken-for-granted definitions associated with African migrants and returnees, 'the vulnerable', and the various agents and institutions that they rely on to cope in the frontline of multilayered precarity.

Madam Opponent, I now call upon you to present your critical comments on my dissertation.

SAANA HANSEN
POST-DOCTORAL RESEARCHER
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL
ANTHROPOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI
saana.hansen@helsinki.fi

REFERENCES

Bierschenk, Thomas and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan 2014. Studying the Dynamics of African Bureaucracies. An Introduction to the States at Work. In Thomas Bierschenk and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (eds). *States at Work: Dynamics of African Bureaucracies.* Leiden and Boston: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004264960.

Chiumbu, Sarah and Muchabavara Musemwa 2012. *Crisis! What Crisis? The Multiple Dimensions of the Zimbabwean Crisis.* Cape Town: HSRC Press.

Crush, Jonathan and Daniel Tevera 2010. Exiting Zimbabwe. In Jonathan Crush and Daniel Tever (eds). *Zimbabwe's Exodus: Crisis, Migration, Survival.* Cape Town: Southern African Migration

Programme; Ottawa: International Development Research Center.

Daily News 2019. *Zim at Crossroads as Horror 2019 unfolds*. January 29.

Das, Veena and Deborah Poole (eds) 2004. *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.

Ferguson, James and Akhil Gupta 2002. Spatializing States: Towards an Ethnography of Neoliberal Governmentality. *American Ethnologist* 29 (4): 981–1002. https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.2002.29.4.981.

Hagmann, Tobias and Didier Péclard 2010. Negotiating Statehood: Dynamics of Power and Domination in Africa. *Development and Change* 41 (4): 539–562. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7660.2010.01656.x.

Hammar, Amanda 2014. The Paradoxes of Class: Crisis, Displacement and Repositioning in Post2000 Zimbabwe. In Amanda Hammar (ed). *Displacement Economies in Africa: Paradoxes of Crisis and Creativity*. London: Zed Books. http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350219717.ch-004.

Hammar, Amanda. JoAnn McGregor and Loren Landau 2010. Introduction: Displacing Zimbabwe: Crisis and Construction in Southern Africa. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 36 (2): 263–283. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2010.485779.

Howell, Signe 2003. Kinning: The Creation of Life Trajectories in Transnational Adoptive Families. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 9 (3): 465–484. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.00159.

Jaji, Rose 2021. Eroding the Gains of Mobility: COVID-19 and Impact on Low-income Migrant Zimbabwean Women. *The Zambakarai Advisory*. Special issue: Living in an Era of Emerging Pandemics. Fall 2021: 133–146. http://www.zambakari.org/uploads/8/4/8/9/84899028/8_eroding_the_gains_of_mobility_2.pdf. <Accessed 23 January 2024>

Jones, Jeremy 2010. 'Nothing is Straight in Zimbabwe': The Rise of Kukiya-kiya Economy 2000–2008. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 36 (2): 285–299. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2010.485784.

Puig de la Bellacasa, Maria 2011. Matters of Care in Technoscience: Assembling Neglected Things. *Social Studies of Science* 41 (1): 85–106. https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312710380301.

Raftopoulos, Brian 2009. The Crisis in Zimbabwe. In Brian Raftopoulos and Alois Mlambo (eds). *Becoming Zimbabwe: A History from the Pre-colonial period to 2008*. Harare: Weaver Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvk3gmpr.

Reeves, Madeleine 2019. The Queue: Bureaucratic Time, Distributed Legality, and the Waiting-Work in Migrant Moscow. *Suomen antropologi: Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society* 40 (3): 20–38. https://doi.org/10.30676/jfas.v44i2.77733.

Sharma, Aradhana and Akhil Gupta 2006. Introduction: Rethinking Theories of the State in an Age of Globalization. In Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta (eds). *The Anthropology of the State: Reader*. Oxford and Victoria: Blackwell Publishing.

Sunday News 2019. *Hope for the Economy with Magical Hand of the Zimbabwean Diaspora*. 3–9 February.

Tronto, Joan and Berenice Fisher 1990. Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring. In Emily Abel and Margaret Nelson (eds). *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women's Life*. SUNY Press.

UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) 2010. The Potential Contribution of the Zimbabwe Diaspora to Economic Recovery: Comprehensive Economic Recovery. Zimbabwe Working Paper 11. http://www.zimbabwesituation.com/old/WP11.pdf. <Accessed 24 January 2024>

Vigh, Henrik 2008. Crisis and Chronicity: Anthropological Perspectives on Continuous Conflict and Decline. *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* 73 (1): 5–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/00141840801927509.

Wood, Summer 2019. The Bureaucracy of Birth Registration in Tanzania. *Critical Policy Studies* 13 (4): 379–395. https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2019.1672573.

BOOK REVIEWS

Stoetzer, Bettina. Ruderal City: Ecologies of Migration, Race, and Urban Nature in Berlin. Duke University Press Books. 2022. 243 p. Part of the book series, Experimental Futures: Technological Lives, Scientific Arts, Anthropological Voices, edited by Michael M. J. Fischer and Joseph Dumit. ISBN 10: 1478018607 (softcover) ISBN 13: 9781478018605 (hardcover).

'Berlin is poor but sexy'. This quip—or marketing slogan—is attributed to the city's former mayor Klaus Wowereit, on page 114 of Ruderal City. Although it comes across as tangential to Stoetzer's argument, the idea that something exciting or at least lively can emerge from something severely disturbed lies at the heart of this book. Yet, whilst even those with a passing familiarity with Berlin might indeed endorse this view, Stoetzer's analysis points above all to what that cheerfulness hides: a range of interrelated, well-researched but unevenly experienced contemporary ills exceptionally noticeable in Berlin. In particular, the book examines the legacies of racism and colonial extractivism upon which European life is still based, using them to develop the idea of urban life as ruderal. She deploys this ecological term—that is, a ruderal plant is one that grows and even thrives in poor soil and disturbed landscapes—to contribute to the swelling literature on social–material relations and multispecies theorising. Regardless of how a reader might approach this topic, this book is well-researched, ethnographically rich, and conceptually ambitious.

Organised under sections on rubble, gardens, parks, and forests, the book offers ample examples of how racial inequality is reproduced through mundane practices and unremarkable environments. In doing so, it puts the landlocked city of Berlin and its fascinating political history into a far larger natural historical context of migrating people and plants. Thus, although this is above all a book about Berlin, it is also about how violence as well as happenstance are embedded within urban historical processes that throw people, flora, wider ecologies, and topographical features together. Furthermore, the book shows that for all that there is much thrown-togetherness, complexity, and contingency in anything urban, there are important aspects of this urban-but-still-natural world that can be rather precisely and insightfully studied. Berlin is well endowed with opportunities to pursue this kind of scholarship. Long constructed as a city at the centre of world history, Berlin is arguably also a city of numerous new beginnings as well as hugely violent interludes. Perhaps most significantly for this book, the city is marked by and somehow explicitly preoccupied with displacements and efforts to make sense of and cope with them.

In Berlin, anyone caring to notice can identify all kinds of hybrid products of ecological and political processes. In Stoetzer's telling, it seems almost necessary as well as quite intuitive to merge human history with natural history. After all, Berlin is famously a city of parks as well as no-go areas, many of which have been organised and reorganised according to high-level and often war-inflected geographies. It is these geographies, in turn, that have generated

the unplanned and unnoticed forms of nonhuman life with which the book begins. As novel communities of plants flourished in fields of post-war rubble, a community of scientists and hobbyists emerged who turned this urban botanising into a field of study, which is as fascinating to contemporary social scientists as it is to natural scientists. For instance, British geographer Matthew Gandy (2017) made a film telling the story of post-war Berlin through its plants, featuring the ecologist Herbert Sukopp, who also appears in *Ruderal City*. Botanists working in a city of rubble were drawn to paying attention to the ecologically formative histories of trade, migration, and war. Sukopp's and others' explorations of the war-torn landscape thus support ongoing work elsewhere, in the critical social sciences, for example, which challenges simple contrasts between the idea of the urban as culturally controlled versus the assumed naturalness and separateness of the rural.

Ruderal is certainly a suggestive metaphor for a study regarding how race, the politics of austerity, and natural resources are articulated. It was, however, research on antiracist activism that initially drew Stoetzer to the forests in and around Berlin. While the book focusses specifically on racial politics and capitalist and colonial forms of violence, it approaches racialised life in Berlin through people's engagements with the land, such as through gardening or outdoor eating, an approach foregrounding above all the impulse to thrive and create liveliness where it might not be expected. This clearly supports the use of the term ruderal; yet, Stoetzer's ethnographic treatment of whiteness, like the treatment of migration as a problem, is less nuanced, almost caricatured in places. Thus, the question of how migrations, colonial forms of violence, and dislocations have been racialised in Europe (and anthropology), and how these histories have co-evolved with (understandings of) ecological processes and economic world-systems is only partly addressed.

The text runs to 243 pages with extensive notes at the back of the book, many of which I read with interest. Yet, as a whole, the scant attention that Stoetzer grants questions of political economy highlights a missed opportunity. It may be that readers are expected to know how German—and, by extension, European—economies and imaginaries became racialised exploitation so firmly built into them. Yet, some indications of the economic relations between the people she describes making homes and generating novel human–nonhuman ecologies in Germany would help the reader and strengthen the analysis. The book offers many, many ethnographic accounts, accounts I would call vignettes, about how variously marked and diversely positioned people create and sustain life-affirming and place-based practices in Berlin, and, thus, connect to the city's heterogeneous ecologies (of people and natures) across multiple differences. The structures and tendencies that sustain and possibly entrench inequalities receive only passing mention or are taken as understood.

The book can feel repetitive, with the writing often resorting to lists (of bads) and rehashing, sometimes at length, a familiar vocabulary of indignant remarks on capitalism or anthropology. Although it grants much space to hitherto invisibilised migrants, characters appear in the narrative in such an abundance that it becomes hard to see how they link to each other and to the wider ecologies—that is, the interconnected processes—the book seeks to highlight. Intentionally or not, many actors are also, on the whole, so fleeting a part of the narrative that they do not allow for much of an affective reading. The idea that what needs

analysis and problematisation the construction and maintenance of white identity no doubt remains important politically and analytically, but also stated more than demonstrated. Ultimately, although the idea of the ruderal as a new tool is highly interesting, *Ruderal City* does not quite offer the conceptual framework needed to study the twenty-first-century's hybrid and geographically complex environments that I, at least, expected.

Still, for anyone interested in contemporary cities 'from the ground up' and in their ecological connectedness, this book contains a wealth of inspiration. Perhaps it is unfair to expect one book to erect a conceptual framework. After all, at its heart, we find experiences emerging from a structural condition that promotes an inability to make sense—a cognitive dissonance—of a world being upside-down.

EEVA BERGLUND
ADJUNCT PROFESSOR
DEPARTMENT OF DESIGN,
AALTO UNIVERSITY
eeva.berglund@aalto.fi

REFERENCES

Gandy, Matthew 2017. Natura Urbana–The Brachen of Berlin. Trailer. Berlin, June 2017. https://www.naturaurbana.org/. <Accessed 22.01.2024>

Synnøve K. N. Bendixsen and Edvard Hviding (eds.) *Anthropology in Norway: Directions, Locations, Relations*. Canon Pyon, UK: Sean Kingston Publishing. The RAI Country Series, Volume Three. 2021. 152 pp. ISBN: 978-1-912385-30-0 (paperback); ISBN: 978-1-912385-38-6 (E-book); DOI: 10.26581/B.BEND01 (E-book)

Anthropology has taken different shapes in all corners of the world, where its followers inquire about the meanings attached to culture. This inquiry was primarily directed towards faraway places outside the 'Western sphere'. Anthropology in Norway, interestingly, developed in two opposing directions: one as an old-fashioned view looking for answers in remote places; and the other focused on answering those questions on Norwegian soil. These two sides have raised questions around all of the components of anthropology as a science: its methods, applicability to the 'outside world', and the ethical dimension of conducting fieldwork. With these premises at the core of each section, this compilation reflects what the anthropology in and of Norway has given to the global landscape of the social sciences.

The compilation begins with a preamble by Synnøve Bendixsen and Edvard Hviding, in which they describe the peculiarities of anthropology in Norway, situating the country in the West, albeit, from the periphery position of anthropology as a science that emerged in universities in the United Kingdom and the United States. According to this logic, anthropology in Norway was founded by scholars trained academically in those countries, to develop this scientific field through the study of cultural minorities in Norway (the Sámi and, more recently, immigrant populations) rather than in far-away places. This approach prompts the authors to examine the ethical side of anthropology in its early years, specifically how it perpetuated inequalities in national societies rather than combating them. This reflexivity proposes a reformulation of reciprocity between researcher and informants and how science can be used to benefit those who are studied. From the foundation of the Centre for Sámi Studies at The University of Tromsø – The Arctic University of Norway to the participation of Norwegian anthropologists in the peace processes in Sudan, this compilation brings together a variety of perspectives regarding how anthropological knowledge can engage with those social processes it studies.

Following the preamble, the discussion continues with a historical overview by Olaf H. Smedal, who sketches the emergence of this discipline from the early years at the Ethnographic Museum in Oslo, the years following the Nazi occupation when Fredrik Barth brought the influence of American and British Anthropology to establish academic departments across Norway, the relationship between anthropology and the research group for Sámi studies at the University of Tromsø that later emerged as the Centre for Sámi Studies (suddenly linked with the self-determination movement of the Sámi people in the 1970s) to the current fieldwork interests of Norwegian anthropology departments both in their own country and afar.

Smedal (2021: 27) uses Barth's concept on 'transactionalism', viewing societies as processes

constantly reinventing themselves, showing the interconnections between anthropology and historical processes. Anthropology in Norway has come hand in hand with national changes and ideologies that shape the different forms of knowledge, which have been intertwined with social movements, the foundation of academic departments, and the question of how this science can benefit society in applied matters. One of Norwegian anthropology's most significant contributions to the landscape of this science has been the development of fieldwork within the national borders of the country. Given the lack of resources available to undertake fieldwork overseas during a long period of time—from the post-war age to well into the 1980s—ethnography was seen as a step in the national surroundings. This resulted in innovative works such as Marianne Gullestad's (1984) study of young working-class mothers or the work of Barth (1963) on entrepreneurs in Norway.

Undertaking fieldwork in Norway opened up discussions on the methodological steps throughout the research process, questioning the necessary length of time one needs in order to perceive locals' viewpoints. Signe Howell, in 'The fieldwork tradition', compares the time frame parameters between Norway and the UK in the 1970s: while 9 months in Norway was the norm, 18 months in Oxford was viewed as necessary. According to Howell, this shorter fieldwork period demonstrated that ethnography could be carried out efficiently when there is a theoretical basis supporting the quest for answers, no matter how far and wide the space and time are. Howell (2021: 37, 38) argues that anthropological research in Norway was primarily driven to sustain a theory on 'the field'. For example, the Anthropology Department at the University of Bergen, or the so-called 'Bergen School', was established in 1962 from Barth's influence on transactionalism. Fieldwork, therefore, continued to have a specific scope in a theory depending on the department, until the present time when there is more variety in perspectives and places to go.

In a historical description of what fieldwork is, Halvard Vike in 'No direction home: Anthropology in and of Norway', questions the notion of places of belonging as a key element for anthropologists to choose their field site of interest. A sense of belonging that anthropologists share relates to how far away we can go for our fieldwork experience, with further deemed better. However, this principle does not always guarantee fulfilling the 'anthropological experience' nor is it a compulsory step towards coming of age vis-à-vis the personal experience in ethnographic research. Vike provides a number of examples from Norwegian anthropologists who have questioned the cultural differences between themselves and their informants by carrying out fieldwork in and on Norway. As mentioned by Marilyn Strathern (1987: 16) in her discussion of 'auto anthropology' within this essay, doing anthropology 'at home' is not primarily about how exotic the cultural attributes of those studies seem to be, but rather how they construct knowledge. That said, doing anthropology 'at home' means that both the ethnographer and the subjects of study build knowledge in an equal manner, and, thus, question the cultural patterns they both share.

Gunnar M. Sørbø in 'Norwegian Anthropology and Development: New roles for a troubled future?' explains the relationship that anthropological research holds with international development. By providing a historical overview of the intervention Norwegian aid provided in Sudan for more than 50 years through an academic agreement between the University of Bergen and the

University of Khartoum, Sørbø shows that anthropological research affords an innovative understanding of how conflicts operate across different layers of political interests that the international development apparatus oftentimes dismisses. Norwegian foreign aid in Sudan enhances a deeper understanding of how conflicts run at the local, national, and international levels.

In a different yet eloquent narrative, Thomas Hylland Eriksen in 'The unbearable lightness of being…a public anthropologist in Norway' explains the challenge of anthropologists to demonstrate the relevance of their knowledge. Given that anthropologists work for a variety of entities, whilst also criticising institutions that might impose power relations in society such as the government and central banks amongst others, it is difficult to see the 'societal assignment' (*samfunnopdrag*) of this discipline (Eriksen 2021: 74). Eriksen (2021: 78) even calls anthropologists the 'anarchists of Western academia' given their inclination to always talk publicly on the 'heavy side of things'—that is, the problems a nation might face or crises that people experience from structural inequalities in today's world. According to the author, anthropologists need to find novel, innovative tactics to make clear why the critical and sensitive viewpoint of anthropological knowledge is as relevant as any other social science discipline.

Next, Synnøve Bendixsen provides a historical overview of the survival of anthropology in Norway in 'Disagreement, illumination, and mystery: Towards an ethnography of anthropology in Norway'. Through this summary of the ups and downs of anthropology across the four universities where it is located (Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim, and Tromsø), Bendixsen focuses on the issues of academic funding to conduct research and develop the discipline as a component of educational programmes. She outlines one of the reasons why anthropology has remained alive in this country: academic funding has never been heavily impacted by global crises. In addition, anthropologists have ventured into public debates in the media and at events, making anthropological knowledge more accessible to the public. Bendixsen mentions that even though the discipline has gone through a number of changes in Norway recently, it is still well positioned in comparison to anthropological communities elsewhere.

Lastly, the book finishes with a panel discussion on Norwegian Anthropology Day, through the participation of discussants from the four anthropology departments in Norway, followed by an editor's note by Marilyn Strathern on 'Norwegian Anthropology: Towards the identification of an object'. According to the discussion, anthropology in Norway is a social phenomenon intertwined with the changes that Norway faces as a country. It is through this statement that the book traces the discussion regarding what direction(s) anthropology could take in the future within and beyond Norwegian soil. By taking Norway as an example, this book provides a well-explained picture of what anthropology is and how it needed to position itself in academic settings as a science in its own right. Nonetheless, further discussion needs to be placed on where anthropology is situated within the job market today, and how to use anthropological knowledge to solve problems happening in the here and the now.

HECTOR SANCHEZ
STUDENT
INTERCULTURAL ENCOUNTERS
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI
hectorsg991@gmail.com

REFERENCES

Barth, Fredik (ed.) 1963. *The Role of the Entrepreneur in Social Change in Northern Norway*. Bergen: Universitetsforlaget.

Bendixsen, Synnøve K. N. and Edvard Hviding (eds.) 2021. *Anthropology in Norway. Directions, Locations, Relations*. Canon Pyon, UK: Sean Kingston Publishing. The RAI Country Series, Volume Three.

Eriksen, Thomas Hylland 2021. Chapter 6. The Unbearable Lightness of Being … a Public Anthropologist in Norway. In Synnøve K. N. Bendixsen and Edvard Hviding (eds). *Anthropology in Norway. Directions, Locations, Relations.* Canon Pyon, UK: Sean Kingston Publishing. The RAI Country Series, Volume Three: 73–85.

Gullestad, Marianne 1984. *Kitchen-Table Society: A Case Study of the Family Life and Friendships of Young Working-Class Mothers in Urban Norway*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

Howell, Signe 2021. Chapter 3. The Fieldwork Tradition. In Synnøve K. N. Bendixsen and Edvard Hviding (eds). *Anthropology in Norway. Directions, Locations, Relations.* Canon Pyon, UK: Sean Kingston Publishing. The RAI Country Series, Volume Three: 34–41.

Smedal, Olaf H. 2021. Chapter 2. Social Anthropology in Norway. A Historical Sketch. In Synnøve K. N. Bendixsen and Edvard Hviding (eds). *Anthropology in Norway. Directions, Locations, Relations.* Canon Pyon, UK: Sean Kingston Publishing. The RAI Country Series, Volume Three: 16–33.

Strathern, Marilyn 1987. 'The Limits of Auto-Anthropology'. In Anthony Jackson (ed.). *Anthropology at Home.* London: Tavistock Publications.

Henni Alava & Tuomas Tammisto

AFTERTHOUGHTS

The *Suomen antropologi* Ethnographic Reading Challenge: a call for communal slowing down

Each year just before the New Year, our hometown library—the Helsinki Metropolitan Area Library Network (Helmet 2024)—issues a curated 50-book reading challenge. To celebrate a new year, *Suomen antropologi: Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society*, presents an ethnographic reading challenge in a similar style.

The challenge is an outcome of one recent Friday evening when we—middle-aged neighbours and colleagues who did not know what else to do with our free time—went for a walk to our local library. Henni, an avid fiction reader, wanted to pick up the new Helmet challenge after completing her first one in 2023, whilst Tuomas, a very slow reader and former library worker, wanted to check out the comics selections.

'What if we compiled a parallel ethnographic reading challenge?', Henni pitched. So, we stayed at a coffee shop until closing time compiling this list, laughing at our nerdy shared interests. But, we soon realised: it's not just fun and games. Woven into this reading challenge is a bid for something more.

The categories in this challenge purposely extend across broad, or ambiguous, categories, at times bordering on the downright silly. Our intention is to encourage thoughtful reading of ethnographies and other books that inspire our ethnographic imaginations. But who needs encouragement to do what should certainly be a key part of their work?

We do, and, in our experience, so do many of our colleagues. The ability to concentrate on a book-length text can be stretched for any number of reasons, whether they stem from challenges to our mental health and wellbeing, precarity-related stress, neurodiversity, a lack of time or endless work-related clutter. Often, the problem lies in that we are simply too frazzled by constant multitasking to just sit down and read.

Things like reading challenges can be off-putting for some, and one might ask whether turning something like reading into a challenge transforms it into yet another task requiring accomplishment. It might. But, it can also help us prioritise reading a good book over something like scrolling through our email or social media or news feed. That is, it can help us prioritise an activity like reading which calms us over something that leaves us wired and stressed.

Rebecca Solnit (2014 [2000]: 10) wrote, 'I like walking because it is slow, and I suspect that the mind, like the feet, works at about three miles an hour. If this is so, then modern life is moving faster than the speed of thought or thoughtfulness.'

Taking our cue from Solnit, this first *Suomen antropologi* reading challenge is inspired by the idea of *thinking at three miles an hour*. For us, this means taking the time to read books, instead of book reviews. Entire books, instead of just introductions. Articles, rather than just abstracts.

Of course, deadlines sometimes push us to skim and jump around through texts. But perhaps we sometimes also do it out of habit, rather than necessity. Perhaps, in these late-stage capitalist social media algorithm–infused times of ours, we are accustomed to frantically skuttling to-and-fro, instead of sitting still and doing one thing at a time. Perhaps, we are just so hooked on quick rewards (PLING! You have an email!), that we feel too easily bored to sink into the headspace required for slow reading.

We are not the first to call for slow thinking in academia. Already in 2010, the Slow Science Manifesto declared, 'We cannot continuously tell you what our science means; what it will be good for; because we simply don't know yet. Science needs time. Bear with us, while we think' (Slow Science Academy 2010). With this reading challenge, we seek to create—again, not least for ourselves—a reason to and a framework for slowing things down. But in doing so, are we saying that it is up to individuals to slow the break-neck pace of academic work life? To an extent, yes. The tragic reality for many of us is that we ourselves are the only ones we can rely on to say 'slow down' or 'do less'. Yet, there are few things as pernicious—or as prevalent in late-stage capitalism—as blaming individuals for their failure to cope with increasingly impossible circumstances and benchmarks.

In a recent book, anthropologist Daena Funahashi (2023) analysed the Finnish societal panic around increased rates of burnout in the early 2000s, describing the rise of self-management skills as the proposed panacea for burnout. Since Funahashi's fieldwork, the emphasis on individualised coping skills for stress management have become ever more pronounced in Finnish public discourse. Popularised brain research increasingly shapes Finnish understandings of stress, sleep, and work efficiency, and many Finns (Henni included) have found inspiration from scholars like Minna Huotilainen, who regularly feature as experts in the national news, on social media, and on various talk shows. In the Helmet network of libraries, over a hundred copies of her book, *The Concentration Resuscitation Guide,* have been in constant circulation for years (see Huotilainen and Moisala 2018).

What brain scholars rarely discuss is the fact that stress management skills do not remove structural inequality, racism, sexism, or ableism. To our mind, it is crucial that scholars remain alert to and critical of the expanding consensus related to 'self-management', whether in university management or societal decision-making, which obfuscates structural inequalities. Yet, whilst we embrace the anti-capitalist critique of individual responsibility for wellbeing, our personal experience also reminds us that awareness of how, for instance, our brains respond to stress, can significantly support our personal wellbeing, and make us better colleagues and teachers too. Social critiques should not preclude self-care or vice versa. As Audre Lorde (1988: 131) so powerfully suggested in her original notion of radical care, 'Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.'

Instead of putting the onus on individual researchers—asking each of us to strive to read more or think more slowly—we instead echo others' calls before us (Schulz et al. 2022) for communal responses to our varied individual challengesyet discussions about the emotional and psychological impacts of conducting this type of research remain rare. In recent years, debates begun to emerge about the emotional and psychological toll that qualitative field-based research on violence in general, and on gender-based violence (GBV. After all, relations and communities of mutual aid and care are what, in the end, make our research possible.

Friedner and Wolf-Meyer (2023: 4) recently suggested that anthropological theories of value, morality, and inclusion be put into practice in anthropologists' own academic communities, to render those communities more malleable to the diverse needs of their members, and to 'proactively work toward making connections between people in the effort to expand who counts as an anthropologist and what counts as anthropological praxis and theorizing.' In this spirit, we thus propose this ethnographic reading challenge not as a solo enterprise of striving to be faster and do more, but rather as a collective wake-up call allowing us to create academic communities that slow down in efforts to care, read, and think together.

Therefore, if this reading challenge sounds fun, if you too need help prioritising reading or seek company amongst others with whom you may think through books that feel hard, we urge you to start an online or in-person reading group with your colleagues. Schedule coffees to brainstorm book titles that match your interests and the various challenge-specific numbers. Set aside time to both talk about what you are going through which affects your work and to collectively rant or rage about the books you have read. Feel free to bend the challenge to suit your needs: twist the categories; replace some books with articles, cut the number of categories to 15 (as Tuomas intends); commit to complete the list in three years rather than one (as Henni intends). In place of rules, this challenge offers flexibility: do whatever works for you and your needs.

And if this challenge seems awkward, start an initiative that suits you and your community better. Just remember: the struggle against distractions, stressors, and shallow thinking is not one which you face alone. We are not equal in how these struggles confront us, as they differ for each of us, depending upon who and where we each are in our lives and careers. But we are better equipped to tackle them if we learn from each other and work together. Organise!

HENNI ALAVA
ACADEMY RESEARCH FELLOW
SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY
TAMPERE UNIVERSITY
henni.alava@tuni.fi

TUOMAS TAMMISTO
ACADEMY RESEARCH FELLOW
SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY
TAMPERE UNIVERSITY
tuomas.tammisto@tuni.fi

REFERENCES

Friedner, Michele and Matthew Wolf-Meyer 2023. Becoming Malleable: How Orienting to Disability, Communication, and the Senses Further Commits Anthropology to its Moral Project. *American Ethnologist*. https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.13239.

Funahashi, Daena Aki 2023. *Untimely Sacrifices: Work and Death in Finland.* New York: Cornell University Press.

Helmet (Helsinki Metropolitan Area Libraries) 2024. The Helmet Reading Challenge 2024. Helmet Webpage. https://www.helmet.fi/en-US/Events_and_tips/News_flash/The_Helmet_Reading_Challenge_2024(273524). <Accessed 3 January 2024>

Huotilainen, Minna and Mona Moisala 2018. *Keskittymiskyvyn elvytysopas.* Jyväskylä: Tuuma.

Lorde, Audre 1988. *A Burst of Light: Essays.* Ithaca: Firebrand Books.

Schulz, Philipp, Anne-Kathrin Kreft, Heleen Touquet and Sarah Martin 2022. Self-Care for Gender-Based Violence Researchers: Beyond Bubble Baths and Chocolate Pralines. *Qualititative Research* 23 (5): 1461–1480. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794122108.

Slow Science Academy 2010. The Slow Science Manifesto. Slow Science Webpage. http://slow-science.org/slow-science-manifesto.pdf. <Accessed 3 Janury 2024>

Solnit, Rebecca 2014 [2000]. *Wanderlust: A History of Walking.* London: Granta Books.

The First *Suomen antropologi* Ethnographic Reading Challenge

1. The book is written in a style you like
2. The book is written in a style you dislike
3. The book is in a theoretical tradition that does not particularly interest you
4. The book is a classic, which you have meant to read, but haven't gotten round to
5. The author identifies as belonging to a minority
6. The book has caused an uproar
7. The author is part of the community they study
8. The author is an outsider to the community they study
9. The book is an edited volume
10. The book makes broad comparisons
11. The book is an historical ethnography
12. The book is a multispecies ethnography
13. The book is written before 1950
14. The book is about work
15. The book is strongly autoethnographic
16. A sense or the senses are central to the book
17. The book is in the tradition of political economy
18. Pictures or photographs are central to the methods or presentation of the book
19. The book includes ethnographic poems
20. The book is published in 2024
21. A colleague recommends this book as underrated or having received too little attention
22. The book is set in or concerns mountains, swamps or caves
23. The book is an ethnography of an institution
24. The book is about care
25. The book is set on a continent or region unfamiliar to you
26. You know the author of the book
27. You have prejudices toward the book or its author
28. The book includes reflections on difficult fieldwork experiences
29. The book is an exo- or speculative ethnography or about outer space
30. The book deals with a topic that is difficult for you
31. The book is about fascism or populism
32. The book employs a method unfamiliar to you
33. The book deals with movement or movements
34. The book is about something very ordinary
35. The book is about the relationship between mind and body
36. The book is about laws or rules
37. The book is about play or playing
38. The book raises strong emotions in you
39. The book advocates disability justice
40. You disagree with the conclusions of the book
41. The book is published by a nonprofit open access publisher.

42. The book's author has left academia
43. The book is fun
44. The book is about a topic that concerns you or your loved ones in a profound way
45. The book is about a place in which you grew up or currently live
46. The book has a mesmerising cover
47. The book's title breaks standard conventions
48. The book raises more questions than it answers
49. After reading it, you wish you had read the book 10 years ago
50. A book you immediately want to recommend to a colleague or student