



FLASH ETHNOGRAPHY

Edited by Carole McGranahan and Nomi Stone



american ethnological society

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ISBN: 978-1-955484-00-8

McGranahan, Carole and Nomi Stone, editors. 2021 [2020]
Flash Ethnography, American Ethnological website, originally
published 26 October 2020.

AES web design by Gabriela Manley
E-book design by Luodan Rojas

Cover image courtesy of Kali Rubaii

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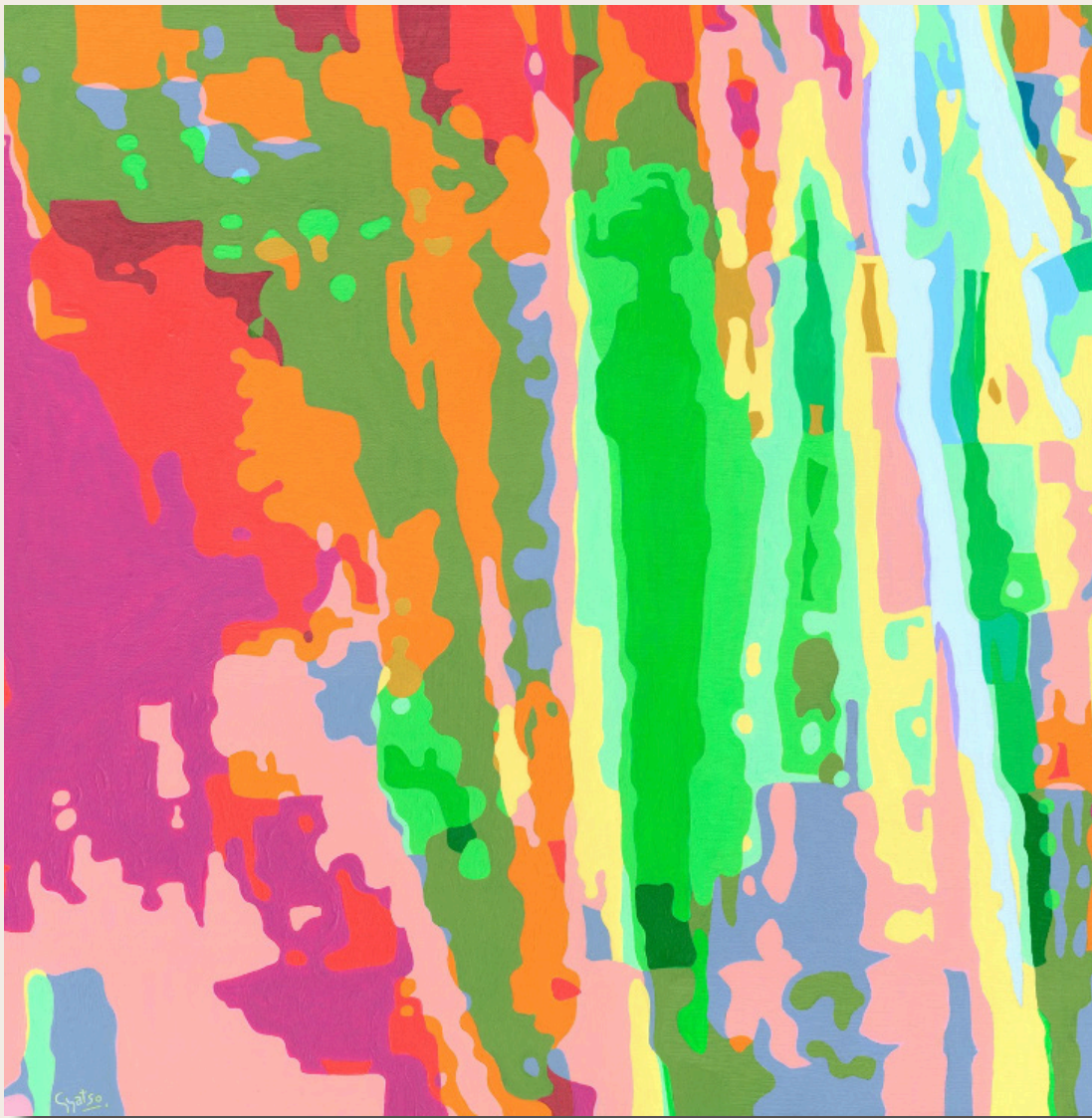
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FLASH ETHNOGRAPHY

an introduction

Nomi Stone and Carole McGranahan



Losang Gyatso, Happiness #1, 2017, acrylic on wood panel, 24X24 inches

Brief. Urgent. Intense. 750 words total, stripped of excess. Some have called flash fiction the “smokelong” -- stories that last the duration of smoking a cigarette. Others have paralleled the flash genre to “the moment you hit the breaks,” or like “a sparkler, spritzing dashes of light into the air,” or “like a bonsai tree, compressed, yet sculpted to create movement, proportion, asymmetry, and poignancy.” But if this describes flash fiction, what is *flash ethnography*? In August 2020, we gathered a group of anthropologists in a three-part workshop to reckon with this question.

We were seduced by a genre that was not yet *settled*. Although a few scholars had written flash ethnography before, notably Susan Levine and Caroline Osella, and including under the name “sudden anthropology,” the genre was still mostly unknown and undefined. In the midst of a pandemic, at a time when writing was difficult for some, the idea of a short yet robust genre appealed. So we joined forces to embark on a definitional experiment to dream this new writing space into existence. What, we both wanted to know, might be the pleasures and potentials of its constraints? Carole was interested in opening up new spaces in her writing, specifically to tell stories that were condensed but also stark. She wanted an ethnographic reboot for the current political moment. For Nomi, an anthropologist who is also a poet, she was primarily compelled by hybrid play in form. How to make the shape,

the container, differently enliven and transform the ethnographic material? We knew we didn’t want to do this alone, but in community. So we brainstormed a list of anthropologists who seemed to likely share this sensibility and invited them to join the project. All together there were seventeen of us writing and thinking together, generously supporting each other as we figured things out workshop-style. We read and discussed flash essays as models, we did free writing exercises, and we mused out loud about what flash could be. Then we each wrote a flash essay and workshopped the essays over two long, but fun online sessions.

Amidst our call-and-response conversations with the collective, we ultimately understood flash ethnographies to be compressed and intense, saturated with vivid imagery and affect; and crucially, to be self-enclosed: each a discrete whole, rather than an excerpt from a larger project. One should begin in the middle rather than getting caught up with lengthy exposition, allowing each sentence to peel back another layer. And of course, like ethnography, the flash version is likewise accountable to the real, made from the tangled and charged texture of being-in-the-world and attuning ourselves also to the worlds of others. What, we collectively wanted to know, were the life conditions of this genre? Where would it take us, and us it?

The essays criss-cross places, times, worlds, affects: the backroads of Vermont, mariachi bands at moonlight

in San Francisco, apartments in La Habana Vieja, archives in Texas and Greece and England, a dentist's office in Dallas, a conversation between new friends, the offices of bureaucrats in Nepal, the frozen streets of refugee neighborhoods of Amman, a block in Brooklyn, a Zoom call between home and a slough, and many more. These essays also traverse a range of sub-categories or genres of ethnographic flash: among others, we encountered the *lyric essay* (Sienna Craig darts through images and their flash of longing amidst belonging); *the encounter where mood braids with scene* (Alessandro Angelini's essay traces an affect percolating through a world and its effects); *the double* (in Roxanne Varzi's piece, the world of a game and the outside world poetically fold into each other); the *persona flash* (Huatse Gyal in the voice of an ethnographic interlocutor); and *the object flash* (in her version of this, Alison Cool jumps between archival boxes' charged contents).

It is possible to say a lot with a few words. Poets know this, and now ethnographers do too. For us, the flash genre felt close to fieldwork, to immersion and immediacy as parts of knowing. There was a freeing element in this, but an urgency too. In this collection

are seventeen essays, varied across form and content, each roughly 800 words in length. Confession: it was hard for loquacious academics to cut, and cut, and cut. But we did. We pruned and we sculpted: we sheared away the excess, we trimmed away at the context, instead embedding it within telling details as gracefully as we could. One novelist described the bonsai as "a particular representation of something much more than itself." Each essay, its invitation to genre, is its own miniature world, and likewise gestures outward into more.

This collection of flash ethnography was a group effort. In the pages that follow are essays from Alessandro Angelini, Ruth Behar, Jessica Cattelino, Alison Cool, Aimee Meredith Cox, Sienna Craig, Roberto González, Huatse Gyal, Carole McGranahan, Penelope Papailias, Ashanté Reese, Kali Rubaii, Nomi Stone, Catherine Trundle, and Roxanne Varzi. Thanks to all of our authors for creating this writing community, including Alma Gottlieb and Anand Pandian whose future essays we eagerly await. Whether you are new to the flash genre, or have been writing flash for a while, may you find something to think with here, or even better, be inspired to write.

Mariachi by Moonlight

Before I'd even slid the door shut, Enrique punched the throttle. His battered Dodge minivan lurched forward, and the passengers greeted me affectionately, as always. *¿Qué onda, Beto? ¿Cómo estás?* Eight *mariacheros* packed into a dusty Caravan—running late.

The wood-paneled machine sailed through downtown Oakland, light after yellow light, before decelerating near the freeway on-ramp. Red to green—Enrique kicked the floorboard again, cranking up the radio as we ascended the curved incline, towards the buttermilk summer moon. A luscious ballad by Mexican male diva Juan Gabriel was our soundtrack. Ricardo playfully embraced his fellow violinist Chalío and me with outstretched arms. We serenaded each other with abandon: *No me dejes nunca...te lo pido por favor.*

Eyes closed, I settled into my corner. Even with crisp air circling through open windows, a familiar funk surrounded us—Azzaro cologne, stale sweat, Red Bull, *chicharrones*, antifreeze, cigarettes. We soared across the bay towards Playa Azul, a seafood restaurant in San Francisco's Mission district, where we were the house band.

From 2003 to 2007, the young Mexican immigrants were my bandmates, best friends, and confidants. Our group worked the entire region, from Silicon Valley's manicured tech campuses to bullet-pocked eastside barrios. We shopped, cooked, and double-dated together, strangers in a strange land.

I won't burden you with how the Michoacanos traversed Arizona's deadly desert, or how the Jaliscoños arrived using sham O-2 visas (for "accompanying an O-1 artist"). I won't explain why a college professor moonlighted as a trumpeter. (Short answer: great money, goddamn fun.) I'll spare you details about how we memorized 500+ standards, or transposed music on the fly.

I just want to take you along for the ride.

Mariachi work isn't easy. Plucking, pulling, blowing, strumming, singing for hours—after laboring as a daytime landscaper, roofer, or car washer—requires strength and stamina. It's also cerebral: remembering or improvising songs, handling cash, dealing with difficult clients, flirting with easy ones, evading danger in crumbling cantinas or lavish gated communities.

Hustling with mariachis means inhabiting an off-the-books world where cash reigns supreme—no guarantees,



Playa Azul, the Mission, San Francisco. Photo by Roberto J. González

receipts, or warranties. No red tape, W-2s, or taxes. It's a world of *caveat emptor*—buyer beware—and seller beware too, where anyone can get royally screwed. A world of pimps, prostitutes, pusher-men. Of grandmothers peddling tamales from pushcarts, and shivering day laborers huddled on street corners. It's a tough world.

That's why we loved Playa Azul, a classy little oasis surrounded by *pupuserías*, pawnshops, storefront churches, and check-cashing joints. It was a friendly haven where families

celebrated birthdays and anniversaries over shrimp cocktails and ceviche. We didn't worry much anymore about getting mugged in piss-stained dives, or caught in barroom brawls. Here, we booked high-end weddings and *quinceañeras*, hauling in \$8000 on good weeks. I know—I was the moneyman, pockets bulging with inch-thick rolls of Benjamins.

Every Friday, Enrique double-parked, hazard lights flashing, while we swiftly unpacked instruments. We strutted in like black cockerels with puffed chests,

silver buttons sparkling, absorbing the essence of briny oysters and seared *huachinango*. After a restroom trip to tap kidneys, slick back hair, pick teeth, and primp bowties, we tuned up. Then we found the liveliest party, surrounded it, and unloaded the big guns—compliments of the house. That was enough to get the family patriarch or matriarch asking for more, at twenty bucks a pop.

Success hinged on analyzing every table, every person—you see, the *mariachero* is part troubadour, part therapist, part vaudevillian. We played romantic *boleros* for lovebirds, brazenly gallanted with girls-night-out groups, and loosened up tight-assed office workers, freed from cubicles. Later, we slithered to the backbar and soothed sodden, suffering souls. At midnight, we divvied up the spoils. Then back again the next day.

In California, mariachis reflect the state's sixteen million *latinoamericanos*. Parents organize groups to keep working-class students culturally connected—and out of trouble. All-female and LGBT groups blossom as machismo wilts. Los Angeles produces high-octane hybrids, like punk and metalhead mariachis. Meanwhile, well-groomed, polished bands record albums and tour with superstars.

My bandmates had humbler motives: to support their families in Mexico, maybe even return there for a better life. Most accomplished the first goal; none reached the second.

Eventually, academic obligations forced me out. My *compañeros* understood—but it still hurt. The mariachi lives on, though Ricardo says the magic's gone.

On a summer afternoon, Playa Azul vanished. It burned to the ground four years ago.

They say it was an electrical fire—overloaded sockets in the crowded tenements above. Miraculously, fifty-eight residents survived. Playa Azul didn't.

By then, so many hipsters and techies had invaded the Mission that most mariacheros had fled. But that's a story for another time.

The Forest of (Be)Longing



Even in these shattering months of death and change, Vermont summer is fecund. To find a dirt driveway in the gloaming, between hayfields, stone walls, ferns as tall as toddlers and just as wild, demands that I drive slowly – even on a road I know well.

There it is. A white mailbox with green lettering, not yet patinaed by harsh winters. New enough to be noticeable.

I wonder what the house at the end of this driveway will look like. Especially because, after pulling off the main road and entering a washboard of soil and gravel, the next

thing I notice is a very different kind of residence than the dozens of neat farmhouses framed by peonies, now past their prime, that I'd seen on the way here. This home has patches of visible rot on the cladding but a solid standing seam roof.

We are in the whitest state in the union, but this is not Trump territory. Bridge the Connecticut and move into New Hampshire for that. It is, however, a place of scarcity and tenacity. Know your neighbors. Don't rely on cell service. Keep a stocked freezer if you can afford it.

Many cannot afford it. A physician colleague at the local VA describes the North Country with a haiku clip:

"It's hardscrabble territory. An aversion to docs who meddle but a vault of stories for those who listen. Remoteness means forty minutes on a dirt road before you see a stop sign. Carhartts. Darned wool socks."

I drive slowly past this first house and its collection of things: a rusted-out pickup with bald snow tires, several tractors, a well-kempt chicken coop, a Shaker chair made, it seems, of solid wood but with a seat in need of restringing, around whose back hangs a sign that says "FREE." The chair rests beside a mailbox marked by dents and rust, the number no longer visible. I imagine the postman knows the number anyway.

Thoughts of the postman leads to questions of ballots and access. Community is more verb than noun: turning out, showing up. Still, obstacles persist.

I drive on. My heart quickens at the

horses. They are grazing in a field alive with a charm of goldfinches. I know how to be around horses. I exhale. It is the deepest breath I've taken in months.

To think of breath produces a knot in my gut. I *can* breathe.

A log cabin comes into view. A hay barn, half filled. Beyond that, graceful sloping mountains.

The cabin looks dark. I call out. My friend emerges from the porch, looking sweetly out of place in his preppy shorts and loafers, a backwards baseball cap hiding his Brahmin's bun. To those who don't know him, his youthful levity might belie the fact that he is a healer: surgeon's hands, therapist's mind, priest's heart.

"Hey, hey!" he smiles.

I know little about our host, save that he is a mentor to my friend and a fellow doctor. He is known for opening up space for patients to navigate need and fear, trust and desire in ways that might otherwise be ignored. This is nothing like a blind date, but to be afforded any new connection in this pandemic moment of distance and dread feels disarming...

I am greeted by a figure in jeans and work boots, a button-down tucked in, belted. Neither old nor young. We do not shake hands, but I notice that his seem capable, weathered, as he takes the bottle of Bordeaux I offer.

My friend has called us together for our council: to strategize about medicine and culture, institutional inertia, care for students, and the urgent need to change structure – even in times of austerity and constraint.

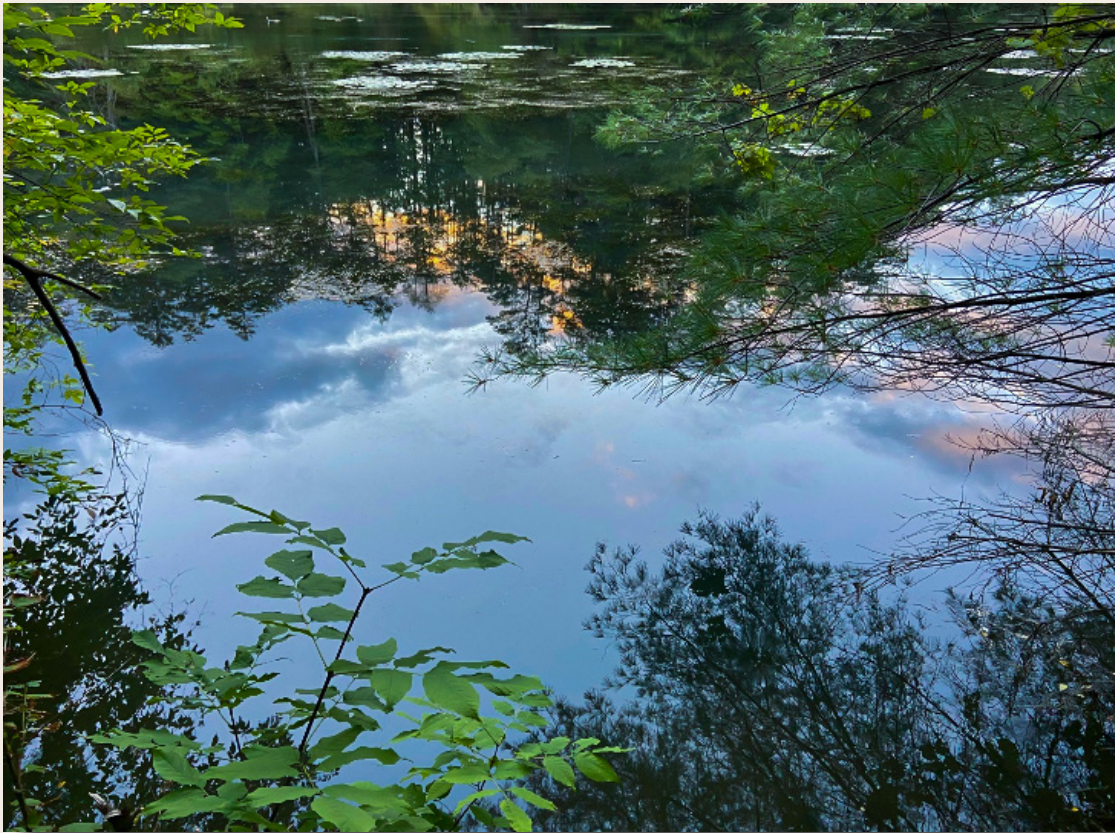
Before we settle into such matters, my friend suggests a walk. "Let's show her

the pond before we lose the light.”

Our host leads us through a clearing. Felled trees scatter like pickup sticks across this landscape. “Pasture has been seeded, but it needs a fence.” Boulders have been moved.

This dusk ramble orients to a lifeworld: vocation beyond profession. The property boundary is a tangle of upturned tree stumps, roots like locked fingers. Our host is recreating a horizon from another time, another country.

“There’s the pond!” My friend is joyous. I will learn that he proposed to his wife in this spot. “Or is it a lake?” he asks our host.



Pond or lake. Photo by Sienna R. Craig.

“Lake, I believe.”

Water pools where earth meets sky. There are cattails, a canoe. We hear but do not see frogs.

We walk back toward the cabin through a thinned forest. Its spareness is about making room, although I am not sure for what.

Fireflies flicker around the horses’ hocks. I think about how longing and its corollaries – ache, loss, aspiration – nestle into *belonging*: this place of equanimity we work to cultivate, we wish to find.

The difference between a pond and a lake is depth.

Tell Me Everything Will Be Okay

It was February 28. I was going to Cuba with my usual fear — this time “they” wouldn’t let me out and it would serve me right for going back to a country my family escaped and only I keep returning to obsessively.

It was also the eve of the pandemic. Should I cancel the trip?

I was more concerned by the pain in my left hip. “Arthritis,” a doctor told me, and I thought of my mother’s lovely hands turned into knotted twigs.

I grabbed my Cuban passport and told David, my husband, “Tell me everything will be okay.”

“It will be,” he said.

The Obama-era crowds of American travelers had been driven away by Trump’s travel advisories. Our Delta flight to Havana was packed with Miami Cubans going to visit family, bearing gifts. There were life-size dolls from some horror movie—a blonde one with a pink cowboy hat and pink boots; a too-fleshy head peeking out of a plastic bag.

When the plane landed, everyone clapped. It’s what Cubans do. We’re grateful not to have died.

In excruciating pain, I limped through the airport, furious when anyone pushed in front of me.

It scared me to see the customs authorities wearing handmade masks fashioned from the same green olive cloth as their uniforms. No cases of the coronavirus in Cuba yet. But they knew it was coming.

David presented the immigration form at the exit. I pretended to be a bumbling foreigner, a Yuma wife traveling with her Yuma husband. If they know you’re Cuban, they’ll be mean.

The bored officer waved us through.

“Keep going,” I told David. “Don’t look back.”

I stepped outside and breathed in the humid air and felt my hair instantly curl. We were in Cuba!

“Calle 15, esquina I,” I told the cab driver, directing him to the building where I lived as a child.

Cristy, my neighbor when we were little girls, still lives in the building. She has an Airbnb rental there with air conditioning and clunky wicker furniture. After a quick hello, she updated us on the latest failings

of the revolution. There was a chicken shortage, a tragedy for Cubans who must eat animal protein every day. She'd stood on line for hours to buy a few chicken wings.

We talked about the coronavirus. "If it reaches Cuba," she said, "none of us will survive."

I did the ritualistic things, visiting my childhood park with the gazebo in the center. And heeding the call of fieldwork, I hung out at the synagogue and asked questions. They no longer opened every day. All the American Jewish groups had stopped coming and they were short on cash to pay bills.

A colleague from Michigan, in Havana for a health conference, had rented an Airbnb apartment in a part of La Habana Vieja on the verge of gentrification. "Come see it, you'll love it," she said.

She was right. The exterior was a chalky ruin, the interior a sleek modern space with polished concrete floors, cedar dining table, and wispy bistro chairs.

My colleague gave me her landlady Lily's number. The next day, my last in Havana, Lily showed me another of her Airbnb apartments. It was even more stunning, looking onto a corner that sparkled with street life and outdoor restaurants.

Lily spent ten years in Toronto until, tired of the snow, she returned to Cuba after it became legal to buy and rent out apartments. She'd studied nuclear physics and became a construction manager. She had an eye for how a space could be made beautiful after it was gutted.

I started dreaming aloud. "I want a place like this, so I can come to Cuba and be here



Havana, March 2020. Photo by Ruth Behar.

whenever I want. Will you help me?"

She smiled. "Of course."

David, worn down by the heat, napped on the sofa while Lily and I studied an ad for an art nouveau apartment across the street that was for sale. It was up a flight of stairs, like Lily's apartment. That didn't worry me. My hip pain had completely disappeared.

"That would be perfect for you," she said.

I agreed. I saw myself growing old in the heart of La Habana Vieja where my family had once lived.

The next day we flew back to Miami. When we landed, Cristy sent me a message on WhatsApp. She got into an ugly fight with another woman hustling for chicken wings. Three days later, Cuban news sources announced that three infected Italian tourists had brought the coronavirus to the island.

I returned to Michigan and shut myself up in my old Victorian house, quarantine and agoraphobia combined. I fear for my life in ways that not even the Cuban government can make me feel afraid. Not a day passes that I don't say to David, "Tell me everything will be okay." I try to believe him when he replies, "It will be."

Expansive Mood

Commotion under the amber light of a lone streetlamp. A young white woman lunges and flails at several men around her. She is naked.

My partner Nicole and I are still in the minivan, trundling up the cobblestone cul-de-sac to its final stop at the hillside settlement where we live. I nudge Nicole, “Look there. I think I know her.” We scramble out and approach the fray.

I recognize Sarah, her long blonde braid. A year-long travel fellowship had brought her, an American straight out of college, to this Rio de Janeiro favela where she is staying in a makeshift boarding house that hosts a children’s arts workshop. Two weeks ago, over a dinner fundraiser there, Sarah had introduced herself and spoke of her globetrotting to “experience community life.” Rio is her last stop. And with that, I thought I knew her.

Sarah shoves away the men holding out clothes to her. “Please, put this on.” Their Portuguese makes no sense to her; her behavior makes no sense to them. Defiant, she climbs atop a parked car to parade her liberation from patriarchy, brandishing two middle fingers. One of the men, from the local gang that generally adjudicates conflicts here, orders me: “Hey *gringo*, if the police come, there will be trouble.” I sense her

vulnerability, exposed and surrounded. I also sense the combustibility of her foreign whiteness.

“Sarah, you’re putting these people in danger,” I plead. Two men then drag her down off the car, at which point her body goes limp. I catch her

head before it hits the sidewalk. For a minute she lies there before popping back up to her feet. Sarah raves in English about the oppression of men, of clothing, of language itself. Freedom is her body and her body is freedom, she proclaims. Nicole tries to engage Sarah on these ideas, but soon she strides on again. We chase. I ward off gawking mototaxi drivers.

Reaching the corner where the sleepy street meets a buzzing thoroughfare, we traverse a boundary in Rio’s geography of violence. Danger now centers squarely onto Sarah. We cannot let her roam the city. Sensing herself corralled, Sarah decides to lie supine on the sidewalk. I lie down parallel to her. We stare up at a starless night haze. I want her to ignore her surroundings. But the world is still oppressive and contrived, and all that exists is her, her body, her being unraveling on the mosaic stone pavement. Sarah, listen, listen. But I don’t exist. She is limitless, and language is but a man’s instrument to domineer and betray that oneness.

Sarah’s housemates arrive, and we reason with Sarah around a public concrete table with an inlaid chessboard. She’s not playing our game. Soon after, a military police car and an ambulance pull up. As a throng encircles Sarah,

Rio. Photo by Alessandro Angelini.



an older Afro-Brazilian woman inches up to her. She embraces Sarah, who visibly relaxes. But suddenly the woman presses a hand to Sarah's forehead and bellows, "*In the name of Jesus Christ the Lord, be gone! Get out, you devil from hell, out of this girl! Leave her in peace, Satan!*" The paramedics and I pry them apart, and Sarah collapses, screaming. We usher her into the ambulance. Nicole rides with her to a psychiatric institute, while I follow in the back of the police car. Nicole would tell me Sarah, in the ambulance, felt sorry for the evangelical woman. "She was doing that to me just to make herself feel good."

In the emergency ward, somehow both dingy and sterile, the nurses and attending psychiatrist struggle with Sarah's fits of grandiose agitation, and her English. Strapping her to a bed, they administer a tranquilizer. She sleeps. We have accompanied Sarah here, but I doubt we have delivered her to anything we could call safety. The attending describes Sarah as experiencing an expansive mood. Does a mood belong to the psyche alone? Or does it braid with a scene, of which we are but its effects?

Nicole and I leave Sarah at 2:30 am, to return at 8. In those few pre-dawn hours back home, a flurry of gunshots outside the window jolt our bleary selves out of slumber. When we descend the hill again, police are everywhere. In muted chatter, neighbors tell of two unidentified men, maybe from a rival gang, maybe off-duty cops, have killed a local youth selling drugs, and two of his clients.

I visit Sarah daily for two weeks. Her mother and brother fly to Rio to arrange for her return stateside. We eventually learn that Sarah had stopped taking her meds.

The newspapers would report each story, separately. Woman runs naked out of favela. Three shot dead in favela. Online commenters would readily fill in the blanks. They would speculate that the woman must have been on drugs to act so *doidona*—crazy—peddling the well-worn trope of rich girls who pretend to volunteer in the favela to score drugs and for sexual adventure. They would think they know her. And with that, they would think they know their own world.

Mother Bard, Fight or Flight?

An Ethnography of May

The moth will come to the light, and you will come to the moth.

I am not a hunter.

Then choose a different class. Warrior, Paladin, Cleric, Shaguwain?

The small gaping mouth of plastic, lid open, poised in my palm, at the ready ... slips

And the moth escapes because,

I am not a hunter.

He will die if we don't feed him.

We will release him, or he goes hungry.

He's family.

I am not a hunter.

Husband is practiced at this art of catch and release. He hunts the things that slink in past the boundary: spiders, silverfish, moths and flies, and releases them back into their own world. And so I let him catch the fly, slowly, slide it into the jar.

We are neither of us killers. But we are all frozen witness watching as the Mantis leaps from praying to prey.

My snail is a vegetarian. Why can't your mantis eat a carrot?

He cannot become what he is not.

Then don't ask me to hunt.

Then make a choice. He eats the fly turn to page 20.

Page 20

He bites at the bottom and then moves to a delicate appetizer of wings, legs and makes a meal of the head. He drops crumbs of black flecks.

Can I change my mind?

The fly gets away, turn to page 37. Roll the dice.

He opens his palm, the die is red with shiny gold numbers -- a Dodecahedron of fate.

That's not a choice.

There are twelve possibilities.

*Page 37.

Your mantis is starving, you go back out in search of a fly. You come upon a town shuttered by plague. Eyes watch you behind closed doors as you move down the silent, empty streets, weapon of cloth, your handy mask at the ready.

That's my weapon?

It has a hit-point of 80! A vampire Leaps out of nowhere. What will you do?

Spray him with Clorox, go to page 26

Run, go to page 27*

Spray and spray and spray, hoping to kill the invisible before it kills you, mother, hunter, killer.

Page 26

The spray erupts into an aerosol that disperses as quickly and reaches as far as his cough.

Is aerosol real or imagined?

*It won't matter how much you spray,



The mantis and the moth. Photo by Roxanne Varzi.

Mother Bard, Fight or Flight?

but it will matter if he is not fed. It will matter if the Paladin goes alone.

What Paladin?

From the mist of disinfectant a beautiful Paladin emerges, tall and Black and powerful.

Race?

Human.

Say Her name.

She has many names. She seeks fighters for justice. It is time to take down the old guard. Are you a warrior?

I am not a fighter.

She is headed to the epicenter of the pandemic, they will eat the heart of the rotten apple. They will spit it out and re-plant the seeds.

To join her go to page 55.

To slink away to safety go to page 100.

Slink away? Son, when you say it like that it's hardly a choice.

Words have a hit point of 100. I am a bard. There is always a choice.*

Do nothing ... nothing without do, a verb that becomes air. Your adjective? Complicit.

*Why do you get to choose bard when I am condemned to hunter?

I am not a hunter.

Because you chose mother class and she must feed.*

Obsess over the virus, but hunger is the more eminent danger. Human race is the most dangerous player.

*I choose bard.

You chose mother.

Can't I be both?

Is that your choice?

Yes.

Go to page 1.

But it is empty.

Exactly. Begin again.*

Author's note:

My son escapes to the world of Dungeons and Dragons and begs me to join him in this game of chance, where like Covid, every roll of the dice matters. It's a game of risk and momentary empowerment where we fight invisible enemies in order to avoid the all too real ones. Fight or flight?

In the stillness when all of the noise and movement of late suburban capitalism grinds to a halt, the beauty and surprise of bugs, birds and bees creep in closer and closer. Like the Mantis we catch and keep in a glass jar, this is life in lockdown. Powerless over the pandemic, in fear of an invisible virus, watching the world go hungry, watching "democracy" die. Fight or Flight?

Then, in the real world the unexpected opportunity for change with the BLM movement. Suddenly risk meets resistance, to participate in the game, in the outside world, in writing as half my mind stays on statistics and symptoms and safety, on feeding and caring and staying hopeful for my family while mourning the loss of a world that never really existed.

Place at a Distance



*Cypress Trees. Kissimmee Billie Slough, Big Cypress Seminole Indian Reservation.
Photo by Neal Marty Bowers*

I should have been in South Florida, serving as a judge for the Miss Seminole Princess Pageant. Instead, I proposed Zoom for an interview with Marty Bowers about his thrilling new endeavor, the Kissimmee Billie Slough (KBS) Curriculum Project. He responded “umm, i can download the app n letchu kno. i can facetime .” No iPhone or Facetime for me, so we scheduled a Zoom.

That Friday afternoon the connection failed. We resorted to Facebook Messenger video, with the conversation interrupted repeatedly by an unstable internet connection, garbled words, filler laughter, jettisoning and redialing: the full pandemic-communication rigamarole. Too spooked by technology gremlins to set up something fancier, I held up my phone by hand for nearly two hours to record the audio.

Such are the banality and low-key anxiety of connection “in these times” of collegial respect and long-distance friendship when communicative protocol is emergent.

Marty and I had never visited one another’s houses until we joined by video. We were each staying “safer at home” during a pandemic that was surging on Florida Seminole reservations. This wasn’t supposed to be how we talked about the KBS Curriculum Project. We would have found time for a sit-down interview, most likely at the Billie Swamp Safari, where I would order an Indian taco and the gigantic (one size only) unsweetened iced tea. Or maybe we would have visited the slough, a swampy riparian area people also call

“the native area,” but perhaps not: we would not risk anyone thinking it inappropriate for us to go alone, and planning a larger outing is a heavy lift. Never mind that. Instead, here we were in Los Angeles and Florida, in each other’s homes and, I like to think, each delighted to reconnect “face to face” after several years of communicating only by Facebook reactions and comments plus the occasional direct message.

Bowers’ project builds from the premise that place has much to teach. And that part of the responsibility of sovereignty is decolonizing Seminole education. The KBS Curriculum Project gathers teachers and other Seminole Tribe staff to restructure the K-12 curriculum at the reservation Ahfachkee School by connecting learning in a range of subjects to the past and present of the Kissimmee Billie Slough. Hands-on lessons in the swamp—testing water, learning plant identification, spotting critters, absorbing ecology and history—would supplement classroom instruction, all calibrated to each grade level’s Sunshine State Standards.

True enough, but to describe the project this way sucks out its life. After all, Bowers’ declarative sentences come out of a perfect and brilliant jumble of pride, conviction, sheepish self-criticism, fuck-you confidence, confession, knowledge dropping, and introspection. For two hours we talked and laughed, Marty moving around the room in search of clearer cell signal, me seated at my partner’s desk because our eight-year-old had taken over my home office for Zoom “summer camp” class,” leaving

nowhere else suitable for focused conversation. So much mirth: why do I usually excise laughter from ethnographic writing about place?

Some places can do everything. The Kissimmee Billie Slough (KBS) covers thousands of acres that are protected by Seminole Tribe of Florida environmental policies. There, treasured ghost orchids bloom, cypress trees and healing plants grow, shapeshifters may dwell, the slough becomes a slow-flowing river during the wet season, and Big Cypress residents hunt, fish, ride around on four wheelers, or just take a break from busy lives. In that watery place there are archaeological sites, stories, histories of war against invading Americans and of the Seminole cattle industry, environmental regulations, Everglades restoration initiatives, water quality tests, and wetlands ecology galore.

As Bowers put it, “We can tell the complete Seminole story from the Kissimmee Billie Slough.”

That is a mighty weight for a slough to bear. Or, maybe the reverse is truer: perhaps narrative strains to carry the slough’s weight.

Marty recounted a heated conversation between his daughter and granddaughter that inspired his project: the mother tried to teach her child a concept that “she herself didn’t understand. And they were desperately trying to reach one another in their own way, and they were each getting so frustrated in their own way. And then they both started crying. And I was thinking: there’s just gotta be another way.”

Now, thanks to Messenger video, I could picture that moment in that house. By contrast, I could not join him in the slough. What if the former proved to be more important than the latter for my larger study of the ways people in the Florida Everglades were tied to water at a time of ecological reckoning? What if that house became the slough when mother and daughter argued?

I have a feeling we will talk this way again, kept more distant and also brought closer through the sometimes-garbled words of unstable connections.

KARMA AND AIR CONDITIONING

Dried cheese is not a food one eats quickly. You suck on it, move it around in your mouth, chew it, savor it. Eating dried cheese offers time for stories to unfold. As we ate, Tenzin told me the entire story, even the parts I already knew. She told it in that way you tell a story to someone who was there for it. She told it for confirmation as well as for comfort.

As I write these words, Tenzin is sick. On the day we ate cheese and talked in Kathmandu, she was not. She was healthy; I was healthy; our children were healthy. While we could not then imagine her terminal illness, she could see her future. My children are elsewhere, she said. I can't get them. I can't claim them. I have no status. My karma is that I am here alone. What can I do?

[rewind to the day before]

I went through three security gates to get to the room where I heard familiar words. "There is nothing we can do." I had heard them before in UN offices in India and Nepal. They were words

of empathy and frustration, but also of absolution. We are not responsible; there is nothing we can do. I heard them in a room with weak air conditioning on a hot summer day. They were words spoken as only bureaucrats can:

There is nothing we can do for the Tibetan community.

We are here at the request of the government.

It is up to the local government.

If the Nepali government wanted, they could issue identification documents to all Tibetans in a week.

We don't consider Tibetans stateless because China considers them citizens.

There is nothing we can do.

Tenzin knew I was going to the UN office. Like many others, she looked to the United Nations for justice. Truth will prevail, the Dalai Lama reassures them. Tenzin believed this. She believed that the truth of the situation would lead to its resolution. She believed Tibet would once again be under Tibetan governance

Thermos still life, Kathmandu. Photo by Carole McGranahan.



rather than Chinese colonial rule. She had faith in the Dalai Lama and hope in the United Nations. Religious and political faith in the Dalai Lama is cultivated over centuries. Hope in the UN is different. It is grounded in a universal humanism that was never truly universal. It is grounded in the belief that injustice will be recognized and addressed. But, China is a world power no country is willing to challenge. And so in UN offices in South Asia, polite civil servants repeat, “There is nothing we can do.”

[exit the anthropologist]

The next day I went to see Tenzin. We hugged each other and giggled, and I sat down on a carpet-covered bed while she poured us tea. Early morning sunlight filtered into the room through gauzy curtains; incense smoke danced in the breeze. We settled in, catching up on all that had happened since we last saw each other. For much of our conversation,

her eyes were wet. Things were not going well. What can I do, she asked. It was a question for which she did not really expect an answer, nor did I have one to offer.

Tenzin was divorced. Her husband had beat her. Back then, domestic abuse was not something refugees could seek help for from anyone other than their families and friends. Things are starting to change, starting to slowly change. Her world is sad, that of a mother separated from her children, of a woman whose life has not gone as planned. Following their divorce, Tenzin's ex-husband took the kids. He made decisions for them without consulting her. They moved from country to country. What could she do? What rights did a mother have? What rights did a refugee have?

None, it turned out.

Tibetan refugees in India and Nepal have no internationally-secured rights. No country in South Asia has signed on to the UN Convention on Refugees. Tenzin had no political status or rights or documentation. She was in Nepal. Her kids were in India. Her ex-husband was in hiding.

What could she do?

[]

In an office somewhere in South Asia, bureaucrats claim no responsibility. There is nothing they can do. Tenzin, no longer in Kathmandu, refused that answer. She left Nepal in hopes of something better, but her children are still not with her. They are on different continents, and she is now sick in a world that continues to push them apart. Tenzin says this is her las, her karma. Actions in her past lives shape her present reality. But karma does not absolve. It includes entanglements. It involves responsibility. She says: tell my story.

Huatse Gyal

Even My Name Has Fizzled Out



Tibetan grasslands. Photo by Huatse Gyal.

Nowadays, few people call us by our names. Most simply call us “shit collectors.”

I came to the county seat in 2009. I left two brothers and a sister back in our Droksha village. I’m the oldest. After the Chinese government divided the communal lands among each household in the late 1990s,¹ my siblings had nothing to do. All you need to do is to drive the animals to your fenced land in the morning, then the animals come back in the evening. Unlike before, you don’t need to carefully graze and nurture the animals. We had a family discussion and agreed it would be better for the family if I could earn a salary in town. Around that time, our village leader said the county government was looking for workers to clean trash from the streets. He also said one would not get this job easily if one didn’t have a close relationship with higher-ups in the county seat. By that, he meant we had to offer at least a sheep to a higher-ranked leader. We followed his advice, and, just like that, I got this job.

Now I have been doing this work for about ten years. You invited me to talk about my life and my work, so I’m just saying whatever comes to my mind. Of course, I’m aware that none of what I’m saying has any value.

“Of course, there is value in your story,” I said. The scorching sunshine hits on the concrete pavement of Gesar Square, making both of our eyes uncomfortable.

When I first came to the county seat, I missed the pasture land so much. I was

twenty-five years old, but I had not even realized the beauty of Droksha before leaving. If you lay your eyes on Tibetan pastureland, you would be amazed by the rich variety of plants and flowers growing amidst all types of grasses. You would also marvel at the transforming landscape, as the grasslands of summer turn from green to golden in the fall. I spent twenty years of my life carefully grazing and nurturing hundreds of yaks, sheep, and horses on the grassland. I miss them as much as I miss my family.

With my friends, we used to graze our animals while playing and laughing. I loved to sing songs in the open space. Although I still miss Droksha so much, if I went home, people would say I did not manage to help my family, so I have been trying my best to do this work. At least, when I get my salary at the end of each month, I am able to buy some vegetables, medicine, and snacks for the kids in the family. So, life is not too bad.

I’m someone who has bad karma. I’ve had a problem with my left eye for a long time. It’s always watery. Eye drops sometimes help. Now even my name has fizzled out.

Many people may not know this. The street cleaners have to wear a very bright uniform. Many must have seen it before. The bright green color of the uniform we have to wear every day makes your eyes very uncomfortable, especially when the scorching sunshine shines on your clothes. Sometimes, I wonder if wearing a pair of sunglasses might help block the

sunshine and be good for my eyes. However, I'm too shy to wear them. People might ridicule me, saying that a "shit collector" is wearing a fancy pair of sunglasses. People who wear sunglasses here in the country seat are either those who work for the government, or those who have nothing to do but just wander the streets. It seems many people think that wearing a pair of sunglasses adds additional beauty.

One day, I guess people might call me a "blind shit collector," ha, ha, ha!

Wearing impractical uniforms is only one of many rules. During the day, we need to collect litter and sweep Gesar Square. At night, we have to take turns losing sleep to protect facilities at the square such as trash bins, around 2-3 a.m., drunks often come to the square, and they shit and pee everywhere. If we told them not to do that, they would pompously say, "Does the square belong to the shit collectors?"

There were many times that they also beat us.

Still, at Gesar Square, our main worry isn't cleaning up the drunks' shit or puke. According to our rules, if we are unable to protect the facilities at the Gesar Square, our bosses deduct the cost of the trash bins from our monthly salaries. Our month salary isn't that much in the first place.

The saying that it's hard for people to understand another's pain: isn't that so true?

Notes:

[1] Since the late 1990s, Tibetan pastoralists have been confronted with a mandatory rangeland fencing policy, premised on Tragedy of the Commons assumptions, which has greatly altered traditional communal grazing practices. It also created a surplus of labor by easing the ways to graze animals with fencing materials.

Retrieve

Box 1988/065: Joint Committee to Visit the State Penitentiary. 20th Legislature, 1887: I learned this about Huntsville (Wynne) Prison Farm: “[this farm] is used for working convicts who are unable to go off to the camps and farms at a distance, and who, but for this farm, would be a dead expense to the state.”

Hours of the same routine: asking the archivist to pull another box, sifting through documents—many of them handwritten—looking for traces, listening for whispers to invite me in. That is my way with people during ethnographic work: waiting for invitations rather than entering with or by force. I hope this works with people sorted into folders and boxes at the Texas State Library and Archives Commission, too.

Box 1988/068-2. Folder RB 100.60: Addendum. 1921 Penitentiary Investigation, 37th Legislature, Penitentiary Investigating Committee. Transcript of Evidence Relative to Killing of Two Convicts at Eastham Farm on July 22, 1921: Eastham Farm is now Eastham prison, a men’s facility where my mother worked as a correctional officer (CO) for twenty cumulative years—ten in her first stint before working at Ellis prison for five years, five in a second term before retiring, and five more after a year of retirement. I wrote only one note about this document. It reads: “need to figure out if this is something worth coming back to scan or paying to have a scan of.” My researcher-doing-work-close-to-home language for, “I am not ready to experience the time-space collapsing that will happen when that 1921 world meets the particularities of the labor in this current world that made my life possible.”

I am weary in the way that archives make you. The morning excitement worn down to midday blurry vision, worry, and doubt. When working with the living, I am confident that my time with them will be fruitful, even if we go in directions I do not anticipate. Especially then. When working with these documents, vestiges of state power, I am not so confident. Saidiya Hartman teaches me that what looks like absences and silences in archival records may very well also be opportunities to tarry and commune with the fragments, or something like possibility.

I am tired of tarrying and communing with dominant voices that documented their own abuses toward mostly Black men and women, justifying them in the name of reformation. These archives make me feel like [white supremacist] scripts have never been interrupted, rewritten, or destroyed. But my own handling of these materials—the sifting, the scrutinizing, the questions I asked of them—is an interruption, a rewrite. Did the writers of these reports ever imagine that some 80-100 years later, a Black woman would be reading them, using them to deploy their narrative undoing? Likely not. The promises of such keep me seated, sifting, and listening.

Box 1988/065: House Committee to Investigate Retrieve State Prison Farm, 44th Legislature, 1935: in a year's time, twenty-four prisoners mutilated themselves at Retrieve State Prison Farm. The investigators attributed this to the *inmates* being “dangerous,” having a “low mentality,” or being beyond reformation. I and my interlocutors across space and time agree on one thing—that these men would stop at nothing to gain their freedom; a point that earned disdain from them and curiosity, admiration, and sadness from me. Under what conditions would one have to be laboring for self-harm to feel like freedom?

I am moving at a slower pace now, carrying both my weariness from picking up, studying, and putting down so many

documents and a worry that I am missing the whispers.

Box 1998/038-270A: Most of the images were not labeled. No dates and no names. I sifted through the mundane photos in folder 5 of 15 of the “agriculture” photos. Cows, rows being tilled for planting, large machines cultivating cotton sometime in the mid-to-late twentieth century. One could easily forget that these agricultural landscapes were owned by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice but for the few pictures of guards, in their classic grey and navy uniforms, overseeing the production. A photo falls out of the folder, face down on the table, revealing a single word on the back: “inmate.” Startled by the disruption and the word itself, I flipped the image over to the right side. A person sits on a tractor watching the machine drill a hole behind him for what looks like a fence post. Others are in the distance. His face bears the mark of concentration: a fixed gaze through squinted eyes. I wondered about the skills, knowledge, and patience the work required.

I am taken by this photo. Captured, really. Stuck on the single descriptor, how inmate eclipses other possibilities like farmer because he is entrusted in the state's “care.” But this man is a *farmer*, right? Do inmates get to be farmers?



Hauling sugar cane on a prison farm (no date). Prints and Photographs Collection, 1976/31-168, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

Documentary Hinterlands

“Watch out for the tea!”

I am grabbing mugs as James fans documents across his kitchen table. But the papers are already watermarked by beverage stains, their corners dog-eared and well-thumbed. Setting them out, James knows each at a glance - by the shape and pattern of the text, the slant of a historical signature, the placement of a grainy diagram.

For two weeks now, I’ve been meeting with veterans in their 70s and 80s across the UK, asking them to recount serving at British nuclear bomb tests in the Pacific. Most start by introducing me to the archives. Their archives. ¹

James first introduced himself to me at the Supreme Court in London, where a group of test veterans were waging a class action against the Ministry of Defence for radiation exposure. “They’ll never give up the *real* documents,” James said, seated in the Court Cafeteria, walking stick planted between his knees. “This was never going to be a fair fight.”

And how does one fight when the evidence that might prove culpability is controlled by the accused? Buried within the military’s own top secret archive. And yet documents have ways of being unruly. Of leaking out. Copies of some of the bomb planning records had been found in the Public Records Office, and in the uncensored folders of an Australian archive, almost by accident.

James hands me the first document. A meeting in London, November 19, 1956.² Commander of Operation Grapple, Air Vice Marshall Oulton, needed to designate a radiation “Danger Zone” in the Western Pacific. He tabled a map, consisting of two circles drawn out at a radius of 400 nautical miles from Christmas and Malden Islands, the chosen location for the nuclear tests. This “preferred danger zone” was calculated on the assumption that if a nuclear bomb accidentally detonated at ground level, the fallout would at maximum spread that far. This was premised upon a 150 kiloton blast.

“Well, in reality three of the bombs in Operation Grapple were huge. Megaton huge.” James points to the margins of the paper where he had scrawled this fact. He is used to arguing with these documents.

James reads aloud from the meeting record, in a clipped, officious voice. “Such an area is patently too large and has been reduced.” Overlaid upon

the circles is a much smaller, irregular shaped zone drawn with efficient, straight lines. It weaves back and forth, vertical then horizontal, excluding all of the nearby inhabited islands. The Washington, Fanning, Jarvis and Penrhyn Islands are now classified as lying in the 'safe zone.' James offers no commentary, but lets the document sit between us for a moment.

The next record. November 27, 1956. The scientific architects of the British bomb tests met in London to produce a top secret document entitled, "Safety Precautions Planned for Operation Grapple."³ They noted that, according to this limited danger zone, safe levels of radiation "recommended by the International Commission on Radiological Protection (ICRP) would be necessarily exceeded." Despite this they reasoned that, "only very slight health hazard to people would arise and that only to primitive peoples."

Through all the photocopying of photocopies of archival documents, the word 'primitive' has faded, almost indecipherably, from the page. But James has underlined it, twice, in green ink, and traced back in the vanished letters p and v. His finger is, however, pressed below the word 'only.' He taps it.

He moves along, placing a letter down before me. September 20, 1957.⁴ The Colonial



Hauling sugar cane on a prison farm (no date). Prints and Photographs Collection, 1976/31-168, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

Office in London informed the Acting High Commissioner for the Western Pacific about plans for the next bomb test, Operation Grapple X. “There is no reason to fear damage to the island itself and the experts assure us the test will carry no risk for the people of inhabited islands in the vicinity or any in the colony.” The letter is brief. It purrs with confidence.

James recounts how, less than a month later, Britain detonated its first thermonuclear hydrogen bomb above Christmas Island. “That one was so much larger than they were expecting.” James says. He reaches over, and in the blank space of this letter he carefully writes out an equation for me.

Hiroshima = 15 kiloton = Fifteen thousand ton

Grapple X = 1.8 megaton = 1.8 million ton

We read another document. The only officially reported damage from the Grapple X blast were to several buildings, a helicopter and some large fuel tanks at the military camp on Christmas Island. All personnel were reported safe. Someone, on an earlier photocopy of this photocopy, has roughly underlined the word ‘safe.’ Or perhaps they have crossed it out.

I scanned the thick stack of unopened files sitting on the chair between us. “Is there anything in any of the documents you’ve seen, about the local people, on those neighbouring islands? The effects?”

James shook his head and gathered up the documents, placing them on an empty dining seat. He smoothed the floral tablecloth and opened up a new manila folder.

[1] In a 2009 British High Court case where a group of test veterans claimed damages against the Ministry of Defence, Judge Foskett notes “The bundles of documents in this case exceed 100 lever arch files, many containing up to 400 pages of documentation...I make no complaints about this...but it is important that anyone reading this judgment should understand the extent and depth of the documentary hinterland.”

[2] Public Records Office file CO1036/280).

[3] Public Records Office file (CO1036/280).

[4] Public Records Office file (CO1036/283).

Europe's Shield

JPEG Image. Created Monday, 9 March 2020 at 12:17. Add tags...

We lean forward for the habitual double kiss, but sway back suddenly. Better not. My historian colleague and I had just emerged from drizzle-snarled Athens traffic at the University of Athens medical school campus. A few minutes later, four masters' students from my seminar "Politics of Death and Mourning" would arrive for our tour of the Criminology Museum. This one-room collection, with its pre-war glass vitrines, is located inside the Toxicology-Forensics building, between the Anatomy Theater and the city morgue, at the nexus of death and knowledge.

What a day for this.

This semester we were exploring the history of anatomy, foregrounding necroviolence: namely, the exhuming, dissecting, dismembering, measuring, exhibiting of (certain) dead bodies. Likely candidates: the destitute, colonized, indigenous, 'ancient,' heterodox, convicted, conscripted, institutionalized, prostitute, stillborn. Violence sanitized,

transfigured into specimen. Here, in Greece, quasi-colony disguised as Europe's origin, in this mini-museum, replica of grandiose imperial bone rooms, whose bodies might we find?

Lean in. Selfie time.

A student's red umbrella pops at the edge of the frame. The next day the Minister of Health would announce the closing of schools and universities for fourteen days as a preemptive measure against the spread of the virus known as *koronoïos* (with omega or omicron), sometimes *koronaïos*.

civilprotection.gr

I do a double take when I discern the figure of a shield at the center of the new public health guidelines hastily taped to the elevator door at the university. "We are not afraid -- we protect ourselves. Our shield (*aspida mas*), knowledge." The potential aggression involved in protecting "us" suddenly popped out of the background.

Collections of Criminological Interest » Collections of War-related Material » Guillotine. Website of Criminology Museum, University of Athens

“Our most valuable holding.” imported from France in 1833 to secure the reign of Greece’s Bavarian King Otto, the only extant guillotine in Greece. Authentic and used. Fronted by a “bandit’s” head, an “abnormal” embryo, afloat in jars of formaldehyde. The epitome of enlightened, technologized state murder. Terror, the underbelly of Reason and Science, is the topos of modernity. Democracy always bears the colony within, political philosopher Achille Mbembe reminds us. But, in the colony, endless war is waged outside the law.

Prime Minister’s Office, 25th of February, 2020

“It’s necessary to shut down current anarchic structures. But the existing ones can’t shut until new ‘closed’ ones are constructed. This will benefit the country, especially now with the flare up of public health issues. Like *koronoïos*, which can be dealt with effectively in a closed structure, not an anarchic, open one that’s a ‘health bomb’.” These “structures” warehouse people from Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Pakistan, Congo who managed to cross the Aegean from Turkey, only to stagnate in Europe’s purgatory. At 2am, before

the government spokesman made his statement, armed riot police had arrived on several border islands via commissioned tourist ferries, meeting intense resistance from residents who want refugees gone, transported to the mainland. “Battlefield,” the headlines report.

EU Joint statement. Greek-Turkish border, March 3rd, 2020

The European Commission president expressed her gratitude to the Greek Prime Minister: “This border is not only a Greek border, it’s also a European border ... I thank Greece for being our European *aspida* in these times.” Greek news media reported that she (flatteringly) used the Greek word. On February 27th, Turkey, reneging on its 2016 deal to contain refugees within its territory, had opened its border. On March 2nd, fire coming from the Greek side had “pushed back” (killed) 22-year-old Syrian refugee Mohammad Al-Arab.

Skull, no. 505, Anthropological Museum, University of Athens

The visit to the Anthropological Museum (one of the oldest in Europe, established 1886) was an afterthought. Well-lit, compact, fully-renovated, the museum could be anywhere. Eugenicist views scrubbed, original collections basemented. When asked about the



history of the collection, the guide volleyed back “all the exhibits are casts” to resume her script about *homo sapiens*. In the last vitrine, though, the aboriginal skull from Tasmania, a German colleague’s inscription from 1905 inked into the bone, turns out to be original. So even here.

<https://el.wiktionary.org/wiki/κορονοϊός>

Koroni in ancient Greek means ‘twist’ or ‘bend’: crow’s (*korax*) beak, boat’s prow. *Korona* with an ‘a’, the monarch’s crown, later entered modern Greek from Italian as a calque. (The first case of coronavirus also entered Greece, not from refugees, but via Italy, on February 26th: a designer from Thessaloniki infected at Milan’s Fashion Week.) Coined in European languages from ancient Greek lexical parts, calques (Fr. *calquer* ‘to copy, to trace’) name the new -- technologies, scientific terms, political concepts -- before slipping into modern Greek. So they never quite fit. Translations really, not transcriptions. Linguists squabble over possible spellings: some delineating, others concealing the trajectory.

BOXES

Box 1

Give a present, write a poem.

*Now it is Christmas again
And now it is Christmas again
And Christmas lasts until Easter! 1*

Merry Christmas, everyone. Make me laugh, move me.

*But that wasn't true
And it wasn't true
Because the fast comes in between. 2*

Christmas in Sweden—I watched it on TV. Fanny and Alexander. What a strange carol they sing—the actors—as they dance around the table, ring around the tree.

This box is a gift, beautifully wrapped, its label poetic. Read it now, it's a hint.

Box 2

Beige and gray: the colors of the future, once upon a time. A plastic box made by Memorex, owned by IBM.

Do you remember floppy disks? Almost square, with a metal slider you could push to see the black tape hidden underneath, though you weren't supposed to.

In Markus' office, a box in the bookcase held data and dust.

Markus said he started with floppies. Later CDs. He had some of those too.



Locked floppy disk box. Photo by Alison Cool.

Cohorts and variables, double click, open the spreadsheet. Numbers in boxes: income, age, postal codes. This is how you become an economist.

That was a long time ago. After the study concludes and the article's out, you erase the disks, destroy the data. At least, those were the instructions from the statistical bureau, thinking, even then, about the people in the files: How to keep them safe.

What could be safer than a locked box?

Markus had the keys. But he knew how it would go: first the original would vanish, then the spare. Hopeless. Eventually, unintentionally, a solution—the key would be stored in the lock, the spare dangling from the thin metal ring they shared.

Box 3

I never saw the third box, the poison box. Per told me about it in the library café. Every Thursday: pea soup and pancakes.

“Imagine,” said Per. “Under our feet: two five-story houses, each 300 meters long, buried deep underground.” I thought about it, substituting yards for meters. “That’s where we keep the core of our print collections,” he explained. Per was the deputy national librarian, so he would know.

Underneath the library, nineteenth-century newspapers were disappearing. “Printed on very bad paper,” said Per with a frown. “Impossible to preserve.” All you could do was scan the pages, time versus technology. Old news. The digital files were stored in Stockholm, the backups on servers far away. “In case something really bad happens.”

Letters become numbers. Libraries save what is written.

But things go wrong. Some published books, for example, are plagiarized. “The publisher withdraws the book, and it goes in the poison box.” Even worse, he explained, “we also have a very—specific—small collection of child pornography. Because pornography is part of the printed material that ends up here, whether we like it or not.”

He sipped his coffee, looked at me. “One regulation says no one is permitted to possess child pornography. And this other regulation says the National Library has to collect everything printed. We asked for advice, and they said you have to find a solution yourselves. So we put it in a safe, locked it up, and no one gets access to it.”

Why poison? Why boxes? Boxes promise to protect and save, close and open again—not tomorrow, later on. In between, something happens. The contents are the same, but the world changes. The box is a portal to a time of promises fulfilled.

Here’s my gift to you—it’s a fortune told as a riddle.

The ghost of Christmas future takes you away. A cold night, a distant hum. Darkness pierced by red lights blinking. Shelves of servers, systems and secrets, electrical pulses.

Dawn breaks. Clouds. Something terrible has happened, but you don’t know what. Fire or flood, the Baltic sea rising? Maybe violence, an attack. Stockholm is gone. The streets

are empty, all the data was lost.

Thank god you backed up the files.

Now it's Christmas, again.

The curtains open on another scene. This is a better world of books and armchairs, peace and harmony, democracy and science. Scholars are waiting outside the library. Snow begins to fall.

The doors open. Librarians roll rubber numbers on wood-handled stamps forward and back, finding today's date. It smells of old paper and old glue.

The air is close in the stacks of the future. Was the poison box here all along, unopened? Or do you find it easily? The poison box is out in the open, it's on display in the lobby. An pedantic exhibit of our evils, mostly ignored. Or are students studying records of wrongs in the reading room? See them writing in notebooks, all quiet loops and neat lines. What do they know of these things we failed to understand but promised to remember?

Write this down. It will always be like this: a mystery, a story, a lie.

Notes:

[1] *Nu är det jul igen,
och nu är det jul igen
och julen varan än till påsken*

[2] *Men det var inte sant,
och det var inte sant
För däremellan komma fastan*

Dentist in Dallas: Pandemic Affect in the American Empire

I fear the room's shared air; outside, Dallas heat is liquefying. Next door is the neon awning of the popsicle store: tinny music, electric strawberry and bubblegum pops, and across the way is the smokehouse: their bestseller is "burnt ends," the smoky, fatty bits of the animal. Yes, sweets and meat and naked laughing faces, the city's bright summer, its uncanny luster: everything looks the same as it did six months ago. Almost the same but not quite. The city pulses around me like a little ache, but actually it's the pain inside my tooth.

When the dentist approaches I recoil: his blue paper mask droops below his nose. "Please," I ask him, "can you put your mask on over your nose?" Already I've asked two receptionists in this office to cover their faces. In Texas, four months into the pandemic, there are 15,000 new cases a day. The dentist's eyes frown at the scolding. I am shepherded off to the

dental technician to X-ray the source of the pain.

The technician is tall, slender, gloved. He wears his mask properly and his eyes are solicitous when he asks me to remove mine to capture my teeth and gums. I'm anxious: it is my first time taking off my mask in public but when he whispers, "you'll be okay" it seems true. I think I recognize his accent, that of an Arabic speaker, and it brings me ease; I have been researching and writing about Iraq for more than a decade. I take a breath. He smiles at me and gestures at the screen. Technicians are meant to wait for the dentist to read the X-ray but this one points to a tiny hollow on the image: "this here is just a cavity and it's small. You have nothing to worry about. I was a dentist in my country."

I ask him what country he came from and what America asks of him to become a dentist here. "Syria," he tells me, "and



Pandemic Days. Photograph by Nomi Stone.

it will take some time.” I reply to him in the Iraqi dialect of Arabic. Almost the same but not quite. I want to ask him if his family is safe, but I fear provoking a stab of pain through intrusion. Instead I say: “I hope you can get the job you deserve here soon.” Then, before I censor myself, I say softly again in Arabic, “you’re better than he is, the American dentist,” and Amir (he has told me his name by now) chuckles.

Then I feel a flush of shame: for having felt for just a moment that he and I are outsiders together. However I may feel about it, I am from this place: its bluster and denial and exceptionalism, its fantasies of inclusion across the capitalistic grid while its glossy pleasures are delivered only to the few. My chest tightens at what this home has given me, and what it hasn’t taken. “I truly hope,” I offer tentatively to Amir, “that your family is okay.” The way his eyes flicker for a moment tells me they are not. “My brother is gone,” he tells me. “And my Dad.”

In Arabic I stutter “May God have mercy on them.” He blinks. The hygienist approaches. “We think it might be better if you come back next week,” she says. “To see our female dentist. She’s more patient. That might be a better fit.” The pain in my teeth seems to roam: my jaw, my sinuses, my head, scalding in my eyes. “No, thank you,” I reply. I do not want another encounter of shared air in this room. She nods and asks me to sit down, Amir retreating to assist another patient. The air is thick; it catches when I breathe.

After the gritty toothpaste of the cleaning and the scaling off my plaque, after the mouth mirror and the saliva ejector, the dentist arrives, this time double masked and gloved: I can only see his eyes and the white freckled flesh around them. After he finishes drilling, the tooth hurts for another three weeks, the nerves still raw. I return a month later for my tooth to be checked. I hope to catch a glimpse of Amir, but I don’t. I walk back out into the Texas scald, and I drive home.

Frozen Baby Story



Amman, Jordan. Photo by Kali Rubaii

The most horrible thing that ever happened to me was the moment I tripped while walking down a frozen sidewalk in Amman, Jordan. I had not yet found the conceptual framing to articulate the confluence of war and climate change. I did not have words like “anthropocene” or “sociocide.” I only had words like “cold” and “war.”

Syrians ran for their lives. Some set up camp on the hilly streets and sidewalks of the city. That year, it snowed heavily enough for Jordan to borrow a snowplow from Israel, without much outcry from the country's Palestinian residents. Snow dampens sound. It suppresses, even, political dissent. Cold people, trapped people, hungry people, might consent to almost anything. That is why exposure is such a common element of torture. It is also, I think, why doctor's offices are so cold.

I tripped. When I looked down, there was an infant frozen solid on the ground.

I can't describe the feeling, the creeping shiver, that came over me. It was not the feeling of panicked dread when you forget a deadline or get into big trouble. That's a heat flooding over you, from the shoulders.

You know when you step on something soft, and it feels alive? It startles. You recoil into a jump backwards. Cold creeps up like a corkscrew from your guts. Almost, but not, like queasiness.

But when you step on something that does *not* feel alive, but feels as if it should be, it just makes you flat cold. Like shock. The coldness of this body alarmed me for a lifetime. It felt somehow intended that I trip there, and intended that it should haunt me. Hold me responsible.

The baby had closed eyes and a sweet face with little lips so frozen that where they parted, they were firm and doll-like. I remember holding a plastic bottle to a plastic doll once, touching the hardness of its fake lips with my fingers. Very

strange. The bottle would make a hollow sound as it touched the empty face.

How abject it seemed. Of all the things I could trip on... a dead cat? Maybe! But an infant? I knew there was something exceptionally wrong, not for the obvious reason that it had been left there, or that I had tripped on it, or that it was frozen... but that it was not the only child to freeze to death that night. It was not supposed to get this cold here. The baby wore a thin cotton dress.

There is so much about horror that gets suppressed.

They say we should not speak too much about dead babies. Out of respect. But I spend a lot of time talking about babies whose lives were halved, quartered, stunted, and splintered. I cannot make dead babies a discreet topic. They are often my main company. They stick with me even when I fall asleep to the glow of Netflix far away from snowy Jordan. They manage to thin out and slide under my eyelids just as my eyes flutter closed.

I have been handed so many stories by, from, about, or on behalf of dead and not-quite-dead babies. Have you ever been responsible for something you were not qualified to be responsible for? I never know what to do with these stories.

What makes dead babies, or their bodies, so hard to talk about ethically is their permanent subalternity. They cannot speak for themselves and are easy to dismiss as lacking subjectivity or political agency, and—as is the case of all dead—difficult to consult for their

consent. Because of these things, it is also necessary to speak of them. As it turns out, the dead certainly have political will. Subaltern infants do have voices (albeit faint), and they have grievances they make clear, often by means of communication that are hard to fathom or treated as simply imagined by their interpreters. (To believe them, one has to believe me. And you won't. Not really.)

This particular baby was in my path somehow, and I felt responsible for her. She was saying something with her body that was not quite about war and not quite about climate change, but something about worlds-ending projects at their crux.

Years later, I adopted a cat from the same icy streets. The two may not be related, but I did not want to see a little cat freeze at my doorstep like the baby. She is sitting with me now. She is not the transposed being of the cold baby into a warm cat. Yet, they are linked.

Sometimes she jumps up out of a deep calm, to bite me for seemingly no reason. There is fury in her stillness. She is "nus-nus," half and half, patchy looking with a broken ear. She sees two worlds, as if through a split viewfinder. I only see one. She lashes out from what seems like nowhere, but is, I think, from somewhere.

I imagine she is exacting angst or revenge, depriving me of any predictability, comfort or rest. "But wait," she says, "I am still angry."

We Are Not Okay

“Are you okay?”

It was an ominous way to wake up: a ping from a text 15 minutes before my morning alarm buzzed. The message was from a friend who lives a few streets away.

“Are any of us okay right now?” I thought but didn’t text back.

“Yeah, I am. Why? Are you okay? Is something going on?” Fully awake, I wondered if another tragedy occurred while I slept.

“I heard about the shooting on your block last night. Just checking in.”

I live in the heart of Bedford-Stuyvesant Brooklyn, on a block like many others: one that has both rapidly changed over the past decade, and stayed the same. Over half of the brownstones are still owned by Black folks who either inherited the property from parents, aunts, or grandmothers, or bought them in the early 90s when this part of Brooklyn had yet to appeal to white buyers and was still considered no man’s land.

But the reality is my neighborhood was never considered a no man’s land or disenfranchised or devastated or bleak to the many Black people who live here, who cultivate the cultural richness and intangible aliveness that make neighborhoods like Bedstuy prime geographies for flag planting and cooptation.

We still have block parties where “block uncles” skewer hot dogs on small round, rusted-out BBQ grills while kids from Atlanta and Charlotte visiting extended family ‘up north’ play in rented bounce tents in the middle of the street. Wiry young Black men gather on corners talking trash and making smart and playful jokes as you walk past them and their overturned bikes. These young men have beef with the other young men who live a few streets down. The park at the end of our block, a mix of outdated swings, ladders, and monkey bars, a too small—on purpose—basketball court, and an open expanse of blacktop used for skateboarding, outdoor training, and drug trafficking, is supposedly the territory over

which they fight for ownership.

I read and take phone calls on the green wooden benches scattered on the playground perimeter on summer days when the sun makes staying inside feel like an offense. At night walking home from the bodega, I pass the generator-run stadium lights the NYPD set up in late spring to flood the park with a glare. It's so bright you can read the lettering on candy wrappers pushed to edges of the basketball court: Banana Now & Later...TWIX...double bubble. The illumination is unsettling in that it already designates the entire square block from avenue to avenue a crime scene. I step off of the sidewalk before I approach the lights to walk in the darkness of the street, feeling the secrets and safety in shadows.

I don't expect to find any mention of the shooting on the news, doubting if another street shooting in Brooklyn is noteworthy to people in the media who assess which traumas are legible, which worthwhile to cover. So, I log on to the Bedford-Stuyvesant Facebook page where I find a post about the shooting. Scrolling a few comments down, it is revealed that the victim was a child. I inhale the details: *a bullet...ongoing tensions between 'gangs'...a one-year-old shot and killed on impact in his stroller...a family in the park. And exhale the analyses: why were they out that late with a baby? this is what happens when babies have babies. that park is a mess. ya'll still want to defund the police?*



The Park. Photo by Aimee Meredith Cox.

Are we okay?

The rest of the day, maybe even the rest of the week as the facts of the shooting become clearer, my understanding of it becomes hazier. The thought of the death of this baby must fade, become sketchy, for mundane and normal life to go on. The thought of this baby must stay with us in sharp and cutting clarity for new life to emerge.

As it turns out, the shooting of an infant is newsworthy, Newscasters set up lights to join those placed by the police in front of the metal gate circling the park where a small memorial has formed. I convene on the corner with my neighbors to watch. We are too far away to hear what is being said, intentionally so, and are comforted watching lips move. I pretend the correspondents are telling a different story.

A few days after the shooting, the park is converted into a make-shift fair. Astroturf appears to cover the lot with a few scattered tables of logoed merchandise for giveaways. Uniformed cops play basketball with neighborhood kids. There is a DJ. He alternates between calls for everyone to dance and unrehearsed testimony on gun violence and police-community unity. My next-door neighbor, a tall bearded Black man who lives with his 90-year-old mother, taps my shoulder and holds up a Black Lives Matter t-shirt. "There's more over there," he says, pointing to a plastic table. I walk away, moving past the candles and the frayed satin ribbons tied to the gate. I decide to stay on the sidewalk this time. I decide I am not okay.

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