CHAPTER 6

FLAT CLAPS AND DENGUE FEVER: A STORY OF ETHNOGRAPHIES LOST AND FOUND IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes the author’s experience with a lost opportunity to learn about and from Hijra communities in India. While the author was forced to leave the field, and ethnography was ‘lost’ before it could truly begin, the author was able to learn from the experience and translate the questions and ideas generated there into a way to frame and energise new work at home in the United States. The chapter begins with a description of the proposed research context and the circumstances that led to the author’s early departure. This is followed by lessons and reflections gleaned from the experience, and recommendations that ethnographers enter and write about the ‘messy’ field and write in ways that welcome serendipity, honour intuition and value their own and others’ humanity.

Keywords: Intuition; humanising methodologies; ethnographic fieldwork; Hijra; transgender; reflexivity

INTRODUCTION

I was kindly invited to spend three months as a visiting scholar at City University\(^1\) in India in early 2012. While I was there, I planned to do some preliminary fieldwork among the women and young children of the area’s free, public childcare centres or *anganwadis*. I had made some connections and had just happened upon...
a new, exciting potential ethnographic project and begun to plan when I suddenly became very ill and had to leave the field. The ethnography never happened.

This is the story of that lost ethnography. In telling it, I explore not only what it means to lose things in the academic context, but also the role of the human ethnographer in navigating, recasting, experiencing and learning from loss. Loss ‘puts us in our place’, writes Schulz (2017), ‘it confronts us with lack of order and loss of control and the fleeting nature of existence’ (para 6). However, this is also a story of what is found, both during and after the loss of something so seemingly unrecoverable as an entire ethnography.

This complicated story of lost and found employs Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical metaphor² to distinguish the ‘front stage’ story or performance – where the ethnographer puts on the conventional show – from the ‘backstage’ where the ‘suppressed facts make an appearance’ and the ‘vital secrets of a show’ (Goffman, 1959, pp. 112–113) are kept. I intentionally tell this story from that unguarded backstage, pulling back the velvet curtains to reveal the ropes and pulleys and wiring and sandbags of ethnographic performance backstory, and to invite readers (some of whom may be fellow performers who might be backstage anyway) to see how I made sense of my misadventure, the ethnography I lost, and the one I found.

**FLAT CLAPS AND DENGUE FEVER**

I was invited to come to City University in central India during my research leave, and designed some exploratory fieldwork in the hopes of gaining deeper, comparative understandings to build upon my prior work as a preschool ethnographer in the United States (see Galman, 2015). This time I hoped to learn from child care workers in India’s national childcare system. While I wasn’t going to be doing any more than very humble, very preliminary observation, I prepared carefully, reading everything I could about the area and talking to others who had been there. I made local connections via email. I danced the careful dance of feeling out exactly what the host institution expected, and what I would need to figure out on my own, across a cultural and geographic divide bridged only by email threads.

These threads were delicate and easily overtaxed. After I accepted the invitation from City, I didn’t hear anything further for some time. My emails went largely unanswered – certainly a product of the busy time of the semester at City – but it was hard for me to plan without guidance. I emailed to ask about arrangements for the journey. Should I bring my young children with me? Is there someone who can answer questions about this? I didn’t hear anything. This should have probably been a sign to me that I was approaching things incorrectly, but I simply pressed on, afraid of offending, perpetually unsure, suspecting that I should be asking more questions, but not sure how to ask them. The delicate dance of navigating a different way of coming to agreements demanded flexibility, after all.

But flexibility didn’t extend to decisions about what I should do with my children, then six, four and two years old. I decided to keep them at home and travel on my own. I did feel a mild panic about leaving them for quite so long, but steeled myself and forged ahead. Mothers did this all the time, I said to myself.
It will be fine. My two-year-old still slept in my arms at night, I thought, and the sweet powdery smell of her soap and footy pajamas came to mind. But I shouldn’t turn down this opportunity, I told myself again. I bought the single airline ticket and immediately felt the sharp catch of regret.

When the moment of departure arrived, my two-year-old daughter began to scream. She wrapped her arms around my leg. My husband pulled her away, and she stretched out her arms, howling even louder. The coach driver honked his horn. I could barely breathe. My husband said, ‘make it quick’. And I did. I threw myself out the door and cried the whole way to the airport, and most of the way to Dubai, too.

I arrived in India exhausted, and still slightly tearful, but the sun was shining and it was a beautiful day. My guest house was cheerful, located in a bright cul-de-sac. My fourth-floor room had lovely wide windows with a view of the delicate green and red treetops. A beautiful, creamy white cow slowly chewed its cud and opened and closed its liquid brown eyes in the courtyard. Children ran around in the street. Some things didn’t make immediate sense: the bed was bolted to the floor with enormous iron screws, and where I expected to find a sink and shower there was instead an unfamiliar bucket-and-spigot contraption hanging out of the wall next to the toilet. It is important to note, dear reader, that I owe the bucket-and-spigot a debt of gratitude as it led to a great friendship and more.

My mobile phone did not work in India, and I had not yet been able to get one from the University, so I reached out via email using the guest house WiFi to post pictures of the spigot/hose and bucket situation on social media, asking, ‘Who Knows What This Is?’ An acquaintance – a friend of a friend named Preethi, also a researcher in social science – responded. It turns out she actually lived just on the other side of the city. Not only did she immediately tell me what I was looking at (a bucket shower), and how to use it, she also invited me to come see her in the coming weeks for a live demo and dinner at her home.

Through a series of miscommunications, I never did get that mobile phone. However, a daily routine emerged even without one. Each day I woke up to the comforting *skritch skritch skritch* of the neighbour’s maid sweeping the walkway outside and the first little beeps of the drivers on the road nearby. Even without my glasses on, I could see that hundreds of mosquitoes had massed on my bedroom ceiling overnight, like a spray of black buckshot. The misty, orange-tinted mornings were breathtakingly beautiful: The last moments of coolness before the world began to heat up were filled with gentle sounds: flapping wings as brown birds lit on the neighbours’ balconies and a black-handed monkey or two skittered on low wires between buildings. Soon the vegetable seller would appear with her donkey, loaded down with fresh vegetables in a wide wooden tray. I loved the dry, warm, hay-like smell of morning before the streets filled to bursting with busy people, cars, and animals.

After breakfast I would venture downstairs, greet the man at the front desk, carefully step around the rice-flour kolam in front of the guest house, and wait on the narrow garden wall for my driver, sent by the University each morning at precisely 8 a.m. I sat among the little plastic bags of milk, which had been delivered earlier that morning; we were like a row of plump companions. The driver dutifully
picked me up and skillfully navigated the long, harrowing drive through the industrial outskirts of the city, before depositing me in front of the University. There was a different driver each day.

I would then take the elevator up to the eighth floor to my assigned work space. I sat in my cubicle. I would sit there for hours, politely emailing University personnel to make gentle inquiries. Could someone help me organise transportation to go visit a field site? When no response came, I felt like I was certainly asking the wrong way. I felt like a pest and imagined that I was supposed to figure this out on my own. I wandered downstairs. I would try to find the people I was emailing, because it is always better to talk face-to-face. I drank endless tiny cups of scalding hot milky tea from the little machine in the foyer while I continued my tentative dance of figuring things out. I worked on my keynote and my seminars. I emailed Preethi for advice.

By afternoon it was usually extremely warm on the eighth floor. One afternoon I propped a nearby window open to let in the breeze. The people around me quickly and wordlessly shut the window. Desperate in the heat, I waited an appropriate amount of time, then opened another window, this time choosing one closer to my space to avoid chilling anyone else. Soon I would learn why they were closed so quickly, and it wasn’t to avoid a chill: It turned out there were nests of extremely large, extremely angry giant bees clinging to the outside of the building like vibrating stalactites. These nests were occasionally set on fire as a pest control measure. The bees don’t die right away but instead fly angrily about, aflame and hysterical, into walls and onto people, biting and stinging and burning. The ground below was perpetually littered with charred bee corpses. After my first encounter with Bees On Fire, I never opened a window no matter how hot it got.

At 4 p.m., I would sit amid the dead bees on the first-floor pavement and wait to be driven back to the guest house. One day I asked the driver if he could drop me off somewhere else, instead of the guest house, at the end of the day. Maybe I could visit Preethi? He said that this was not allowed and I was only permitted to use the University driver to go to between the guest house and the university. But, he added, maybe the guest house could call a taxi for me. I did just that.

I made arrangements to meet Preethi at a bookstore on her side of town. She would introduce me to friends and help me get things going, or at the very least get a sense of what was out there. I had a lovely time. We walked around a neighbourhood where there was not one but two different childcare centres, and I was able to meet a few people. I made friends with a toddler who taught me how to make pretend dhosas out of sand and rocks with a shiny miniature cooking set over a pretend fire. I visited a toy store that doubled as a location for professional development in early childhood education. I got to do the ethnographic work of hanging out amid the ordinary everyday that is visible culture (Williams, 1958).

As the heat of the afternoon subsided and a busy darkness fell, it became time to face the challenge of getting back to the guest house. Preethi called a taxi for me and gave driver the address and the phone number for the guest house. About five minutes down the road, the driver stopped and got out his cell phone to call the guest house. After a moment he turned to me with a look of friendly concern. ‘Shut off’, he said.
As in, the guest house had turned off their phones. And it’s not like it was the wee hours of the morning. It was 8 p.m., arguably a time when phones might be on.

And so began the next hour of driving around the darkened streets, looking in vain for things I might find familiar, or things I had seen before. We drove and drove, until traffic came to a halt like around a jam-packed passenger bus, a handful of shouting auto-rickshaw drivers and five slow-moving water buffalo in the centre of the dual carriageway, flanked by something that looked like it was possibly on fire. As my driver sighed and turned off the engine, three lovely, smiling women in bright saris sidled up to my back-seat window, singing and briskly clapping their hands with their long, lacquered nails extended outward. They held out their palms. I could not know what they were asking for, but assuming they wanted money I dug into my bag to get out a few Rupees.

My driver rolled down his window and banged his hand on side of the car, shouting, startling me and shooing the women away. They sauntered away in slow defiance, turning back to wink and wave. He restarted the car and turned around in his seat. ‘Hijra’ he said to me, with a shrug. ‘They only beg. They are men!’ He laid on the horn and manoeuvred the car a few meters in the opposite direction. I put my money back in my purse. My driver eventually found his way to the guest house, where the phone was off the hook, but I was still thinking about what I had seen.

Later, Preethi explained to me that the women I had met were known as the Hijra; they were members of a thousands-of-years-old community of ‘third gender’ people in India. Theirs is not an easy road: during the colonial period they lost all concrete political or social power, they were banned from the basics of civic participation, from holding jobs or getting bank accounts to owning homes or voting, so they were often left with few options for survival. These included sex work, performing blessings and panhandling, and also a variety of other duties, including specifically those associated with Hinduism, that hinted at their former status. As told in the Hindu epic, the Ramayana, their non-binary existence won them a special place: When Prince Rama left his home for his long exile, his devoted followers followed him into a forest, full of sadness that he was leaving. The prince told them to stop being so sad, and asked that all the ‘men and women’ of his homeland should go home and mourn no more. Rama left for 14 years, but when he returned, he found that the Hijra had stayed and waited for him, all that time, because they were neither men nor women, and they loved and obeyed him. Prince Rama rewarded their devotion with special holy status (paraphrased from Nanda, 1998).

According to Gettleman (2018), Hijras are found in both Hindu and Muslim communities, and in both contexts have special cultural tasks that they are associated with as part of their historical and cultural position. Hijra in today’s India are openly denigrated, feared and mocked, hence my driver’s reaction, who may have felt that he was protecting me. However, they are also revered as different, special and even powerful bestowers of fortune – even as they are held at arm’s length. Preethi said that it is our duty as feminists and anthropologists working for social justice to support these women however we can. I wanted to learn more about them and their experience.

On our way home that afternoon, as luck would have it, we were approached by three Hijras as we sat in stalled traffic in a hired auto-rickshaw. The women
were giving their signature and identifying ‘flat clap’, by which they clap with their palms together and fingers splayed apart and slightly upward in a bouncing, high-energy rhythm. Handing each woman a few loose coins and bills, Preethi said, ‘These are powerful women. They are on our side. Always give them money. They deserve so much more than they get’. The women thanked us, with winks and a smile, before sauntering on through the belligerent traffic. I thought of the rough encampment not too far from my guest house, and the women I had seen from afar, their brightly bangled arms beckoning drivers.

I had always been interested in gender, but I had never heard of Hijra communities before. That night when I got back to the guest house, I emailed a friend of Preethi’s who was currently studying a small Hijra community in another Indian state. I learned that there are young people – and even children – in Hijra communities. I wondered how that happened, and at what age, and by what mechanisms young people came to be a part of these communities – one that has its own ancient language and rituals and identities separate from the world around them. I also wondered about the extent to which these communities were truly supportive, or if they were more exploitative and hierarchical. As I would later learn, not all transgender women in Indian society are Hijras, and not all Hijras live in Hijra camps as part of the elaborate mentorship structure that involves learning and support but also subservience and sex work. I was also keenly aware that my lens was unflaggingly Western, and I would need to be unrelenting in decentering that perspective and its ties to the history of white, Western ethnographers working in non-Western contexts. As Bhattacharya (2009) writes, even if not all research is necessarily ‘imperialist and racist in its intention or practice’, it is undeniable that research informed by Western imperialistic discourses, conducted on/with non-Western participants and packaged and represented in the Western academic world carries within it some inherent impossibilities of capturing the voices of people. (p. 107)

After all, British colonialism and its Victorian sexual mores displaced and demoted the Hijras from their position as revered Hindu demigods to their current, reduced circumstances in the homophobic and transphobic India they created (Gettleman, 2018).

I had lots of questions. What would it mean to understand gender diverse identity and enculturation in a context defined by community, even community of necessity? What about those transgender women in India who were not members of Hijra communities? Also, how do the discourses of fear, power and magic both disserve and empower Hijras in India, and how do these compare with contemporary discourses and practices around transgender children and adults in Western contexts? While the many excellent studies of Hijra communities throughout India have contributed much to our understanding of culture and gender (Nanda, 1998; Reddy, 2010) I was eager to know more first hand, about the practices of intergenerational knowledge transmission, apprenticeship and community happening in the Hijra encampment not 100 yards from where I slept every night. Would it be feasible or appropriate to visit? Who is working with these communities? My new friends were enthusiastic and supported my interest, and told me their stories about the Hijra. Penny knew someone when she was a
child, who appeared unbidden at weddings but was welcomed strangely. Anjali had an uncle who had left the family, and who she saw only once more, dressed as a woman. Sara sought out their blessings for her new baby, who was premature, but who thrived ever after. Everyone agreed that if you asked Hijras to bless you, their blessings had special power.

I had fulfilled my obligations to City University, delivering the full seminar series, meeting with students whenever the opportunity arose, and giving a well-received and original keynote lecture. I remember sitting in my cubicle on the day of that keynote and noticing that my feet were unusually swollen. By the end of the day they looked less like feet and more like bluish balloons. The next morning I had started to run a low-grade fever. I was unbelievably thirsty, and a little bit nauseous. Dizzy, I stumbled and rammed my foot into the heavy iron leg of my bolted-down bed. Soon, that foot was throbbing, black and purple, and crunching in a way no human appendage should ever crunch.

The medical care in India is among the finest in the world and there are clinics everywhere, so I spent the rest of that day googling doctors in my area, trying to figure out where they were and how I would get there. In the midst of all of this, my head pounded, my nausea continued, and on top of it all, I had a few emails from my husband at home saying that things were really not going well at all. I’d been gone only a few weeks, and the children were having more trouble than either of us thought they would. A babysitter who was helping with driving everyone around had precipitously quit that very day. Then, like the icing on an abominable cake, my mother emailed to say that my father would be having some chancy cardiac stent surgery, rather unexpectedly, the following week.

The next morning I woke up drenched in sweat. Preethi wrote to ask if I would be coming out today, that maybe we would be able to visit with Hijra community members. I was still feverish, my joints burned and had started to experience a range of inconvenient digestive problems, so I resolved to take a day off to lay very still and see if I got any better. During the course of that day, I felt just well enough to realise it was probably time to go home. But, leaving was an awful thought; I had just managed to get out in the community, in a very small way. Of course, I didn’t need to wait and see if the other shoe was going to drop. It had already dropped right off my swollen, purple foot.

Everyone was very understanding, and sympathetic. Preethi cheerfully added that I could always come back, anytime, as her guest. This was a temporary delay to the work, she insisted brightly. ‘All your friends will be here when you come back’.

The morning I was to leave for the airport I tore the straps from the inside of my suitcase and wrapped these over a layer of maxi pads around my injured foot to secure it inside the widest shoe I had for the trip home. I took some paracetamol to keep my fever down. Due to a miscalculation in departure times and airport policy, I ended up having to sit on the pavement outside the airport for nearly four hours before they would let me in, but I finally got on the plane, and I finally got home. The next day my horribly broken foot was examined and set in a walking cast. I saw a doctor specialising in infectious disease. She was horrified that I had slept with my windows open, even with marginal screens in place. I felt profoundly stupid, but honestly did not give it much thought in the midst of
other concerns. I thought I was protected by the doses of anti-malarial medica-
tion I had been able to take, but that really doesn’t do much for other mosquito-
borne diseases, like Dengue. The doctors sent me home with rehydration fluids 
and some stout pain medication. Everyone agreed that it was a good thing, and 
stroke of incredible luck, that I got home in almost one piece.

**LOST AND FOUND**

My serendipitous roadside encounter was timelier than the Hijra, or Preethi, could 
have ever known. This is the point in the story where I must offer an important aside, 
one that – at the time – I had struggled to put into words. My little boy, Ben, who was 
four years old at the time, had recently begun to tell us that he was a girl. That he knew 
he had always been a girl. That he wanted pink underwear and rhinestone slippers 
and to be called Lucy. I thought of Ben, and also of Ramon, a five-year-old in my 
US preschool field site the previous autumn, who wore borrowed dresses to school 
every day and drew self-portraits that he signed with the name ‘Valentina’, and whose 
parents loved and supported but still worried about him. I thought about the look the 
Hijra women gave me as they winked and sauntered away from the cab that night – 
it wasn’t a look of cowed misery or victimhood or diminished outcomes but rather 
of pluck, guts and defiance. For me, the lights had come on. While I was, like Van 
Maanen (1995) at least in some small way seeking to make the familiar ‘strange’ by 
learning from preschoolers and their teachers in a very different context, I had in fact 
made the ‘strange’ familiar; in India I could look the difficult questions I had been 
avoiding squarely in the face – and also to rethink them in terms of resilience, dignity 
and pride – and never pity. This isn’t to discount the terrifying statistics: Nearly all 
transgender children in the West grow up in families with cisgender parents, siblings 
and peers, completely ‘far from the tree’ as Solomon (2012) would describe. Without 
supportive families, they often go the way of many Hijras: begging, homeless, turning 
to sex work, with radically diminished outcomes, at heightened risk for suicide and 
exploitation (James et al., 2016). But there is more to this story.

I kept in touch with Preethi. I learned a tremendous amount about the Hijra 
communities and, thus inspired, began investigating the lives and experiences 
of transgender and gender diverse children in the US. What began with getting 
hopelessly lost in an Indian taxi ended with a funded research program that con-
tinues today as the Gender Moxie Project (see Galman, 2017, 2018). I still hope to 
go back to India someday to learn more, first-hand, about the Hijra communities.

Things are much better for the Hijra in general, and transgender people specif-
cally, today than they were even when I in India not so long ago. I am overjoyed 
to hear about numerous progressive social advances including full legal standing, 
personhood and positive public visibility. India also recognised transgender peo-
ple as a third gender, making them eligible for welfare, government support and 
a truckload of other benefits associated with recognised personhood (Varma & 
Najar, 2014). This is good news, even as we see the erosion of the most basic 
rights and physical safety for transgender people in the United States (National 
Center for Transgender Equality, 2018).
I still wonder about the unique sociocultural and political moment that I might have captured, even in a small way, had I not gone home. I would still very much like to return to India and learn about Hijra communities, especially given the changed policy environment, and the reading I have since done from Indian scholars on this topic Diving deeper into the policy changes and cultural shifts happening in a culture that has historically had room for (if not always equitable space for) a third gender, and being able to connect those with my own work in childhood, could be a new avenue for understanding gender and development in the contemporary context.

**DISCUSSION: ON SERENDIPITY, INTUITION, MESS AND LESSONS**

Much has been written about the often-circuitous pathway by which research projects, questions and interests come to the fore in ethnographic research (Rivoal & Salazar, 2013; Sanjek, 1990). In my own training, I was taught to be flexible so that I might be open to ‘the art of making an unsought finding’ (Van Andel, 1994, p. 631). Wolcott (2010) calls this happy accident serendipity:

Fieldworkers often toss off the fact that it takes a lot of time and a lot of luck to make a go of fieldwork. However, this is luck of a sort one can have a hand in; serendipity suggests that you make the most of whatever opportunities confront you rather than worry that sometimes requires one to turn an unfortunate circumstance completely on its head, and to rethink or restructure the original course one had set. (p. 61)

My ethnography of the Hijra was lost, but I also learned three important lessons as a result of the experience.

*Lesson One: Good Ethnographers Trust Themselves and Their Intuition*

As Janesick (2001) writes, the researcher is tasked with ‘being awake to intuitive inclinations ever present in fieldwork’ (Janesick, 2001, p. 533). I gradually awoke to intuition while in India, but I did not start out that way; just as cats’ whiskers help them gauge whether or not they can safely fit into and extricate themselves from a small space, our human intuition tells us when a something is impractical or unsafe. I ignored the whiskers of instinct time and time again in the name of misplaced stoicism and rigidity: I didn’t press harder when the sponsoring University and I seemed to be on different communicative wavelengths. I opened the windows to fiery bees, disease-carrying mosquitoes, and probably more. I left my children even though I knew it would be painful. I squashed those feelings down, as so many mothers in academia have historically been forced to do in the name of productivity.

But those same windows yielded more than mosquitoes and bees: I learned to be open to intuition and thereby welcomed the happy accident of discovering something new. Had I not been open in this way I never would have met Preethi, and I might not have been open to the women and their flat claps that night, lost on the road, and the light they shone on my future work.
Lesson Two: Good Ethnographers are Human

Winn (2014) writes that even as researchers seek methodologies that affirm the humanity of their participants, they must also recognise their own humanity:

No one tells emerging scholars that, yes, sometimes ‘we cry’ … the emotions that are inextricably linked to being and becoming human are also part of being and becoming a researcher. (p. 1)

The old idea of the ethnographer as disinterested droid is no longer considered desirable, but its ghosts persist in ideas of fieldwork hygiene, subjectivity management, and most of all in the vaguely positivistic distrust of the researcher’s humanity as a fly in the empirical ointment. This is further compounded by the white American feminine ideal of contradictory, stoic denial and self-abnegation, lest we embarrass anyone with our feelings. There was a time when I would have stayed in India, limping and miserable, trying to make the best of things for the full three months rather than ‘admitting defeat’ by going home. This would have been stupid and dangerous. As an American still rejecting the learned alienated consciousness of capitalism, I take the fact that I put my own basic wellbeing ahead of the work ‘ethic’ as a sign of progress (Brown, 1959).

Recognising and valuing our humanness improves the work. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) write, ‘as has long been recognised by ethnographers, he or she is the research instrument par excellence’ (p. 17). She can get sick or tired or old, and be terribly brilliant while also subject to the winds of fortune and fickle fate like anyone else. This also means that the ethnographer may influence the context, but she may also be influenced and changed and impacted and transformed by it, for good or for ill. We ignore or discount the wonderful human instrument and it’s in tempo humanity at our peril. As Graue and Walsh (1998) observe,

Data are not out there, waiting, like tomatoes on the vine, to be picked. Acquiring data is a very active, creative, improvisational process … the researcher is not a fly on the wall or a frog in a pocket. The researcher is there. She cannot be otherwise. She is in the mix. (p. 91)

In other words, only the most human of instruments can do this work and do it well. Similarly, only the most human instrument can navigate the messiness and often unwelcome, unwieldy surprises that fieldwork brings. Humanness allows us to roll with the punches.

Lesson Three: Good Ethnographers Explore the ‘Backstage’

A closed academic ‘backstage’ can contribute to a dehumanising and deceptive academic culture of secrecy – and worse. As Thompson (in press), who also employs Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical frame, writes:

Academic norms demand research be ‘finished, polished, and packaged’, but Goffman (1990) reminds us that the end product conceals ‘the feverish drudgery the author may have endured in order to complete the index on time, or … the squabbles he may have had with his publisher in order to increase the size of the first letter of his last name as it appears on the cover of his book’ (p. 53).… Most academic writers conceal not just the writing process, but, in the case of ethnography, also our intimate, unfinished, messy, and painful experiences in the field. We must come to terms with how much of this secret ‘backstage’ material to include in our work. (para 9)
Telling the story of a lost ethnography is certainly a tricky business. Most academic writers would certainly prefer to mute and muffle, unless plucky lessons can drown out the unpleasant bits of embarrassment. Can the humanising effects of my confessional ‘backstage’ story make up for the embarrassing fact that I had to leave the field because I was bitten by the wrong mosquito and broke my foot in four places on a bedframe? In an answer to Thompson’s question about how much backstage material we should share, I think we should share that which might be most instructive to others, especially new scholars, in an effort to humanise the work. Kohn (2010) writes that good ethnographers should share more than just the happy ‘aha’ moments (p. 193). She affirms the value of being frank about our ‘evocative tales of mishap and woe’ (p. 197) because,

In our attempts to demonstrate proficiency, fluency and purpose in our studies of others, particularly in our writing and even when we are at our most reflexive, we have tended to let those moments go – to erase them from the serious work of our trade – to label them as incidental or anecdotal or even see them as trivial embarrassments to be swept away, at least from the academy’s eyes and ears. (Kohn, 2010, p. 191)

She continues, noting that where we are at our most vulnerable and human, ‘personal accidents and emotion-laden incidents … may come to be recognised as productive sites of anthropological and self-knowledge’ (p. 191). There are no perfect ethnographies or ethnographers, no shortage of mistakes to go around. Telling the stories of lost, forgotten and failed projects models humanity and humility for others. In championing the messy, intuitive, bumbling and brave, we affirm that ethnography is about human understanding and relationship.

CONCLUSION

The first law of thermodynamics states that energy can neither be created nor destroyed, but instead transformed. So, nothing – not even an ethnography – is so lost that it cannot be found again if you know where and how to look. Poet Edmund Spenser in The Faerie Queene ([1596] 1979) said it more eloquently:

What though the Sea with Waves continual
Do eat the Earth, it is no more at all;
Nor is the Earth the less, or loseth ought:
For whatsoever from one place doth fall,
Is with the Tide unto another brought:
For there is nothing lost, that may be found, if sought.

(Book V, Canto II, 4-9)

I believe that the process of losing one project was a necessary condition for the finding of the other. It was found in the friendships and professional relationships from my time in India. It was found in a brightened and better understanding of my own child, and my renewed energy for advocacy and activism to
support gender diverse children’s right to gender self-determination. It was found in the discoveries I continue to make even now, having ‘generated more data than the researcher is aware of at the time of collection’ (Strathern, 2004, pp. 5–6). It is found in how I spend time with my children and do not accept long separations from them in the name of a workplace structured by corporate-model patriarchy. It is found in my teaching which emphasises intuition and humanity. It was found in my willingness to be gentle with myself as a human instrument. I believe that as a result of losing an ethnography, my world is a little bit bigger and my work is a little bit better. I believe that while the ethnography was lost, I was found.

NOTES

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. Thanks to Kakali Bhattacharya for inspiring this thinking with her paper bag pedagogy.
3. Mobile phones, which are unreliable where I lived in rural Massachusetts, are absolutely essential navigating everyday life in India, as I would soon discover.
4. I was under the impression that I was not in a region or season wherein I needed to worry about the gapping around the screens in my windows, which I left open to get some lovely cool evening air, and to enjoy waking to the pleasant sounds of morning each day. I was wrong.
5. This is a common practice in navigation – the streets, with their systems of ‘mains’ and ‘crosses’ are almost impossible to figure out, so drivers frequently call ahead for landmarks – like banks, lakes, water tanks, etc. Without a phone, one is well and truly stranded.
6. And though Westerners typically think of them more like transgender women, not all transgender women in India are in fact Hijra and many Hijra do not consider themselves to be transgender. Many transgress the gender binary as part of their everyday and performative identities. These distinctions, and the intricacies of the ways in which Hijra experiences and communities are different from the Western conception of gender/transgender, are among the many reasons why I was drawn to explore this from the perspective of the humble learner (Graue & Walsh, 1998).
7. A recently aired Vicks commercial tells the story of Gauri Sawant, and its very existence and wide airing in India is a sign that times have radically changed. https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/indian-tv-commercial-showing-adored-transgender-mother-goes-viral-n745156.

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