

**Omissions and Admissions:
Poetic writing, feminist ethnography and empathetic violence**

*Alexandra Hyde**

I want to start with an omission.

Admission.

I downloaded the PDF of Evelyn Hammonds' essay 'Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality'¹ onto my iPad. To begin reading, I swept my middle finger across the screen with that entirely new gesture of turning an electronic page - a light semi-circular sweep that is a little stiff, like a queen's wave.

On the front page of Hammonds' paper, the text stretched out:

W

differences

I

body

I paused. I waved rapidly on:

[silence]

Among other isolated words, there were three blank pages with only the journal particulars as a legitimating frame. I thought, Radical. It went on:

speech

silence

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¹ Evelyn Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," *differences* 6, 1994.

And again:

Practice

Invisibility

The final page of the essay contained the following:

see speak

I laboured a good while under the misapprehension that this document *was* Evelyn Hammonds' critical investigation of race and sexuality² when of course it was an accident of digital coding. The electronic file as I downloaded it from the archives had become scrambled in translation between computer programmes and, but for a quotation, the title and some spaced-out words, most of the content of Hammonds' essay was omitted. Still, the words (and spaces) that were left seemed to embody through their form, something of what the 'real' essay proposes about the relationship between visibility and invisibility with respect to gender, race and sexuality. Writing for a special issue of the journal *differences* on queer theory, Hammonds argues that even where feminism has sought to trouble normative assumptions about sexual difference, race has been ignored to the degree that black sexuality is homogenised and subsumed beneath a queer heterogeneity that is implicitly white. Thus black sexuality is invisibilised as a kind of absent presence, its shape and mass defined not by its own geometry, but by that which it is not. This is the inverted visibility that Hammonds characterises using the metaphor of a black hole. To render visible and describe the black (w)hole, she argues, requires a way of reading where absence counts as much as presence³. And this is precisely the kind of reading that Hammonds' essay, in a very literal sense, seemed to require when I opened the PDF in its scrambled form. Those sparse pages were not blank at all, not empty, not absent, not holes (and not blank actually, but white). Rather, the spaces around the words seemed to write as much as the words themselves; the spaces suddenly seemed more whole and the words less absolute.

But it is important not to elevate this happenstance of technological malfunction to something beyond its properties on the page, like one of those cases where an image of the Virgin Mary appears on a slice of toast. I have to concede for example that the thinking engendered by my literal reading of Hammonds' essay took shape against the backdrop of a women's studies department in a university in the US, and teaching on a course about race, gender and the body. Although I was primed to make this particular interpretation perhaps, it still seems startlingly fortuitous – miraculous even – that Hammonds' paper retained its core meaning

² Hammonds, "Black (W)holes."

³ Ibid, 139.

with very little content. In contrast to the standardised format and tone of the other journal articles on my desk, my feeling when I reached the end of what I thought was Hammonds' essay, was that it demanded a close reading, as if to be fathomed. Indeed, its meaning seemed to inhere so much in the structure and ambiguity of its form as well as the nature of its limited content, that I thought perhaps it might be a poem. Did that first, bold 'W' stand for 'woman' as some kind of universal category, an assumption that the subsequent words spaced around it, words that intimated the interplay of others and selves – 'differences', 'I' and 'body' – were designed to counter and complicate? Was that final page designed to underline the question, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has termed it⁴, of *who* can speak, a question that is tied to race through visibility and the tension between who is seen and who does the seeing, a tension blown open on the vast expanse of that final page, which could also be interpreted as a challenge to the reader, demanding a witness, some kind of redress: see speak.

Beginning with an accidental omission and a guilty admission then, this essay is about ambiguities of form and the possibility of new writing and reading strategies. It is about the omissions that occur in writing – omissions that I want to say are inevitable, accidental even, in that we cannot help making them – and the admissions that they in turn allow – *make visible* – when they are read. Thinking about how written form functioned in my giddy reading of Hammonds' article led me to think about the function of form in my own research writing. In particular, mistaking Hammonds' essay for a poem led me to consider the place of poetry in a field of representation such as ethnography, and its implications for thinking about political and epistemological forms of erasure and ultimately, violence. In this essay I analyse extracts from poetry written during my own ethnographic fieldwork with the British military, some of which is set against the backdrop of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Eventually, I test the limits of my own poetic writing as a vehicle for both the representation of violence and the violence of representation. First however, I want to think more about the ways in which poems keep open the question of representation and stand for the more fluid and tense relationship between researcher and researched, writing and reading, subject and object. I begin by thinking about writing through another form entirely: drawing. Inspired by the anthropologist Michael Taussig's fieldwork sketches of scenes that shock in *I Swear I Saw This*⁵, I use ideas about drawing as a comparator of form to consider my own response to ethnographic experience.

Making pictures

Consider for a moment not writing but drawing. In *I Swear I Saw This*, Taussig publishes one of his hectic fieldwork drawings and describes the work it does that goes beyond the limits of the fieldwork diary as a written form⁶. I want to pursue Taussig's argument with respect to poetry, because I think that writing poems might be productively compared to making drawings. Both are cognisant of the idea that 'representativeness' does not have to be the principal aim or mode of their expression. The idea that fieldnotes are a raw or unmediated form of documenting 'real life' has long been countered by critical anthropologists such as

⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the subaltern speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds. (Basingstoke: MacMillan Education, 1988), 271-313.

⁵ Michael Taussig, *I Swear I Saw This: Drawings in Fieldwork Diaries, Namely my Own* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

James Clifford⁷, who emphasise their intertextual, collective and rhetorical nature⁸. Clifford rejects the idea that ethnographic writing is about simple description or a straightforward, objective process of documentation. Critical and postmodern approaches to ethnography emphasise the *made*-ness of fieldnotes in relation to research that asserts for itself a certain truth-claim, one which confers on the ethnographer the legitimacy of having “been there”⁹. Indeed, the claim to represent the in-depth, lived experience of ‘reality’ – no matter how partial – is ethnography’s traditional defence when measured against generalizable research findings from the natural sciences for example¹⁰. For Taussig however, the realism of the fieldwork diary is fallacious¹¹ and his drawings far from mere illustrations. Rather their strength, he argues, is that they “head off in an altogether other direction”¹².

Three things are interesting to me about Taussig’s drawing of two people sleeping in a busy highway tunnel in Colombia, beside which he wrote the titular words “I Swear I Saw This”¹³. Firstly, that Taussig acknowledges the messy artificiality, the *made*-ness of his drawing. Secondly, that the drawing remains nevertheless a way of recording an event, encompassing chance encounters across a composite social and temporal space of interaction¹⁴. And lastly, that drawing for Taussig opens up the question of the ethnographer’s position in the field as a witness¹⁵, particularly to the kind of political or physical violence that warrants such a post-script. I consider each of these elements in dialogue with some of my own ethnographic work below, using extracts from the poetry I wrote during six months’ participant observation living on a British military camp in Germany.

I think of my poems as a kind of picture-making part of my ethnographic methods. The operative verb here is important – I choose picture-*making* not picture-*taking* because, like Taussig’s comparison of drawings to photographs¹⁶ I want to be sure to emphasise their distance from their object, a constructedness that happens at my hand. In *I Swear I Saw This*, Taussig praises drawing as a form that meets its object by failing to render it completely – there is a gap between the drawing and that which it represents. The haptic madeness of a drawing – its artifice – not only conveys its object, it also betrays the subjective process of representation that has intervened to portray that object from a particular angle, using the textures of a particular medium, an abstract or expressive style for example. That is, the drawing (more so than a photograph Taussig argues¹⁷), wears its artifice on the outside. So it is with poetry in comparison to ethnographic writing in fieldnotes or description, no matter how ‘thick’¹⁸. And it is here I think that poetry (and drawing) might be connected to feminist

⁷ James Clifford, “Notes on (Field)notes,” in *Fieldnotes: The Making of Anthropology*, Roger Sanjek, ed. (New York: Cornell University Press, 1990) 47-70.

⁸ Clifford, “Notes on (Field)notes,” 60.

⁹ Charlotte A. Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others*, (London: Routledge, 1999) 68.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 80.

¹¹ Taussig, *I Swear I Saw This*, 13.

¹² *Ibid*

¹³ *Ibid*, 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 52.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 71.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 21.

¹⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁸ Geertz 1973 in Clifford, “Notes on (Field)notes,” 60.

methodologies that take account of the positionality of researchers and the politics of representation created thereof.

Feminist critiques have questioned methods that produce a singular, objective account of social relations without considering how knowledge is shaped by power relations in the field¹⁹. In so far as these methods generate writing, feminist scholars such as Liz Stanley²⁰ reject the distinctions of genre to insist that all writing, in fiction and poetry to the natural and social sciences, is “life writing”²¹. The development of autoethnography within anthropology²² has also provided reflexive and critical methodologies to account for the mediating role of the self in research, as is acknowledged in the subtitle of Taussig’s book: “Drawings in fieldwork notebooks, namely my own”. Even where a piece of writing might be derived from an anthropological artefact directly, it illustrates how participant observation is a process of appropriation, “*bricolage*”²³, or what Taussig calls “an interzone consisting of fieldworker and field creating therein a collage or intertext”²⁴. One of my fieldwork poems for example, is derived from what might be called a primary text (technically, it was written by someone else) but in its conversion into a poem it takes on a secondary and reflexive meaning. ‘Cavalry Dash’ reassembles almost word-for-word a thank-you note sent by a young officer to friends who had invited him and me for dinner one evening. The path of the note’s conversion into a poem was convoluted. News of the note came first from my friend, its addressee, who thought I would find it representative of a trope we had both encountered in the officers we had met. When I next visited my friends, I was able to see, touch and read the note first hand as it was pinned to their kitchen noticeboard. In my last week of fieldwork, when I had the idea of turning the note into a poem and asked my friend if she could tell me what was in it, she sent me the note and it became mine on that second sending.

Cavalry Dash

Dear Anna,
 I am writing
 To thank you so very much
 For dinner last night.
 The food was excellent
 And the pudding to die for.
 It was lovely meeting Alex,
 Whom I think would prefer
 Life in the Officers’ Mess,
 And also Henley.
 What a lovely
 Relaxed, hassle-free

¹⁹ Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, eds., *Feminist Epistemologies (Thinking Gender)* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

²⁰ Liz Stanley, *The Auto/biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/biography*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).

²¹ Stanley, *The Auto/biographical I*, 3.

²² Deborah E. Reed-Danahay, ed., *Auto/ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 1997).

²³ George C. Bond, “Fieldnotes: Research in past occurrences,” in *Fieldnotes: The Making of Anthropology*, edited by Roger Sanjek (New York: Cornell University Press, 1990) 275.

²⁴ Taussig, *I Swear I Saw This*, 52

Dog he is.

The note's slow transformation into the form of a poem – copied, cut up, cut down, anonymised and remade – exposes the quiet machinations of ethnography in progress, or what might otherwise be called *intent*. To me, re-configuring the banal content of the thank-you note into the elevated form of a poem seemed like a good way to subvert, even satirise, the conventions of education and class on which the contrived formality of the military hierarchy depends. My hope was that the artifice of the note's form as a poem would function to expose the artifice of its content and the conventions it represents. What the poem also reveals, however – one might say *admits* – is a degree of critical partiality at my hands and thus in turn, the fallacy of the fieldwork observation as an unmediated primary source. My point here is that it is form, more so perhaps than content, which is the principal catalyst of meaning in this instance. That said, I must also acknowledge the risk that converting the observation into poetic form simply renders its object (literally, the thank you note) more opaque, the multiple meanings I am seeking to expose codified and buried rather than revealed by a clear, descriptive commentary for example.

Moreover, in the gathering of such artefacts, the question of intent becomes an ethical one. Anthropologists have adapted ethnographic methods in ways that attempt to render the practice of participant observation more open and egalitarian. When planning my fieldwork I thought a lot about visual and participatory approaches to ethnography, such as participant-led audio or video tours for example²⁵. But when I arrived on camp, I found that I was reluctant to stop the flow of everyday life and draw attention to my interrogation of it in such an overt way. Contrasting the writing of poems to the kind of methods that they replaced in my methodology proposes a further admission therefore: are these poems stolen? A stash of scenes captured in a secretive, subjective way, unlike photography, where the camera at least makes public the presence of an observer who stops time, steps out in front of the scene and interrupts the moment – SNAP. Could it be that poems, not cameras, capture people's souls²⁶? Especially in light of the participatory research methodologies that have arisen around digital media, approaches such as PhotoVoice²⁷ for example, poems appear by comparison somewhat fusty and exclusive in their authorship²⁸. Perhaps part of the problem is that poems are bound up in encoding and decoding, in language that is so very *wordy* and presented in such a reified form that many people, writing or reading it, find at best slightly dull and at worst completely inaccessible. And yet might there be a sense in which poetry's obtuseness is its strength? It strikes me that poems are an intensely unreliable written form; inherently unstable and susceptible to failure, particularly if one mistakes their purpose as being to communicate a single meaning or argument. There is always the risk that the reader might not

²⁵ Sarah Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography: Images, Media and Representation in Research* (London: Sage, 2007).

²⁶ The imperial undertones I seek to invoke here are captured in the opening of Derek Walcott's epic poem, *Omeros* (Faber & Faber, 2002), 1.

This is how, one sunrise, we cut down them canoes.
Philoctete smiles for the tourists, who try taking
his soul with their cameras.

²⁷ <http://www.photovoice.org>, accessed 24 November 2013

²⁸ That said, poetry-writing workshops have been used to formulate alternative ways to examine and explore military narratives and experiences in the context of war, violence and post traumatic stress disorder. See for example http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/03/education/edlife/veterans-learn-to-write-and-heal.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0, accessed 14 November 2013.

get it. But this is also part of poetry's appeal. In terms of diffusing the false security of authorial intent, one can always rely on the possibility that the poem's layers will rebel, and that it will be interpreted in an entirely different configuration by someone else (or in the case of 'Cavalry Dash', that it will be read as just a thank you note). Poems can be traitorous then, opening the door to the classic postmodern pitfall: so what? In such ways, poetry contains within it the possible admission of its own failure and the fallibility of the author, which so many other forms of representation attempt to conceal. Rather than being over-written and exclusive then, might poetry not be helpful for teaching us to live in "deauthored space"²⁹? What I have tried to express here is something of the paradox by which the made-ness of poems helps to disconnect (or more encouragingly, liberate?) writing and reading from the authority of authorship. Next I want to explore how the power of poetry as an ethnographic form of writing inheres in the tension between the made-ness of poems and their dependence on real events.

Chance encounters across a field

Poems and drawings are a slow form when compared to the click of a shutter or the hasty notes that go on in fieldwork diaries. Another of my poems, 'Parade Ground', represents events that were held over a long period of time throughout the duration of my stay in Germany. By exploring the different ways in which the military community used the same space across a number of months, during which winter turned to summer and the regiment's troops came home from Afghanistan, I came to consider the camp's parade ground as more than simply "the flat surface of instantaneous relations"³⁰. Rather, its use at different times imbued the space with complex social meanings and invoked multiple places at once, a terrain with a more varied and subtle significance than its primary militarised function indicates. The poem begins with the celebration of a national holiday:

On St David's Day,
 the presentation of a live sheep,
 a leek-eating competition
 and the performance of a dance
 by pre-teen daughters
 to the music of a mother's car stereo which,
 despite four doors and boot being open,
 is still too weak for the wind.
 A bunch of balloons is released with a flourish,
 transcending grey tarmac for paler grey sky.
 It ascends with more than the physical weight
 of letters attached to Afghanistan
 and is haltingly caught in a tree.

The first thing to emphasise here is the centrality of the ethnographic encounter to what these poems are, that they can be said to record something that *really happened*. Indeed, sometimes their imagery seems to be given to the observer by sheer luck (like the balloons caught in a tree, sometimes it feels like a gift, a 'real' metaphor). It is here that the poem might merit the

²⁹ Patti Lather, *Getting Lost: Feminist Efforts Toward a Double(d) Science*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007) 13.

³⁰ Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994) 265.

post-script ‘I swear I saw this’³¹, in other words, I didn’t make it up. The second thing to emphasise however, is that just because the events in the poem are real, does not mean that they are unmediated facts. The risk with fieldwork poems is akin to the risk with fieldwork diaries or ethnographic monographs therefore: their apparent facticity creates the illusion that they are innocent documents, mere bystanders. To assume this however, would be to forget that the presence of an event in a poem is always-already a selective interpretation (as is its absence: ‘Parade Ground’ included a whole stanza on an Iraqi tank that stood in the corner of the parade ground and was slowly restored while I was there, a motif I worked over and over until I deleted it from the poem completely). This is where it would be a mistake to think of my poems as snapshots of army life for example. That would be to deny the degree to which what is documented in these poems is mediated through language and form, where events are taken out of context or out of sequence to make connections that perhaps were not explicit at the time. In such ways, a poem renders a singular observation as more than the sum of its parts.

In *I Swear I Saw This*, Taussig proposes that drawings in a fieldwork diary might be “the pauses, the occasional moments of still life where the writing hesitates between documentation and mediation”³². Much happens in the pause between observing and writing – the distance between the event or encounter and its transformation into ethnographic-poetic form. The beginnings of my poems are hand-written in notebooks but soon they are transferred to screens and played about with for months afterwards, each edit further removed from the poem’s initial spark. Written across and representing different tracts of time, my poems are distant from their object and come with some of the unreliability of memories perhaps. In an essay on the role of memory as a resource for the stories we tell (and the research we conduct), Karen Fields asserts that “memory fails by filling blanks mistakenly”³³ by which she means that memories are selective, formed of real events but shaped by “forces such as an individual’s wishes, a group’s suggestions, a moment’s connotations”³⁴. Like the selection and editing of verbatim quotes from research participants to convey authenticity in research³⁵ the conditions for an event appearing in a poem and the form in which it appears, are determined outside the event itself. In an attempt to reconcile this dangerous time lapse, Garance Maréchal and Stephen Linstead³⁶ propose that poetry created in and of the ethnographic moment should not be further amended or edited subsequent to the event of its initial writing, that the poem should stand as a “real-time artefact”³⁷ and be made quite literally to mark time. Although it is “intended to capture that intensity of focus—not recall it, not evoke it, but inscribe its energy in the moment”³⁸, this approach denies the made-ness of the poem (however quick and immediate its making might be) and returns ethnographic writing to the false innocence of documentary. Instead, I want to propose that as part of ethnographic fieldwork at least, the poetic form, with its susceptibility to failure (or put more optimistically, its generative capacity to allow multiple meanings) meets its object – expresses

³¹ Taussig, *I Swear I Saw This*, 74.

³² *Ibid*, 52.

³³ Karen Fields, “What One Cannot Remember Mistakenly,” in *History and Memory in African American Culture* eds. Genevieve Fabre and Robert O’Meally (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 150.

³⁴ *Ibid*

³⁵ Carol Smart, “Shifting Horizons: Reflections on Qualitative Methods,” *Feminist Theory* 10, 2009, 5.

³⁶ Garance Maréchal and Stephen Linstead “Metropoems: Poetic Method and Ethnographic Experience,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 16, 2010, 66-77

³⁷ Maréchal and Linstead “Metropoems”, 75.

³⁸ *Ibid*

everyday lived experience – in a particularly symbiotic way. Indeed one of its strengths, as Maréchal and Linstead argue, is to capture social change as “a continuous, fragmented, and relational process”³⁹. For example, Manda V. Hicks⁴⁰ uses prose poetry to convey the messy inter-relationality between researcher and research participants as insiders and outsiders in relation to the military institution. Her “[u]nconventional articulations of a female soldier”⁴¹ convey a nonlinear, circuitous interplay of expectations, frustrations and mis-communications⁴². For this argument to work – that poetry as a form represents the impossibility of writing as well as perhaps its ultimate refinement – one must acknowledge that poetry is fallible, collective and relational not only in its being written, but in its being read: in the possibility of its many different readings out in the world. It is in the handling of poetry as anything other than unreliable and unstable then or, worse, when the point of poetry is understood to be the expression of a universal truth, that its effectiveness is undone. Far from attempting to smooth out the inconsistencies and erasures that poetry enacts, therefore, the key is to be able to incorporate its omissions and admissions into its form and function.

It is at this point that I want to make the connection between poetic writing and feminist theory and research practice, which strives to locate a possible means if not of reconciling, then existing critically and in awareness of the gap between subject and object; a way of acknowledging and accommodating difference⁴³. The function of poetic writing in ethnography, and its value to feminist approaches, has to do with both the writing and reading of poems: their usefulness as a process and a product of research. My focus so far in this essay has been on the former, exploring the idea that if feminist methodologies demand reflexivity, cooperation and empathy in conducting research, then the same might be demanded of writing it up. Although intensely singular and author-itative in some ways, I have argued that by heightening representation, poetic writing at least renders such processes visible and therefore *navigable*; that poetry, by requiring so much active interpretation and evoking so much beyond the ‘fact’ of events through metaphor, ellipsis and resonance for example, at least contains within it the potential to show one’s workings. These are the admissions made possible by poetry’s omissions. But to re-state the obvious, the collective potential of poetic writing counts for nothing, indeed simply cannot function, if these poems are not *read*⁴⁴. The question of reading then is at least as significant as the question of writing, for as Taussig asks, “To whom or what are you swearing when you write “I Swear I Saw This”?”⁴⁵.

³⁹ Denzin 1997 in Maréchal and Linstead “Metropoems”, 67.

⁴⁰ Manda V. Hicks, “Making my narrative mine: Unconventional articulations of a female soldier,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 17, 2011, 461-465.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 461.

⁴² *Ibid*, 462.

⁴³ Alcoff and Potter, eds., *Feminist Epistemologies*.

⁴⁴ Here perhaps there is an important distinction to be made between fieldnotes and poetic writing as part of ethnography, based on the idea that few field diaries are written with the intention that they will ever be read by anyone else (see George C. Bond, “Fieldnotes: Research in past occurrences.” In Roger Sanjek, ed., *Fieldnotes: The Making of Anthropology* 273-289. New York: Cornell University Press, 1990, 275). There is an important question underlying this distinction however (as well as the assumption that poems are made to be read by others, when surely there are millions of people writing poems in secret and never daring to share them?). What a comparison between fieldnotes and poems provokes is the question of what qualifies writing for reading, what makes writing fit for purpose? This idea that poetry is for reading and fieldnotes are not, implies that ‘writing’ must be something that is crafted and codified and moreover, has had something of the author filtered out before it is released on others.

⁴⁵ Taussig, *I Swear I Saw This*, 74.

In the rest of this essay I want to argue that the value of poetic writing for a feminist ethics of representation in particular, inheres in the volatile convergence of practice, writing and reading, indeed the mutual dependence of these three dimensions of research that overlap, overturn and loop back into one another. As Yvette Christiansë⁴⁶ writes of the work of Toni Morrison for example, what she calls “an ethical poetics”⁴⁷ is an attempt to understand the relation of writing not only to that which it represents, but also to the reproduction of a canon “and what being drawn into a canon also demands of [...] writing”⁴⁸. In the next section of this paper therefore, I explore the value of poetic writing as part of feminist scholarship by paying attention to how writing might be read. How far can one read into things? Barthes says to infinity, at the same as there always remains “a certain measure of the unreadable”⁴⁹. This being the first time any of my fieldwork poems have been published either in part or in full, I can only offer one reading of my poetry here, which comes from correspondence with a close friend and colleague. Using her written feedback and extracts from a poem entitled ‘The dead Iraqi and other tales,’ I engage with the work of feminist thinkers in order to ‘test’ some of the limits of my poetry and its effectiveness as part of an ethics of representation. The result hinges on the possibility that poetry might contribute towards empathetic cooperation and collectivity through writing and out into reading.

Telling stories

The poem ‘The Dead Iraqi and Other Tales’ is about telling stories. I want to note two things about the *content* of the poem and the context of its writing before I go on to explore more about its reading(s). Firstly, like the thank-you note and the parade ground, the stories contained within the poem are based on real events (or at least, real stories). Secondly, the stories refer explicitly to war, physical injury, death and decay. Part of the process of thinking about this poem involves thinking about the representation of violence and the violence of representation therefore. As for the function of the poem, I want to begin by acknowledging its status as part of my own personal response to the experience of doing fieldwork. I include these reflections with some caution, because I am reluctant to psychologise the poem’s content as some kind of disclaimer to shut down critique⁵⁰. To proceed carefully then: I could say that ‘The dead Iraqi’ was written as an attempt at redress (see speak) for the violence I felt both subjected to and complicit in when, at dinner in the Sergeants’ Mess one evening, a soldier told me some stories from his time in Iraq, to which I responded with silence. Indeed, the written form of the poem seems an inadequate reflection of the visual and aural assault of the imagery and its public, comedic telling. Also, in my reappropriation of someone else’s stories, there is a trace of “speaking for others”⁵¹ that Linda Alcoff argues is “born of a desire for mastery, to privilege oneself as the one who more correctly understands the truth about another’s situation”⁵². Critique, Alcoff argues, is the only way to counter this dangerous tendency: “a commitment to remain open to criticism and to attempt actively,

⁴⁶ Yvette Christiansë, *Toni Morrison: An Ethical Poetics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 6.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), 35.

⁵⁰ Linda Alcoff, “The problem of speaking for others,” *Cultural Critique* 20, 1991, 5-32.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 29.

attentively and sensitively to “hear” (understand) the criticism”⁵³. It is in light of this that I include the poem here⁵⁴.

The Dead Iraqi and Other Tales

Fuckwit Trooper Jones
hacks down to the bones
of his wrist
with a standard issue
army knife
(serrated blade) and then
fair play,
tries the other.
Like once right we’re on detail
to pick up this Ba’athist bloke
bloated from the sun,
fair bit of rigor set in.
We were in a Snatch,
meant for Northern Ireland
not Iraq:
the back door shut
with a bit of rope.
So I had the lads
load him in,
legs up
shoulders
pinned down
by two boys’ boots.
We’re on our way
but the driver brakes
and somebody’s
foot comes down
full force
on the massive belly
of the dead Iraqi
and the dead Iraqi
farts.
We’ve got all the windows open
but everyone’s still
puking
like the time
we pulled that floater

⁵³ Ibid, 26.

⁵⁴ I must admit that in earlier drafts of this essay I tried persistently to avoid including any of my actual poems, insisting that they were not necessary, indeed that they were beside the methodological point I was attempting to make. This soon became untenable, but the publication of my poems for the first time here is still a cause of much reticence and feels like a deeply personal admission.

out of a ditch,
and the thing with corpses is,
sometimes the air
inside passes the vocal chords
at perfect pitch and
as we turned him round
he made this sound like
when we were clearing up
after a suicide
bomb,
there was this bit
of jaw and beard
lying on the ground
and the interpreter
holds it up
and asks the crowd
'Does anybody know
this
man?'

Sergeant Hall
sits at the table
eating a Core Salad
without the protein.
Strong of jaw
but with an elastic mouth,
he pours more tea
into his regimental cup
from the stainless-steel pot
kept hot on a heated tray.
Hands resting at right angles
to biceps in a tight top,
the plasticine features
of Sergeant Hall
finally stop
at a grin.
No more impersonations,
mock-Arabic exclamations,
waggling of bearded chins,
flailing of arms,
flapping of self-dismembered limbs,
cartoon popping of eyes on strings,
effeminate sighs
or wide-mouth screams
animate
Sergeant Hall's
thumb-printed brow,
which sits beneath

a comic-book quiff.
 His hair is still wet
 from the gym,
 where you can find him
 flipping tyres
 and punching bags
 the weight of bodies
 he can't lift.

In multiple ways, this poem might be argued to come up against “the limit of what might be considered feminist.”⁵⁵ On a basic level, the poem begs the question of whether it is morally right to reproduce and give credence to violence in a written-down form, especially one that is so far removed from the circumstances of its production. By inviting and playing on the potential for moral and physical disgust, the poem’s violent content might also foreclose the possibility of empathy with its subject, the soldier-storyteller. In *Why Stories Matter*, Clare Hemmings explores the function of empathy as a core ethic in Western feminism, where “[e]mpathy is understood [...] as a way of challenging the subject/object distinction that grounds the social sciences”⁵⁶. Hemmings argues that when empathy fails, it is replaced by a particular kind of horror that, although naturalised as a gut reaction or an appeal to basic or shared humanity, belies the false assumption that Western feminist values are universal. If a poem such as ‘The Dead Iraqi’ is to avoid this pitfall and do more than simply elicit shock, Hemmings’ insistence that horror must be “situated”⁵⁷ makes some particular demands of its form. For example, the need to situate horror requires that the violent content is framed in terms of the ethnographic event of its telling. Thus the opening stanza adopts a first person narrative and the idiomatic speech of the soldier, while the second stanza describes the soldier and setting in the third person. The hope is that by contextualising the conditions through which such violence is produced, the poem goes beyond a gratuitous description of its physical perpetration⁵⁸. By attempting at least to highlight the structural and discursive forces that shape soldiers’ experiences and identities – forces such as military masculinity (see for example Aaron Belkin’s *Bring Me Men*⁵⁹) and the regimental system for example – the poem also seeks to avoid the easy essentialisation and demonization of its individual subject, the soldier. My friend’s response is testament to this: “At first I found this poem so troubling, that I felt myself able to identify with the fullness (and emptiness) of the Sergeant and the Trooper”⁶⁰.

On a meta-level, this conscious striving for empathy can be seen as a way to resist or refuse the fiction of objectivity in research, a way of identifying with the particularity of different experiences and perceptions. But as empathy is also an attempt to transcend that particularity, we must also accept the paradox whereby empathy undoes itself. The function of empathy

⁵⁵ Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) 201.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 198.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 217.

⁵⁸ The decision to include the second stanza was an active choice in the poem’s writing: another colleague and friend with whom I shared this poem thought that I should take the second stanza out, leaving the first to stand for itself. I couldn’t entertain this possibility. Another friend on the other hand, thought that the poem represented images and events that were familiar and unsurprising – archetypal, predictable.

⁵⁹ Aaron Belkin, *Bring Me Men* (London: Hurst, 2012).

⁶⁰ Katherine Natanel, email to author, November 27, 2012.

thus becomes to trouble the ethical certainties on which feminist principles of intersubjectivity are based, exposing – not resolving – uncomfortable proximities and compromising positions. For example, one might ask whether it is ethically possible to empathise with the soldier in my poem and still ‘be’ feminist or critical, evoking wider debates within fields such as IR and issues such as women’s military participation and “agency in violence”⁶¹. Empathy comes up against its own situated limits therefore, namely the question of with whom one may (and may not) empathise. If it is out in the world through reading that writing becomes collective, then surely empathy follows it there and is subject to the same fragmentation and instability? And it is here that the reciprocity implied by empathy, the intersubjectivity that empathy promises (*desires*), is exposed as fallible. And it fails in multiple ways.

Empathetic violence

Just as we ask who can speak, it is also necessary to ask, who *listens*? Where, and between whom, is empathy created? The answer can be different in practice, writing and reading because between each of these fields, the subject and object of empathy (for we cannot, in the end, pretend that empathy has no object) shifts. And when it shifts, someone is always left behind. After the research encounter, who reads and re-interprets what we have written, whose power and privilege is empathy to create (or resist creating, as the case may be)? The giddy scholar of critical race theory filling up gaps mistakenly? The friend to whom one sends one’s poems like a confession? The journal editor? All of these here for example, but not, crucially, the subaltern: the soldier who might recognise himself in my poem’s narrative. Any empathy I might have shared with him⁶² has, to all intents and purposes, been abandoned. Indeed, by situating the violence in the context of an ethnographic event (by making sure I connect the stories to the storyteller) I position myself as an innocent bystander and distance myself: that violence isn’t mine; *I didn’t make it up*. One must acknowledge then, with Hemmings,⁶³ that empathy is a privilege because it remains in the hands of the subject to create. My betrayal of the soldier, my poem’s “other-subject”⁶⁴ therefore, is empathy’s failure. But it is not its principal erasure. Further to this, empathetic violence inheres in what or whom empathy renders abject.

To explore the possibility for empathetic violence, it is necessary to reflect on what exactly the reader of my poem found so difficult about identifying with the soldier-subject, her point being that “the ‘victims’ remained victim in the way that they so often do”⁶⁵. This is an important point: if my poem is not entirely *about* the violent acts that are its content but is about the act of their telling, then what happens to the ‘other’ victims of that violence? Does

⁶¹ Laura Sjoberg, “Agency, Militarized Femininity and Enemy Others: Observations from the War in Iraq,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 9, 2007, 82-101. See also Laura Sjoberg, *Gender, Justice and the Wars in Iraq: A Feminist Reformulation of Just War Theory* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2006).

⁶² And it is important to note, this is an empathy created in the complex temporal and spatial register of sustained fieldwork. Not only on the evening when the soldier told his ‘shock the civilian’ stories for example, but also the times when he told stories about his home life or his injuries, or when his observational humour focused on the common experience of living in a half-shut-down barracks far from family and friends, in other words to portray an experience with which I briefly but strongly identified. And all of this underlined by the unacknowledged, embodied intimacy of sharing a physical space: passing each other on the way to the gym, eating dinner together, our respective shampoo bottles left in the bath cubicle.

⁶³ Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, 203.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*

⁶⁵ Katherine Natanel, email to author, November 27, 2012.

not the poem substitute the primary, physical content of horror – real deaths, suicide attempts, suicide bombings, corpses and violent trauma – for the representational, institutional and secondary products of that horror – a soldier’s animated storytelling, ‘squaddie humour’ and post traumatic stress disorder⁶⁶? As Taussig states of the violent scenes such as those recorded in his drawings: “The real shock is their passing from horror to banality”⁶⁷. This opens my poem to the critique that if the ‘real’ or ‘original’ violence is elided as its central focus, then the ‘real’ or ‘original’ victims of that violence are doubly silenced.

Spivak’s thoughts on epistemic violence⁶⁸ further problematize what is proposed by the possibility for empathy in the writing and reading of ‘The Dead Iraqi’. If the horror of the poem’s content is situated in the context of the soldier’s experiences, then it is the anonymous, generic ‘Iraqi’ who, as the reader argued: “is made object, denied the fullness of subject”⁶⁹. The anonymous Iraqi and other silent figures in the poem are made present only by their absence, quite literally their physical erasure and death, in relation to which the physically enhanced body of the soldier is thrown into relief: “his grin, his quiff, his biceps and shining humanity - his subjecthood full of emptiness and impotence and violence”⁷⁰. Rendered “indeterminate”⁷¹ by comparison, the ‘dead Iraqi’ becomes the poem’s “imperial other”⁷², over whom both my own and the soldier’s story-telling mastery is asserted. In such ways the writer, through empathy, is allied to the soldier-storyteller, expressly positioned on the same side in the reproduction of both political and epistemic violence. Thus the indeterminate bodies-in-pieces that are scattered throughout the poem are made abject⁷³: in terms of content, as the constitutive outside to the soldier’s gymnastic body, and in terms of form, as a constitutive part of the poem’s critique that is paradoxically silenced by its articulation. It is as Paul Amar argues with respect to the photographs emerging from the torture of detainees at Abu Ghraib: “[p]aradoxically, when subjects are hypervisibilised, they remain invisible as social beings: they are not recognised as complex, legitimate, participatory subjects or citizens”⁷⁴.

Poetry as feminist ethnography?

Feminist, postcolonial and postmodern writing about writing is fraught with images of violence. As part of exploring the “non-innocence” of the accessible text⁷⁵, Lather references

⁶⁶ For an analysis of how PTSD functions as a dominant frame for constructing and interpreting soldiers’ embodied responses to combat injuries and trauma, and an alternative framework based on the ontology of movement rather than pathology, see Zoe Wool, “On Movement: The Matter of US Soldiers’ Being After Combat,” *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology* 78, 2013, 403-433. See also Benjamin Schrader, ‘Auto-archaeology and the Political Affect of War,’ *Journal of Narrative Politics* 1:1, 2014 (this issue).

⁶⁷ Taussig, *I Swear I Saw This*, 70.

⁶⁸ Spivak, “Can the subaltern speak?”

⁶⁹ Katherine Natanel, email to author, November 27, 2012.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*

⁷¹ Spivak, “Can the subaltern speak?” 82.

⁷² *Ibid*

⁷³ Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, 216 and Taussig *I Swear I saw This*, 73.

⁷⁴ Paul Amar, “Turning the gendered politics of the security state inside out?” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 13, 2011, 305. The invisibility of the men and women whose experiences are the object of so much “situated horror” (Hemmings 2011, 217) in discussions of Abu Ghraib is at the heart of Nick Flynn’s (2011) poem ‘seven testimonies (redacted)’. The poem is based on the testimonies of prisoners at Abu Ghraib. It plays on the idea of anonymity, censorship and redaction to render the testimonies in a form that, among many other things, expresses the interplay of visibility and invisibility and the partiality of reading.

⁷⁵ Lather, *Getting Lost*, 86.

Derrida's "monstrous text"⁷⁶ and Spivak's notion that writing is "playing with fire"⁷⁷. If one of the risks of writing is (re)producing violence – as I have attempted to demonstrate through an analysis of my own ethnographic poetry – then deconstruction or critique becomes a necessary tool in any attempt to negotiate the politics of representation. It is as Alcoff argues: "One cannot simply look at the location of the speaker and her credentials to speak, nor can one look merely at the propositional content of the speech; one must also look at where the speech goes and what it does there"⁷⁸. And as Spivak notes, it is the purpose of deconstruction, or criticism, "to provide a notation upon this shifting relationship"⁷⁹. My point here is that it is only by finding ways of writing and reading that accommodate and admit this instability; that make allowances for omissions and mis-communications, that we might be able to forge an ethics of representation that at least recognises, rather than attempts misguidedly to foreclose, the risk of violence. The sting of criticism then is not something to be feared, rather it is something to be embraced. One might say, publish and be damned.

In this paper I have tried to explore and embrace the necessity for multiple criticisms of the kind that generate productive tension and keep feminist ideas afloat; that pursue the imperative to always keep moving. I have explored the potential of poetic writing as a way to both exercise and invite critical deconstruction, not only in breaking things down and reassembling them for writing, but in requiring the same again when they are read. By testing the limits of my own ethnographic writing however, I have highlighted some of the erasures and elisions that are created in this process and between research practice, writing and reading, which raises the potential for what I have called empathetic violence. In light of the dynamic this sets up around what is ultimately the failure of a feminist ethics of representation and the need for constant critique, how might it be possible to rescue feminist research from the futility this implies and the cynicism it might engender? The aim is neither the mastery nor the death of the author perhaps, rather an ethics of co-existence and survival; an attempt to get to a space where the tensions between subject, author and reader (or practice, writing and reading) are not miraculously dissolved, but are exposed, interrogated and can be accounted for. This returns me to the "reading strategies"⁸⁰ advocated by Hammonds in 'Black (W)holes'⁸¹, which she posits as expressly relational, the emphasis being on accounting for complex productive tensions between black and white sexualities, without resolving their mutual dependence as neatly analogous⁸². As Hemmings asserts, the key to feminist critique "lies not in attempts to become or befriend the other, which will always be fraught with misrepresentation, but in attention to "the site where the line between friend and foe is undone"⁸³. In this essay I have demonstrated how some of the properties of the poetic form might be conducive to feminist methodologies that seek to keep open the question of representation in ethnography, that is, if we concede that deconstruction – critique – is as fundamental to the poetic form as its constructedness. Poised ambiguously between documentation and mediation, inviting multiple interpretations and making omissions, poetry facilitates the admission (as in the entrance and circulation) of alternative readings, and

⁷⁶ Ibid, 89.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 95.

⁷⁸ Alcoff, "The problem of speaking for others," 26.

⁷⁹ Spivak "Can the subaltern speak?" 106.

⁸⁰ Hammonds, "Black (W)holes," 139.

⁸¹ *Ibid*

⁸² *Ibid*, 131.

⁸³ Spivak 1999b in Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, 217

admits (as in concedes) its implication in specific or general forms of “violence that is the possibility of the episteme”⁸⁴. Perhaps then, poetry works as part of my feminist methodology because it is impossible to declare whose side it is on.

⁸⁴ Spivak, “Can the subaltern speak?” 86.