Performing Confessions: 
Making Sense Afterwards of Fieldwork Immersion

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This paper is about memory, anthropological fieldwork and writing, conceptions of time, and the performance of storytelling. It comes out of my film project—a documentary about Joanne Good, an anthropology student. In the process of researching and filming, I have begun asking questions about how fieldworkers make sense of the time they spend in the field.

For this paper, I begin with a story:

Ten years ago in 1996, Jo Good, a smart, 34-year-old anthropology postgraduate, went looking for a fieldwork location within which to conduct her research. She found herself in the mountainous region of Toraja in south Sulawesi in Indonesia. She liked Toraja so much she stayed.

Jo befriended a local man, Papa Bian, who became her sponsor. She moved in with him and his family and began studying Tato, Papa Bian’s baby son—Jo’s research focused on the social lives of Torajan babies. She learnt how to speak Indonesian and Torajan, she became familiar with the subtleties of a new culture, she took careful field-notes, and she was shocked into village living with all its material discomforts—erratic electricity, little water, cramped housing, basic amenities.

In 1998, the impact of the Asian financial crisis hit Toraja. The tourists—the backbone of Toraja’s modest economy—left and never came back. Jo’s Ph.D. scholarship income tripled in value and she supported several families, funding medical treatments, hearty meals, and day-to-day living. She had never felt so rich.

And then her money was suddenly gone. As Jo’s sponsor, Papa Bian accessed her bank account and gambled away the cash. Jo was left penniless and confused as to exactly what had happened. An illegal lottery was operating in Toraja. Based on horse races in Malaysia, the lottery consisted of little pink numbered pieces of paper sold around Rantepao and the villages. Called the dead-end lottery, it was just that: people were intimidated and beaten over the money they won.

Everyone in the family became so obsessed with the lottery—with the 6pm results of the horse races that would see them bankrupt or rolling in cash for the next 24 hours—that child care was completely sidelined. The children weren’t being fed enough and they grew increasingly susceptible to infections. Jo’s careful research of childrearing practices completely fell apart because no childcare was taking place.

Jo became increasingly infuriated with the adults in her family. One day in 1999, a fight erupted...
and Papa Bian pulled a knife on her. He was locked up. Jo left the family, and, unsurprisingly, left town too, boarding a packed little bus and headed north.

The trip was supposed to take 48 hours—48 hours to Manado, time for Jo to take a break, rethink her research—but the trip became four days. The bus found itself stuck for 48 hours in the middle of civil conflict—a long-standing tension over land escalated into intense violence with 350 houses destroyed and 90 people killed. Jo and her fellow bus passengers sat inside, surrounded by smoke from the burning houses.

During the trip, Jo became engaged to a man on the bus: Adi, a lecturer at a university in Manado. In retrospect, she attributes that the decision to get engaged to a man she had known for a few days to nervous shock.

Jo returned to Toraja with a wedding date: January 1st, 2000, the first day of the new millennium. She found another child in the family to study—a baby called Tiku—and she lived with members of the family who had removed themselves from the lottery and Papa Bian’s house, and who were now in the village. Dasi, Papa Bian’s younger brother, helped her to settle in, and with her research.

Two weeks before the wedding, Jo changed her mind. She was not in love with Adi; she was in love with Dasi, her adopted brother 10 years her junior. Dasi was so gentle with children; he had become her dear friend: she imagined a life with him. As Jo tells it, she simply switched grooms at the last minute and married Dasi. They would raise pigs, brew beer, have children, and live together forever.

Two years later, Jo was gone. She left Dasi with assurances of a swift homecoming, of babies, of a secure future. She arrived in Sydney—determined to pack up her belongings and return to Indonesia for good—but she had been unwell during her fieldwork and it only got worse. Eventually she was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis and hasn’t been back. Instead, she lives in Sydney and writes her dissertation.

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The plot of Jo’s time in Indonesia between 1996 and 2002 sounds neat, contained, and jam-packed; however, it’s a plot I have pulled together myself, selecting the big, dramatic moments. I write about Jo, her story, but the neat paragraphs belie her scrappy, fractured tales. She has never told me ‘the story’ of her fieldwork years in any steady, certain stream. For a long time I assumed it was because she was still sizing me up—she is the subject of my documentary—or maybe she had told me and I hadn’t recognised it.

I have made it one narrative; a story I organised from scraps of information I’ve slowly gathered after foraging through film footage of Jo, through notes from our phone conversations and emails, through notes from interviews, jokes and asides.

It was two years before I realised she had problems piecing together her past. It happened over a photo of a child’s second birthday party. The photo is of Tato—her first research subject—standing over his birthday cake with a giant plastic ‘2’ sitting on top of it. The ‘2’ was Jo’s undoing. She told me:

*I can remember taking a photo of Tato, I can remember that birthday, but I didn’t think I knew him when he was two. The photos weren’t tagged to my data. My memory doesn’t match up. I’m trying to track small changes in a child’s life. It’s managed to mix itself up.*
The photo opened the floodgates; what flowed out, however, were not coherent, ordered memories but rather the awful struggle Jo was having at making sense of what happened. “I remember fieldwork as a squashed series of events—nodes of excitement—but there are huge gaps I can’t account for,” she said.

She grasped at significant dates, but they seemed to unravel her story even further. She describes ‘switching grooms’ in 1999 from Adi to Dasi, but this was impossible, as she and Dasi were not married for another five months, on her 38th birthday in May 2000. Even world events weren’t reliable markers. For a while she was certain she could locate the month of the Manado bus journey:

* After the bus trip, I escaped to the Philippines. I sat in a motel room, frozen for two weeks eating cornflakes and watching cable TV. It was during the impeachment trial of Bill Clinton. *

This was January 1999, meaning she was engaged to Adi for a whole year before the end of 2000 which didn’t seem right to her.

Jo replays Toraja in her head—meetings with me make it worse as I ask questions, forcing her to stir up details. “Every time I meet with you, I can’t sleep at night. I go over and over the story, the chain of events, trying to find a loophole; trying to find a way to make it better. The stories have been completely distorted by the anxiety I had when I got back, and the anxiety I had when I was there,” she said.

Jo told so many different stories to so many different people that she lost her footing, slipping and sliding around a solid past; a version for her parents, a version for her thesis supervisor, a version for colleagues, friends, and acquaintances. “You have to create a fiction about yourself to make sense to people. I never lied; but I had to tell a story. Unfortunately this helped to distort what might have been a coherent, accurate set of events.”

* * *

It is not unusual for us to misremember the past, to create a story, or to tell different stories of our past depending on who is listening. What makes Jo’s experience especially interesting is that her anxiety to remember is caught up with her understanding of what a ‘good’ anthropologist should be. “I spent most of my time in Indonesia not feeling like an anthropologist; I spent the time trying to survive.”

Importantly, Jo believes that a good anthropologist should have precise memories. Until she came upon the photo of Tato, Jo had divided her time in Indonesia superficially but neatly into ‘fieldwork’—the very focussed research about the children, captured largely by her field-notes—and the larger setting—her personal autobiographic account. The division allowed her to start writing her doctorate; she could concentrate on select memories and data. The photo, however, disrupted this process as it symbolised an uncomfortable intersection.

Fieldwork is a 24 hours a day experience. Through the field-notes, I had separated off the peripheral stuff . . . But of course it’s not peripheral.

The problem was that not all her memories were matching up with her fieldnotes. Jo’s anxiety about establishing a seamlessly accurate narrative of the past reflects an anxiety within anthropology as a discipline. Anthropology, on the whole, holds enormous store in an ordered, thorough, allochronistic way of thinking and writing about fieldwork. A researcher spends years conducting fieldwork and then returns ‘home’ to write an ethnography about that research time. The ‘returning home’ renders the fieldwork as being in the past; the researcher is now ‘home’ in the present.

How to write and think about fieldwork temporally has been partly played out through meta-anthro
polological debates about the use of literary tense in ethnography. Until the 1970s, the present tense dominated the discipline.

For example, early last century, Bronislaw Malinowski, considered by many to be the founder of modern British social anthropology, spent two years in the Western Pacific with the Trobriand Islanders. He learnt the local language and engaged in their everyday lives, convinced that the only way to understand others was to learn a society’s subtle interconnections and rules ‘from within’ (Eriksen 1995, 15).

In 1922 he wrote:

. . . these natives do not conceive of a past as of a lengthy duration, unrolling itself in successive stages of time. They have no idea of a long vista of historical occurrences, narrowing down and dimming as they recede towards a distant background of legend and myth, which stands out as something entirely different from the nearer planes. [...] Indeed I have found very often that when they told me some story of the past [...] (1922, 300-1).

Malinowski painstakingly familiarised himself with the culture and rigorously collected data and you can see it in his writing. He provides long slabs of present tense material—*truths about the natives*—and illustrates them with short anecdotes in the past tense—*they told me some story*.

By the 1980s, post-colonial thinkers began critiquing the practice of writing primarily in the present tense. Ethnographic practice was now about speaking in dialogue with people rather than about them. Thinkers such as Johannes Fabian argued that the present tense fixes people in time and space; and that it also effaces the researcher’s presence in the field. John Davis described how many pre-1960s anthropological works used present tense to further their colonialist preoccupations. Their writing was partly answering the question ‘what on earth are these people like?’ (1992, 212), and using present tenses avoided specifying time and place (that is, ‘these people always have been and always will be like this’). By deliberately not noting the unfolding of time—the ordered events—anthropologists—according to theorists like Fabian—were committing a symbolic violence.

Suffice it to say, Fabian and others argue for the use of past tense, for the researcher to foreground her position at and in a specific time; that the material for anthropology is events—*encounters*—rather than things—*truths about the natives*—and must therefore reflect the passing of time (1990, 12).

Literary tense powerfully expresses the position, in time, of the fieldworker to the fieldwork, and yet Jo said it is not something she thought about—until I asked her of course. In her writing, she uses present tense for vignettes and past tense for analysis—a division I myself used in my doctorate. In an email she told me:

Any analysis requires that I move around in the data. I shift from the vantage point of someone who has finished fieldwork (past tense) to drawing on specific instances of behaviour that amplify the point I’m making—of course this bracketed action is in the present tense. I don’t think about tense much, but I do recognise that it sometimes becomes a problem when you want to convey the immediacy of a situation and comment on it at the same time.

Jo’s writing is an inverse of Malinowski’s work which locates the specific example in past tense the analysis in the present tense. Here is an example of Jo’s work.

[Part of a present-tense vignette:] ‘Sumbung is helping Indo’ Tiku feed her son; she is already dressed for school, and has Tiku straddled on her knee as she sits on a rickety stool.’
[Part of past-tense analysis:] ‘Indo’ Tiku was especially proud of her son’s generous nature, she stressed the importance of socialising Tiku to be generous and caring; this she felt would be the key to his acceptance and success within the family.’

Jo consciously frames herself as someone who has finished fieldwork—the research years in Indonesia are over and now she writes. However, there is nothing ‘finished’ about her time in Indonesia. It is not a contained segment in her life that she writes about; it is alive in her, alluding and haunting her. She ‘tries to find loopholes’ and ‘ways of making better’ the unfolding events in Toraja.

Recently she realised:

[i]n the first years after having returned from Indonesia, I hadn’t separated from the events in Indonesia. They weren’t yet memories—they were ongoing experiences; an on-going stream of reality on a loop that was running with greater intensity than my life in Australia.

* * *

Jo’s experience of fieldwork, time and memory is profound, and some contemporary ethnographers would say she has an imperative to write about it in her Ph.D.—in the present tense.

The present tense as a dominant writing mode re-entered some ethnographies in the 1990s when the fieldworker’s voice became more consciously louder and clearer—a postmodernist subjectivity. A series of largely female-authored writings explored the relationship between what they termed ‘anthropology and autobiography’ (Okely and Callaway 1992)—but not autobiography as memoir.

“[T]he (autobiographic) past is not really past in anthropology,” writes Kirsten Hastrup, who is definite about how ethnographies should be written:

[...] the dialogue was ‘then’, but the discourse is ‘now’. There is no choice of tense at this level: the ethnographic present is the only construction of time which renders the truth about the ‘absent’ reality [that is, fieldwork] (1992, 127-8).

She says that ‘[p]hysical presence in the field is no longer the source of absolute authority. The kind of participation needed to identify events and write real cultures cannot be glossed as mere ‘being’ in the field. It implies a process of ‘becoming’. Becoming is a metaphor for a kind of participation that can never be complete and which is no immediate consequence of physical presence’ (1995: 19).

What she’s leading to is the liminal nature of fieldwork, how it takes on its own unique place in time.

Although part of the anthropologist’s life-history and also representing a moment in the course of local history, the experience of the fieldwork as such is outside history (as a particular temporal mode). It is so strongly marked by liminality that the ordinary succession of events is suspended (cf. Turnbull 1990)’ (1995, 20).

Hastrup argues that the problem with those critics of the ethnographic present, such as Fabian and Davies, is that ‘the ethnographic present was thought to represent the reality of the other society’ (1995, 20); whereas now, she says, with the researcher actively positioned in the writing, the present tense is able to convey the present-ness of the fieldwork to that researcher. As Thomas Hylland Erkisen writes, the ethnographic present and the historical dimension should not be seen as mutually exclusive (1995,33).

Jo wants to convey the ‘immediacy of a situation and comment on it at the same time’. Perhaps she might weave in the immediacy of commenting on it at all; being a researcher in a continual state of ‘becoming a participant’ in the field and in her life in Sydney.
Four weeks ago (early 2006), Jo sorted out the timing of the two-year-old’s birthday party. Tato’s mother told Jo she planned to wean the baby at two; however, she weaned him at 18 months because she was so involved with the lottery.

When Tato was weaned, Jo stopped taking field-notes because there was no childcare and the family was in chaos. She resumed note-taking after Tato’s birthday, after the fight with Papa Bian, once she found a new baby to study. A footnote in her thesis explains the end of the relationship with Tato, but it doesn’t specify a time. As she worked on her thesis, this period—unsupported by field-notes—almost completely disappeared. That it had been a time of great personal stress and trauma made it easier for her autobiographical memory to compress it.

“Those six months were lost in a footnote,” Jo told me. And they would never have been found had I not asked her about the photo of a child with a plastic number 2 on his birthday cake.

I would like to express my deep gratitude to Joanne Good for her good-hearted feedback on this paper.

References


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