The Ethnographer Unbared:
Honoring Hatred in Uncomfortable Terrains

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Abstract: Despite researcher emotions often being considered off-limits, here I position my own emotions as central to reaching deeper ethnographic understanding. I suggest the importance of researcher emotions for grappling with the messy reality of living in the field, and for reflecting on ethnographic experiences long after fieldwork is completed. I question what responsibilities researchers might have towards respecting our own emotions as ethnographic data. In particular, I consider the emotion of disgust in myself as a researcher. Why do ethnographers avoid engaging with feelings of disgust, and why are aversion and hatred so hard to even name? Is hate something that ethnographers can come to honor? I use the telling of three stories to shed light on researcher-researched relationships in uncomfortable terrains. I write about Vinith, a participant who I hated, but it is about me even more than it is about Vinith—it is about the intersection between us, and my own struggle to present him authentically, as someone who I consider both detestable and all too human. It is about the journey I took in coming to honor my relationship with Vinith, not in spite of, but because of, the strength of my emotions towards him.

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1. Introduction

> "We must honor those sacred few of whom we can say with confidence that we really do not like, that we hate ... Hated individuals are found within our ethnographic world, but in the narrative representation of that world, they often vanish" (FINE, 1993, p.273).

In this article I juxtapose three stories—three constructed versions of an ethnographic encounter. The stories relate to a single participant, whom I will refer to as Vinith in order to ensure his anonymity. Vinith aroused strong feelings of hatred in me. I use the three stories heuristically to chart my emotions as a researcher, firstly considering my time in the field: my initial meeting with Vinith, our subsequent meetings, and my positionality. Then in the discussion section I consider my own emotions as ethnographic data, and my emotions within ethnographic writing. Finally, I contextualize my emotions across boundaries of time and place, teasing out various ways of telling, naming, and owning different aspects of the researcher-researched relationship, and considering what is lost by presenting only one of these stories. [1]

2. Background

Often as ethnographic researchers we imagine our ideal participants. They may be people who have had fascinating experiences, have reflected on them deeply, are able to articulate themselves well, and are willing to engage with us and build trusting relationships. In reality, we may meet participants who have just one of those characteristics. We may never find the archetypal *perfect* interviewee, but we are able to draw from different aspects of each individual, to build up a composite profile that epitomizes experiences among a group. Before fieldwork, I did not consider a profile of the *worst* kind of participant. Perhaps there is no single exemplar of the *worst* participant. TOLSTOY suggested that "all happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" (2001 [1877], p.12), and perhaps the same is true for unhappy relations between researcher and researched. Perhaps the ways that a participant can emotionally challenge a researcher are all unique. Before entering the field, I had assumed there would be some individuals I would not get along with, or who would not be interested in spending time with me, but I did not consider what it would be like to engage with someone who is keen to participate, but whose personality I find loathsome. [2]

As an ethnographer, I aim to engage with people through my immersion in the field. I try to build trust, and wholeheartedly participate in village life. I try to do everything I can to see life from the position of each person I interview, and this is hard emotional work. I genuinely want to feel that I know each participant deeply, and that I can portray their individuality with confidence. My fieldnotes are informed by all my senses, I use my "whole body as an organic recording device" (MADDEN, 2010, p.19). In Sri Lanka, I was aware of how hot the sand felt under my bare feet, of how loudly people shouted to one another while fishing, of how sugary the tea tasted. I was doing everything I could to experience the village bodily, to feel a real sense of place. I "tuned-in" my body (GOFFMAN &

LOFLAND, 1989, p.125), "opening myself up" (p.128) to a deep awareness of the nuances around me. I made myself vulnerable to those around me in a way I considered appropriate to my position as a researcher. Yet it had not occurred to me that tuning myself in like this also opened me up to be influenced by people whom I find detestable. [3]

3. Representing the Field

3.1 Research context

I met one such interviewee during my fieldwork in eastern Sri Lanka. I conducted ethnographic observation and interviews while I was living for six months in a Tamil-Vedda fishing village. My research was based on the coast near Trincomalee, in a village of about 200 families. The village is located in a politically marginalized and economically impoverished region. The vast majority of adults are illiterate, and there are few employment opportunities outside of fishing. It is a community in transition: a fusion of Vedda, Hindu and Christian beliefs exist alongside one another. In my research, I focused on the way people who have lived through multiple adversities conceptualize hardship and help, particularly help from non-government organizations (NGOs). This focus makes local experiences of hardship relevant to my work, including experiences of poverty, political marginalization, civil war, the 2004 tsunami, and other natural disasters such as cyclones and flooding. However, my focus was anthropologically centered on sense-making of adversity by villagers; not on historical documentation, and without attempting an objective account. I specifically tried to avoid placing credit or blame on any political party, religious group, or NGO. When my interviewees spoke about sensitive topics, I actively tried to redirect them, but I found it very difficult in the case of Vinith. [4]

When I met him, Vinith was a 28-year-old fisherman. He is the oldest of five children, and grew up in poverty. He left school after grade three, and became a fisherman at age twelve. At the age of sixteen he joined what the villagers referred to as the LTT, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a militant group that engaged in terrorist in their aspiration to govern a separatist Tamil state (SPENCER, 1990, p.2). My interpreter had suggested we interview Vinith, as his experience of the civil war was different to that of other villagers. Most people I knew in the village were apolitical. It is an indigenous area, and many villagers described having no allegiance in the civil war. I frequently heard about violence inflicted by all parties: the Sri Lankan army, both factions of the LTT, and the Indian army who entered the war as an external peace-keeping force. Villagers suffered extreme deprivation during the conflict, and the dominant narrative in the village was that they desired peace at any cost, without caring who was victorious. I had been living in the village for some months by the time I met Vinith, and I thought I had a grasp of what to expect. But Vinith's discussion of the war surprised me in many ways, and over my time in the field I grew to hate him. There are innumerable ways in which I am different from the villagers I was living amongst, but only in my relationship with Vinith did I feel a significant barrier between us. I was unsure how to breach that barrier, but at first, I was also

unsure if I even desired to breach it. We were separated by an "empathy wall" (HOCHSCHILD, 2018, p.5), an obstacle to deep understanding of one another owing to the vast differences in our beliefs and circumstances, making it extremely challenging to see reality through one another's eyes. [5]

3.2 Initial meeting of researcher and researched

Vinith was watching television with his family when I arrived with my interpreter for the first time. It was a hot afternoon. I suggested that we come back another time, but Vinith said no, they would be happy talking to me until 5am the next day! Vinith's wife went to make us tea, herding the chickens out of the house on her way. As soon as she had left, the chickens returned, wandering around the room as we spoke. My interpreter had told me that Vinith was *an injured war veteran*, so I was expecting an elderly man with a walking stick. In fact, Vinith was younger than my little sister. I was profoundly uncomfortable during that first interview as Vinith repeatedly returned to the topic of war, and recounted his role in it with graphic detail and obvious relish. I felt shocked. Vinith framed his story in terms of pride and heroism, making it clear that he sees prestige in violence. He casually mentioned horrific facts about himself, in the extreme context of war as well as in the mundane context of village life. He seemed to be boasting, and trying to impress me, but the more he tried the more I felt repulsed. Not only had he been involved in the war, but he told me he had joined the LTT by choice. This is in contrast to the few other villagers with militant pasts who told me they had been forcefully recruited. Vinith himself told me that no one in the village liked him, and that he did not understand why. I went through the motions of continuing with the interview, but tried to get through the questions quickly, accepting short answers rather than probing for more information. I told my interpreter I was uncomfortable, and he appeared embarrassed, smiling at me and asking for the next question. I tried to tune out my mind, while nodding my head as if in agreement. I told myself to just get through it, that I would never have to come back again. [6]

When that first interview was over, I still felt uncomfortable, contaminated somehow by the experience of being in the same room as Vinith. I washed at the well and changed my clothing, then washed the clothes I had been wearing in a bucket by the well. I tried to interrogate the feeling of hatred, a new emotional territory for me, foreign and unfamiliar. In psychological theories of primary emotions, loathing can be categorized as the most intense form of disgust, extreme aversion towards something which is considered to be repulsive (PAUL EKMAN GROUP, 2021). Disgust has an evolutionary function in protecting us from toxicity, we keep a distance from what we find revolting, "it's useful not to eat something putrid, and social disgust in a parallel way moves us away from what we consider objectionable" (EKMAN, 2003, p.178). Yet disgust is not as simple as merely encouraging avoidance of certain things. Intense disgust has lingering negative consequences; it pollutes us, unlike anger or indignation, which may be considered to purify us through their very experience:

> "Disgust does not do its moral work so as to allow us unambivalent pleasure in our relative moral superiority to the disgusting other. Disgust admits our own vulnerability and compromise ... it always makes us bear some of the costs of condemnation. Disgust never allows us to escape clean. It underpins the sense of despair that impurity and evil are contagious, endure, and take everything down with them" (MILLER, 1997, p.204). [7]

It now seems clear to me that my impulse to physically clean myself was an attempt at purging myself of the *rotten* experience of my time with Vinith. I only discovered later that other researchers have felt similarly contaminated through listening. Here is one such description:

> "I had an irresistible urge to scrub my body, as if scouring the flesh would cleanse whatever his hatred had sullied in me ... He seemed to harbor a wish to contaminate me, to project whatever had damaged him into me" (STERN, 2020, p.574). [8]

At the time I had no idea that the feeling of being defiled by the presence of an interviewee was also experienced by others. I thought that being alone in the field and not sharing the emotions I felt was part of my apprenticeship into becoming a *real* anthropologist*,* and that my intuition of contagion was my own moral failing. After washing, I did not know what to do with myself. The village was no longer the same place, the place I thought I was beginning to understand, and where I was beginning to feel that I belonged. I felt profoundly shaken—was everything this man had told me true? Was it perhaps everyone else who had been lying to me? I started to doubt everything as my confidence continued to unravel. I had gone there to meet people whose stories are seldom heard. I knew in advance that the villagers had experienced both human-made and natural disasters, but Vinith's descriptions of actively seeking violence, and taking pride in his own violent actions made me doubt what I was doing in Sri Lanka. [9]

I knew I did not agree with Vinith's views, but the strength of my emotions surprised me, and felt like something I ought to conceal. "Intimate relationships usually evoke wide-ranging emotions, from sympathy to hatred. But, in our close relations with participants, we only expect good will" (KLEINMAN & COPP, 2011, p.3). Admitting to myself that I felt disgust was difficult, I expected that somehow all my ethnographic relationships should be positive. I was not sure if my response to Vinith was something I should ignore:

> "If we acknowledge our anger or disappointment with participants, we face our biggest fear: that we are un-empathic and thus incompetent. It is easier to try to ignore our inappropriate feelings and drift in and out of an awareness of them" (p.7). [10]

After a few days I decided that I must have overreacted. I believed it was important to do a follow-up interview, and that I should see it as a challenge to my professionalism. I resolved to act cheerfully, and encourage anything that Vinith might deem worthy of discussion. I decided that he added a valuable contrast to his fellow villagers, and such a position made his words even more precious. I tried to think of the rules of the discipline: everyone deserves my respect, I should

treat any difficulty in an interview as a challenge to who I am, not to who the interviewee is. I should find a way to sympathize with Vinith's point of view. I should build rapport with him as an individual, while remaining non-judgmental about the content of whatever he might say (PATTON, 2015). I entered the following interviews as positively as I could. [11]

3.3 Subsequent meetings of researcher and researched

The second and third interviews with Vinith were extremely exhausting for me. The emotional energy to keep up a façade wore me out. During the second interview, Vinith's two-year-old son was sleeping on the floor near us, and his three older children were playing outside, sounds wafting through the window as we spoke. Throughout the third interview, Vinith and his wife prepared and chewed betel leaves. Vinith told me about the serious injuries he had sustained in the war. He pointed out all the places in his body which still contain shrapnel, and I felt uncomfortable being directed to look at particular parts of his body. He could not sit still for very long because of a hip injury, so he kept moving around throughout our interview. He had also lost an eye and part of one ear, which made it difficult to make eye contact with him. It seemed to me that violence was written on his face. [12]

As the interviews progressed, I felt so disgusted that I was struggling to control my facial expressions. I started to doubt my entire approach. Why use a methodology that encourages me to feign friendship with someone? Why tune in all my senses to the nuances of village life, but then ignore all the signals my body was giving me to run as far away as possible from a man who I found so detestable? I almost felt a kind of guilt through association with Vinith, as if I were complicit in his violent acts because I was the one initiating and inviting conversation. STERN talked about yielding to the way that an interviewee sees themselves, and entering an "altered state" during interviews:

> "I follow his moral logic so closely that it becomes my own ... It's exhausting to alter my wavelength to match his, even though, in the moment that I join him, I'm not aware of the effort. Afterward, I'm disgusted. I dread returning to my notes, to the person I was when I embraced his subjectivity, when I became a fellow perpetrator" (2020, pp.60-61). [13]

Vinith wanted to talk extensively about the civil war, and returned repeatedly to this topic even though I did not want to hear anything that might compromise his safety or my own. He described how former LTT members now have to go to meetings when others call them, how people like him are "slaves" and "beggars," no longer having high positions, honor or respect. He declared that "there is no power for Tamil people." Vinith contrasted his position now by describing the power of the LTT during the war. He told me that in the wartime, foreigners or the Sri Lankan government would make appointments with the LTT, and the LTT would keep them waiting or tell them to return another day, to flaunt their power. I found such stories emotionally confusing, as I at first thought that Vinith and I were sharing a view about how everyone is deserving of respect, but as he

continued, I realized that in fact he is comfortable with inequality, as long as he is at the top. I also felt disturbed by the pettiness of this example, that power plays about wasting time were apparently so important to him. Towards the end of the war, Vinith was in hospital receiving treatment for his facial injuries. He explained how he pretended to be an innocent civilian, but secretly told the nurses that he was a war hero, so he could get the special treatment he deserved, "because whatever we do, there is respect for war heroes." Again, in looking back at our conversations, I consider that the lengths he was going to in trying to impress me were the very parts of his story that I detested the most. [14]

3.4 Three stories

Here are three different versions of my ethnographic encounter with Vinith. Three stories, three ways of telling, which all contribute something different, with things left unsaid if they are not all told together. The content of the narratives was supplied by Vinith himself during our many interviews and discussions together, and by my reactions to our encounters. I take ownership of having knitted them together into these neatly contained stories, which I have written in an attempt to deepen my understanding of his perspective[1]. I have called the first *From honor to beggary*. It is a story for a thesis, told by a sympathetic ethnographer, constructing Vinith's story and opinions from various conversations we shared:

> "The war started before Vinith was born. When he was 16, his people had been getting killed for over two decades, and he did not want their deaths to be for nothing. Vinith's parents would not have let him join the LTT, so he ran away from home. Vinith is proud to be a Tamil, and wants a homeland for his people. According to Vinith, Tamil Eelam is important, but not if it is achieved peacefully. Fighting is an important part of the homeland. Vinith trained for two years, then requested to go to the most dangerous area: 'We thought that if we could go to the Vanni area[2], where there was lots of fighting at the time, we thought that if we could go there and fight then we would become good war heroes.'
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> Vinith described a sixth sense that he developed in the wartime. Even when there were no visible signs, he could intuit which side of the road was taken by the army. Once, when he was alone, Vinith's sixth sense told him that soldiers were nearby. He saw 25 Indian army soldiers in a trench. He killed all of them. They tried to shoot back, but Vinith killed them first. If the Tamils had won the war, Vinith believes he would have been treated with a lot of honor because he killed those 25 people.
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> Vinith was happy during the wartime, and happy in the refugee camp where he was placed after the war. When he returned home after a six-year absence, Vinith's family cried. They were not angry, but they were sad because he went away looking so strong, and returned with so many injuries and mutilations. They had already held his funeral because they thought he was dead. Vinith needed to adjust to civilian life: 'In the duty time, I was in service for my country, for my Tamil Eelam. But now I am

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1   I initially wrote these stories as an exercise in familiarizing myself with my interviewees, but I have decided to share these three stories here in order to lay bare this aspect of ethnographic engagement.

2   The Vanni is a region in northern Sri Lanka which was of great strategic importance during the civil war.

working for my family, that is normal life. But before I was in mission, mission or ministry, like that, service for the country ... I have been thinking about that, which one is the real one?'

Vinith wants to be famous and welcomed as a war hero everywhere he goes, but instead, everyone treats his family as beggars. When the militants lost the war, he went from a high position with lots of respect, to being like a slave. That loss of status is the saddest thing in his life: 'After finishing the war, we thought we are useless. Nothing, we are nothing ... we lost our respect, the LTT died, now we are losing persons. We are losers.'" [15]

Here is a different story, which I have called *My honorable life*. This second story is one that I imagine Vinith might tell himself, based on our interactions:

"I am happy this white lady is talking to me. No-one in the village listens to me or visits my house. Why does this white lady care? I will try to impress her. I will tell her about my great achievements. I will make it clear that my condition now is due to my side losing the war, otherwise I would be a hero. She will be impressed if she hears about how different things would be if the LTT had won. Why does she keep changing the topic? Why doesn't she let me tell her more about the war? I will tell her about the lengths I went to in becoming a war hero.

I will tell her that I joined the LTT freely because Tamil Eelam is so important for our people. How I ran away from my parents because they did not understand, they were afraid that I would die, and they didn't want to lose their son ... but they didn't realize that the LTT was the most important thing in my life. This white lady does not understand the importance of the LTT either. I am proud to be a Tamil. So many Tamils had already lost their lives, so why would I want their deaths to be for nothing? I am not interested in politics, war is much better. War is different, and we wanted to fight in a war. I knew that we had to fight to get a Tamil state.

I worked so hard, learning how to fight. I will tell her about the glory of fighting, and how powerful I was as part of the LTT. I will tell her that even amongst fellow LTT, I was special—I will tell her about my sixth sense, and those 25 soldiers I killed. I will tell her about the war I still carry within me, the literal pieces of shrapnel that are part of me. I will tell her why my face looks like this.

Before I was a war hero, now I am a war victim. This white lady needs to understand about war victims. I will emphasize that things are very bad now, but only because we lost the war. That will help her realize that I deserve better. Maybe she can help me get what I deserve, because she must be very rich. It is important to impress her and to remain friends with her, even after she leaves the village. Maybe she will help me move to Australia." [16]

The third story is different again. I have called it *A disgraceful life*. This is the story that was in my mind while meeting Vinith, unscreened by any professional persona. It is an inner monologue that I felt I ought to be ashamed of at the time of my fieldwork:

"Why is this man gloating over murder? Why is his loss of status sadder for him than the loss of Tamil Eelam? Did Vinith ever really believe in the cause, or is he simply a

violent person who wanted an excuse to hurt people? How many people in any war are only interested in brutality, or self-valorization? Everyone else I interviewed in the village told me that they were forcefully recruited, but he says it was a free choice that he is proud of! Perhaps the other villagers who told me they did not take any side in the war are in fact deceiving me. Perhaps everyone in the village has a hidden story of perpetrating violence. If so, who can I trust? Is honesty about violence more admirable than concealing violence?

How can I even be in the same room as Vinith? What is my role in all this? Is it doing any good to bring his story to the world? By giving him an audience and not making it clear how strongly I object, am I complicit in his story? He is one of the only people I have met here who did not lose family members in the war—why isn't he telling me about the good things in his life? Why isn't Vinith grateful for still having his life? Why does he keep referring to himself as a victim of war, when he is so clearly a war perpetrator?

Have I ever done anything so atrocious? Is there anything I could say about my life that would arouse as much hatred in villagers as I am feeling right now for this man? What would it mean for something that I consider mundane to be detested by the community here? What would it mean for them to detest something that I worked really hard for, and feel proud of, and see as essential to the core of my identity? Should I start concealing more about myself? Should I start sharing more about myself? Do I want to provoke hate towards myself right now, to allow a simple separation of myself as other to everything Vinith stands for? That way I can contain myself as separate and avoid unpacking any of the messiness of this reality which is so heavily shaped by violence. If I was born into Vinith's circumstances, would my own life story be just as full of violence, and pride about violence?

Is he being genuine in saying that he wants to get to know me and be my friend? Why does he keep asking me about Australia? Why does it feel so menacing when he tells me he will visit me in Australia? So many villagers have told me similar things and I have never had a serious expectation that it will ever eventuate. Though I care about Vinith, as I care for everyone in the village, why do I feel like I will never be able to get far enough away from him?" [17]

I have laid out these three stories in an attempt to explore different ways of telling and representing. I have experimented with voice, emotional honesty, explicitness and different ways of reaching understanding. From my point of view, Vinith seemed to be blinding himself by his persistence in narrating his own acts of violence. In the repetition of his story with various different lenses, I am attempting to demonstrate how much my strong emotions overshadowed my relationship with Vinith, while also struggling to make my own perspective comprehensible—to fellow researchers, but also to myself. DANIEL (1996) suggested that any witness to the trauma of violence also experiences distortions in their vision, and in listening to Vinith's account, I too felt the way I was seeing things being warped, as if I were dazzled by the very thing I was trying to comprehend. Violence, DANIEL has noted, "is an event that is traumatic, and interpretation is an attempt at mastering that trauma ... the violent event persists like crushed glass in one's eyes. The light it generates, rather than helping us see, is blinding" (p.208). I worked hard to try and see the situation as clearly as

possible. In the field I felt pressure to be an empathic ethnographer, to understand Vinith, but also to be true to myself. I will now consider the uncomfortable terrain which I shared with Vinith from a broader disciplinary perspective. [18]

3.5 Researcher emotions and positionality in the field

It would be naïve to believe that emotional engagement in fieldwork is disconnected to emotional engagement in other spheres of life. As WHYTE suggested, "the field worker cannot afford to think only of learning to live with others in the field. He has to continue living with himself" (1993 [1943], p.317). He included this reflection in an appendix, as if it were of peripheral concern, but I am actively bringing it into the spotlight as our lack of willingness to discuss fieldwork emotions contributes to our challenge in coping with them. I was unsure how to treat Vinith, as it is difficult to manage dislike, but also difficult to manage compromise and deception. Feigning friendship with him would have resulted in me disliking myself (KLEINMAN & COPP, 2011, p.8). I see a strange asymmetry in my relationship with Vinith. Ultimately, I hold a lot of power: as a white outsider Vinith told me that he considers me a channel of financial support, and as an ethnographer I am the one now telling his story. Yet Vinith also has a lot of power over me: he was able to openly express his opinions, while I felt the need to refrain from objection, to set aside my own identity and attempt to step into his shoes. Now, I have lost the luxury of neatly containing him as "other," and continue to force myself to relate to him in unsettling ways (CUNLIFFE & KARUNANAYAKE, 2013, p.383). [19]

Participating in Vinith's worldview was deeply disturbing for me. Due to my position as a single female alone in the field, I did not feel confident to challenge Vinith during my fieldwork, or to probe the ways in which he disgusted me at the time. Yet avoiding disgust creates knowledge gaps (KLEINMAN & COPP, 2011, p.11). Perhaps if I had tactfully demonstrated my divergent views then I would have gained deeper insights (p.14); instead, my feelings inclined me to polarize my own personality from Vinith's, and being uncritically self-satisfied about my differences to Vinith is also problematic (p.11). I was perhaps most uncomfortable when I agreed with Vinith. In one of my visits to his home, Vinith told me how much he loves animals. How he always feeds stray dogs, even though the family struggles to find enough food for themselves. He told me how one of his chickens is as affectionate as a dog, and regularly sits in his lap. It was sitting in Vinith's lap during one of our interviews, and he stroked it gently while telling me horrific things about the war. I felt confused to identify with one aspect of Vinith's personality, his love of animals, while at the same time feeling repulsed by him. [20]

I cannot ignore my own role in the context of our discussions. Feeling strong emotions helps us to understand something about those we study, "such terms as objectivity, neutrality, and impartiality refer to subject positions once endowed with great institutional authority, but they are arguably neither more nor less valid than those of more engaged, yet equally perceptive, knowledgeable social actors" (ROSALDO, 1993, p.21). I cannot keep myself *off-stage* as my own subjectivity,

affect, and confusion are important (CLIFFORD, 1986, p.14). By creating a written text of my fieldwork encounter with Vinith, I am shaping both who he is, and who I am: "every version of an 'other,' wherever found, is also the construction of a 'self'" (p.23). Am I doing violence to my own sense of self by constructing myself in relationship to someone I detest so strongly? GEERTZ (1973, p.346) described the "inevitably problematic" relationship between the researcher and the researched: how I see myself plays a large part in what I will say about any participants I happen to study, given that, as GEERTZ reminded us, "ethnography is part philosophy, and a good deal of the rest is confession" (p.346). [21]

My experiences with Vinith make me reflect on myself. I had never hated anyone before. Why did I use a research method that encouraged me to experience such horrible feelings? Engaging ethnographically can be uncomfortable, even frightening: it induces vulnerability and comes at an emotional cost to the researcher (CUNLIFFE & KARUNANAYAKE, 2013, p.378). Hearing Vinith tell his story of wartime, I felt as if I were sliding along a scale from being an observer-as-participant, to being a participant-as-observer. Vinith's story forced me to confront in new and graphic ways how it feels to be a perpetrator of violence, and how it feels to be a victim of violence. I felt hate rather than fear, and yet I comprehended the terrified accounts of other villagers with a new and disturbing clarity. Seeing the parallel to the emotions felt by my other participants, I felt that to ignore my own hatred would have been a disservice to the feelings that many of them had been living with for a lifetime. To turn away from engagement with Vinith would have been an exercise of my privilege, a privilege not shared by my other participants. Villagers were thrown into war without choice, and faced hatred on an incomparable scale. If they had been forced to live it, who was I to walk away from simply hearing about it, or imagining it? [22]

I fully realize that Vinith may have hated me just as much as I hated him, and sharing my experience feels like a confession. But the energy between Vinith and me was so strong that I feel it would be dishonest to my field experience to sweep it under the carpet, or to side-step the triggering word *hate*. I am conscious of trying to hate the crime rather than the criminal, but I am not trying to claim a moral high ground, or to situate my feelings in a code of human rights or a belief in the sanctity of all human life. I am trying to acknowledge the raw, primal force of *feeling* hate without pinning it down with a neat definition, or justifying it as something that anyone *ought* to feel, or *ought not* to feel in this context. There is a simplicity in sincere hate, though I have tried to soften and problematize my hate by actively deciding to honor it. I have laid bare my raw emotions to emphasize the very uncomfortableness of the field terrain. [23]

4. Discussion

4.1 Researcher emotions as ethnographic data

When I first returned from fieldwork, I avoided even thinking about Vinith. What irritated me was not that he had been involved in warfare, or even that he had committed atrocities—but that he seemed to be proud of this fact. What I perceived as his arrogant and boastful manner deeply unsettled me. It also disturbed me that he could talk about such things while his toddler played beside us, and his wife served us tea. It was after some time that I experimented with writing Vinith's story, trying to push myself into sympathy by rewriting it in the first person. Despite feeling uncomfortable while writing about him, reading his story aloud, as if it were my own, was strangely not so uncomfortable. This realization terrified me. As I said Vinith's words, and verbally knitted them together into a coherent story justifying his actions, things seemed to follow logically, and the horrific parts felt inevitable. "There are many people who seem to be perfectly normal, but under certain conditions, like those prevailing during war, their pathological side comes forward and dominates their behaviour" (DRAKULIC, 2004, p.81). People are capable of all kinds of things when they find themselves in extreme situations, and Vinith's life had been shaped by extremities of poverty, insecurity and violence. Should I have celebrated the fact that I was coming to see Vinith's point of view? Should I have felt horrified with myself? I am not even sure that these are the right questions—both seem like things I *ought* to have felt. [24]

Charting my own emotions towards Vinith is part of my ongoing construction of ethnographic knowledge (DAVIES, 2010a, p.94). When in the field and facing him directly, all I felt was disgust. I did not stop to consider that his claims may not be literally true, as there was no mistaking the brutal sentiment of someone who wanted them to be true. Now, following my departure from the field, my feelings towards Vinith are slowly changing. I am now surprised that I did not immediately doubt his words: how could one teenager kill 25 professional soldiers before they had time to return fire? And with the realization that his story was in some way exaggerated, and a show of bravado, I gained a clearer understanding of the fragility of his self-image. When I was in the same room as Vinith, my feelings of repulsion were overwhelming. With time, and the safety of being in my own surroundings, I find it easier to identify with him. The intensity of immersion in the field, while giving me anthropological data rich enough to invoke my hate, also inhibited my full understanding. I now recognize that my methodology continued into the writing phase of my research, as I persisted in paying attention to my own affect (ibid.). Paying attention to my emotions has ultimately helped me understand Vinith more richly than I could have without feeling such initial visceral hate (KLEINMAN & COPP, 2011, p.7). [25]

Regardless of the accuracy of his stories, anything I sincerely report about Vinith is *ethnographically true* while remaining inherently partial, incomplete, and mediated by the written text (CLIFFORD, 1986, p.7). Vinith showed me something ugly, but also something *truly true*, whether or not it is objectively true. I entered the field prepared to hear many things, but the ugly truth of Vinith's

attitude to war was something I was not prepared for. Vinith told me clearly that he values violent heroism. Many of the particulars seem to be fabricated, yet he was also extraordinarily honest about some issues which I would never have expected to learn about. He told me things I consider private, such as his income; he told me things I consider embarrassing, such as his ostracism by other villagers; he told me things I consider politically sensitive, such as his voluntary involvement in the civil war. [26]

Reflecting critically on my emotional engagement with Vinith was also valuable in encouraging me to reflect on different aspects of my position in the village. In retrospect, I worry that my expectations of rapport may have blinded me in my relations to other interviewees (KLEINMAN & COPP, 2011). Was I overly accommodating? Did I really feel comfortable with our power inequalities? Was I avoiding emotional truths? I now question why I got along so well with everyone else in the village. Why did I sympathize with them? Why did they open up to me? Did they say things to me because they cannot share them with other villagers? Did our closeness mask differences that we were not articulating? Do they think I represent all outsiders? Does my status give some legitimacy to the things they told me? What did they think I was offering that made me so attractive? (p.20). Focusing on hate as a problematic researcher-researched dynamic has also shed light on other apparently unproblematic relationships which I had in the field. [27]

"Selective empathy" (SHESTERININA, 2019, p.191), or different ways of treating interviewees according to researcher emotions in the field, impacts the kinds of conversations that are possible: "emotions influence our capacity for engaged listening, which allows respondents to surpass strong positions that they might hold, to explore dilemmas and uncertainties" (p.200). If we demonstrate empathic interest in the well-being our interviewees, and indicate sensitivity to their perspectives, they are more likely to open up and allow us to probe their accounts. But when we lack empathy for our interviewees in a post-conflict context, it limits our comprehension of the complexity of participation in violence (p.191), preventing us from gaining a nuanced understanding of people who inhabit other than the pre-conceived categories of "victim" or "perpetrator" (p.197). This makes my engagement with participants like Vinith vitally important, precisely because my emotional reaction to him was so different to how I felt about all the other villagers. [28]

4.2 Researcher emotions in ethnographic writing

It can be said that "ethnographic writing, by design, gets emotion wrong" (BEATTY, 2010, p.439). I want to avoid the systematic exclusion of emotions, the "methodological asceticism" (p.437) of traditional anthropology, which assumes an underlying reality stripped of all affect. To write that kind of ethnography is to ignore my engagement with Vinith in his particularity, and my messy everyday negotiations of my own self in the field. Removing these emotional layers strips back an important aspect of the meaning-making in my research. The strong emotions I have towards Vinith act as a sign that there is something important that I need to understand, and a methodological recognition of the

interconnection of fieldwork, emotion and writing which lose some of their value when separated from one another. [29]

The lack of disciplinary attention to emotions in fieldwork can be historically grounded in an "intellectualist myth" that method can be separated from the totality of researcher personality (DAVIES, 2010b, p.9), that acknowledging subjectivity is to give up status and become "unscientific" (p.6). From the 1960s, a shift away from valuing *objectivity* encouraged anthropologists to position themselves on-stage, allowing the expression of researcher emotions (CLIFFORD, 1986). Yet even the "reflexive turn" in the discipline from the 1980s overlooked the significance of "the researcher's *states of being* during fieldwork" (DAVIES, 2010b, p.1). The "confessional" style of ethnographic writing emphasizes the human qualities of the fieldworker, with all their flaws, biases and bad habits modestly self-identified (VAN MAANEN, 2011, p.75). Yet even in this style, emotions tend to be expressed with moderation, and the researcher is expected to like and respect those they research (p.80). [30]

The fiction that ethnographers are objective data collecting instruments underplays the significance of researcher-researched relationships, and the way we tell our stories is less authentic if our voice is overly censored by keeping parts of our experiences off-limits. Being open to the wisdom of emotions means being open to *all* of them, not just selecting the ones which we frame as positive emotions. As a researcher I play an active role in curating the stories gathered during fieldwork—yet I am constantly questioning my role in bracketing certain information as more or less palatable, in making creative choices while painting a picture of the people I spent time with rather than simply delivering information about them as data. [31]

It can be considered one of the "lies of ethnography" that we write about our interviewees as if they are all our friends, that we cherish the illusory image of "the friendly ethnographer" (FINE, 1993, p.268). I have decided to reflect openly on the disgust I felt, yet sharing and *honoring* hatred is emotionally challenging and disciplinarily risky. DAVIES advocated the power of alternative modes of learning, embracing "the human reaction" as an important methodological aspect of fieldwork (2010b, p.26). I do not want Vinith or my emotions about him to "vanish" as I write about my fieldwork (FINE, 1993, p.273). Yet this is a choice I have made from a privileged position: I can decide to reflect on my experiences with Vinith when I feel I am ready to cope with them, I can do so from the comfort of a home which is clean, climate-controlled, and has multiple sources of clean drinking water. I even earn a PhD based on my consideration of stories like Vinith's. Does Vinith have the luxury to think about me in his own terms? What has he got from our encounter beyond the novelty he expressed of talking to a foreigner? And what about other villagers who might experience hatred of Vinith or of others? At the very least, I need to take responsibility for creating the situation in which Vinith and I met, and own that the research project itself could be considered an act of metaphysical violence, as I attempt to seek order and meaning in the life stories of people such as Vinith (REDWOOD, 2008, §7). [32]

The asymmetry of my relationship with villagers should not be surprising for me, given the disciplinary framing of our conditions of encounter. Yet they seem to be a larger dilemma for me in the case of Vinith, as I feel so judgmental about him. I have tried to reconstruct Vinith's story as charitably as I can. I know that I personally hate him, and I am comfortable in owning this hate—it seems to me the most appropriate response to someone like Vinith. Yet although Vinith is atypical of the villagers I lived with, his involvement in the war is a familiar story of how individuals living in extreme situations can get drawn into violence. His poverty, lack of education, limited opportunities and lifelong exposure to brutality are strong social forces influencing his willingness to participate in warfare. I have constructed and presented the three stories in an attempt to tease out the extreme ways it is possible to represent Vinith, and also to articulate the privilege of my own disdain for violence, a bias that can easily permeate ethnographies of war without being owned. I have tried to comprehend Vinith within the brutal circumstances in which he grew up, where civil war was so normalized that it was not even specified in many of our conversations. This is a context in which any individual could become complicit in violence as a victim of circumstances rather than as a sinister decision. I have tried to relate to Vinith as someone making rational decisions within desperate circumstances. [33]

I do feel genuine compassion for Vinith as he continued to struggle to provide for his family. I respect him for his participation in interviews, and I am grateful for his trust in my ability to tell his story. I respect how frankly (albeit possibly disingenuously) he spoke to me, despite the danger that could follow. I respect him for surviving. Yet a part of me also wonders how different Vinith really could have been if he had grown up in a different context. During my fieldwork I had the strong impulse to avoid him, yet I was never afraid. But now, looking back, I feel that I should have been afraid, and that I played down the threat to enable me to keep on working. Perhaps the danger signals my body were giving me were in fact valuable information to secure my own survival.

> "My experience has taught me that the body seems to 'know' it's in the presence of something horribly wrong, even if my annoyingly argumentative mind is coming up with counterarguments and caveats. When I sat with the man who said he liked to kill people, I had the sensation that he could see inside my body, as if I had no skin; and the only reason he wasn't physically harming me was that he had decided to be polite" (STERN, 2020, p.575). [34]

The irony of the strength of my feelings is that it is precisely such loathing turned against another human being that can potentially justify the kinds of cruelty that I found so abhorrent. Disgust "can be a dangerous emotion because it dehumanizes the people we find disgusting" (EKMAN, 2003, p.178). Disgust may even be a predictor of inter-group violence (ROZIN, HAIDT & McCAULEY, 2016, p.827). Yet in feeling hate I was trying to position myself as opposed to those very things! In hating Vinith, I was behaving just like Vinith. I needed to find a way to hate his actions, rather than hating Vinith himself. Without denying the validity of my emotions, I needed to be mindful of not letting a lens of hatred poison me in

the way I relate to Vinith, to other villagers, and perhaps most importantly, the way I relate to myself. [35]

EKMAN's research indicated that in response to films of graphic medical procedures, most people respond with disgust; however, about 20% of participants express sadness and pain (2003, p.179). He suggests that we are instinctively revolted at the sight of blood and gore, but that our disgust response is suspended if we identify with the sufferer, in which case we are instead motivated to relieve their pain. Perhaps the divergence of these two responses is the key to understanding my emotional confusion regarding Vinith. I identify with him as a fellow human being, and feel compassionate towards him due to the suffering he continues to endure by living in poverty. I comprehend the desperateness of Vinith's plight and that my own morals are a luxury which many people in the world cannot afford, and yet I continue to feel aversion towards him as someone who is morally tainted for expressing himself with such fierce disregard for human decency. Even now, I want to both help him and escape from him. I see him as vulnerable yet also dangerous. [36]

Beyond trying to comprehend how similar I might be to Vinith, and how easily I could have made the same decisions as him if I had been in his situation, I feel that I owe him something. Vinith's trust in telling me his story, whatever his purpose and motivation, deserves a certain kind of repayment in my fair presentation of him. Yet, I find it difficult to write about Vinith at all without fear of betraying his trust. I am conscious of actively *managing* my hate. When I revisit my notes on Vinith, I find it hard to know what to do with this material. Although I persevered with the interviews and tried to treat Vinith as I treated everyone else, I am not confident in my acting ability. I was not as truly open and receptive as I was with everyone else. I feel that despite my best efforts, Vinith must have felt some of my hostility, creating barriers to our mutual comprehension of really understanding one another (LE COMPTE & SCHENSUL, 2010, p.234). [37]

4.3 Contextualizing researcher emotions across boundaries of time and place

The interrogation of my feelings of hatred, and the way my feelings have changed across time and place, has given me insight into other emotions I experienced in the field. As I try to grapple, both emotionally and intellectually, with the strength of my feelings towards Vinith, I have a new appreciation for the way his fellow villagers accommodated him. If I met someone like Vinith who had been raised in Australia, who had chosen violence despite having had many opportunities to live different values, I would feel hatred. But meeting him in a place with a complex and violent history, I realize with the advantage of hindsight that hate is not the appropriate emotion. With perspective, it seems clearer that all Sri Lankans have been victimized by the horrors of war, regardless of the level of their involvement in the conflict. Vinith himself exhibited some ambivalence about which spheres of his life are *real* when he told me how hard it was to reconcile his military identity with his family life, leading to his considering himself as worthless. This could be classed as a "catastrophic dissociation," in which "survivors are often left with the

impression, sometimes spoken aloud, sometimes a closely guarded shameful secret, that they have not, in fact, survived, or that even if they survived physically, they have not survived psychologically" (BOULANGER, 2014, p.114). [38]

While I still do not feel warmly towards Vinith, and in no way sympathize with what I consider his arrogant valorization of violence, I do feel more moderate in my emotions. When face-to-face with Vinith, I was outraged by him in his particularity. But now that I look at the overall situation, I feel a softening, a surrender to unfortunate truths. This is not to agree with his opinions in any way, or to suggest that they do not matter. Rather, it is to see him against the background of more than 30 years of brutality. People participate in violence for many reasons, often impelled by structural factors they are unable to articulate. Beyond the specificity of the Sri Lankan civil war, "many versions of masculinity in the world's varied cultures are constituted in the practice of fighting: to be a 'real' man is to be ready to fight and ultimately to kill and to die" (COCKBURN, 2004, p.34). Looking again with perspective, it feels difficult to be shocked by the life choices of any one person in the context of the kind of atrocities that have occurred in Sri Lanka in recent history. It feels inevitable that such a person would be one voice amongst the many voices I heard in the village. Beyond the immediacy of fieldwork, hatred is no longer the right word for what I feel. I feel exhausted by the effort of trying to understand. I feel weary of all the evil in the world. I feel the futility of even trying to articulate this feeling. And at the same time, I feel ecstatic at having the smallest glimpse into how the other villagers seem to be feeling, and my first overwhelming sense of the way villagers accommodate what they are powerless to change. [39]

HAGE suggested that in maintaining our movement between participation and observation, we need to be aware of an "emotional borderline" (2010, p.150) which is in fact much deeper into the culture than the imaginary "cultural borderline" (ibid.). The hate which I felt toward Vinith while I was in the field I seemed to feel as a gut reflex, yet it was clearly informed by my positionality as an Australian, as a woman, as someone who has grown up outside of a warzone, and in a developed country with the associated privileges of education and healthcare. The dynamic between us was also clearly impacted by my role as an outsider, and as someone whom villagers perceived as rich, privileged, and powerful enough to be able to influence intimidating bureaucracies. [40]

Rethinking my position in the village, and the emotional engagement I feel when representing Vinith's story after fieldwork, helps me to see him as fellow villagers told me that they see him—someone to avoid, but not to hate. I have reached this position through analysis as well as through emotion work, allied with the distance of time and place. This softening of emotion helps me to travel to the "emotional borderline" between the village culture of my fieldwork and my own culture. It makes me happy that I am reaching a deeper understanding of village sensibilities and fuller comprehension of my own positionality; it makes me sad that hating violence is no longer a viable position for most villagers. [41]

The strength of my emotions when relating to Vinith helps crystallize for me my own vacillation between two social realities, and how contradictory the demands are of making sense of others in a Tamil-Vedda village compared with in my home of Melbourne. To meet Vinith in Melbourne and not to hate him I would consider shameful—if he had grown up with the same privilege that I have experienced, of being able to neatly contain violence as wrong. But in Sri Lanka, under conditions of ongoing poverty, marginalization, and political uncertainty, such affective strength is a luxury and beyond reach. When I met him, in the immediacy of the experience, I felt hate. But I now view the way his neighbors respond to him as more appropriate—avoidance without confrontation, allowing village life to continue smoothly, and personal wounds to remain sealed. My initial emotional response is not haughty, and it is not wrong, but it is also not fit for small-scale tight-knit communities living in continuing precariousness. Paradoxically, I experienced each emotion in the setting in which it does not belong. In engaging analytically with the unexpected nature of my emotions in each place, I feel that I have a richer understanding of the field site, but also of the emotional demands of being an anthropologist: "it is the attempt to invest oneself in both social realities with their contradictory demands that creates the specificity of the ethnographic modality of being" (HAGE, 2010, pp.152-153). [42]

When we engage in fieldwork, we put our*selves* on the line: physically, emotionally, spiritually, socially, and intellectually. Ethnography is an adventure, but also an exercise in vulnerability. I was there. I had signed myself up for whatever living in the village might throw at me. I had tuned-in my body, being hyper aware of my surroundings, using my body as an instrument, and embracing the sensory overload. Yet my alertness to the strange and the new was constrained by a certain kind of passivity, a determination not to be judgmental, which left me wide open to the kind of distress I felt in the presence of Vinith. I was trying to both listen to my body and ignore my gut feelings. I was trying to accept things even before I understood them, sacrificing my personal preferences in the process. The loss of control I felt while spending time with Vinith revealed to me that in some ways I was not "doing fieldwork" at all, but that fieldwork was "doing me" (SIMPSON, 2006, p.135). [43]

There are always more challenging field situations imaginable. TURNBULL, who persevered studying the Ik[3] in extremely challenging circumstances, eventually dedicated his book to his participants: "For the Ik, whom I learned not to hate" (1973, p.1). He elaborated in his preface: "It is difficult to know how to thank the Ik; perhaps it should be for having treated me as one of themselves, which is about as badly as anyone can be treated. They did so with a curious elegance" (p.7). These words feel different as I re-read them after my own fieldwork. I do not consider myself to have been treated badly in the field, but TURNBULL's words resonate with me. I too was treated with a curious elegance, and similarly, I ultimately learned not to hate. In retrospect, I am grateful to Vinith for pushing me into a deeper awareness of the field. Vinith's extreme experiences have in some ways "exiled" him (BOULANGER, 2014, p.114) from connecting deeply with other

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3 The Ik are the eponymous "Mountain People" from TURNBULL's classic ethnography in Uganda (1973).

people, and "left a tear in the fabric of experience" (p.117). Yet working though the emotions I have experienced trying to reach a fuller comprehension of Vinith has also led me to deeper insights about the Tamil-Vedda community in which I lived. [44]

I now feel a heavy burden of both privilege and responsibility in being a storyteller, and my emotions are part of that story. "Confessional ethnographies" are commonly devalued in the discipline and kept hidden: frequently remaining unpublished, appearing in appendices, or following after realist ethnography (VAN MAANEN, 2011, p.81). Yet I have probed into the very sensitivities of affect I continue to experience, in the hope they may be pertinent for fellow researchers. While feelings of hate are not something I would want anyone to experience, learning to honor hatred is a lesson I am thankful for, and the emotions I have felt towards Vinith continue to challenge me in my own identity beyond my role as an ethnographer. The richness and diversity of people and stories we draw from the field push back against the researcher in multiple ways. When we embark on ethnographic research, we stand to gain something valuable, but also to lose something important. There is a risk and vulnerability involved, for both researched and researcher. If we engage wholeheartedly, ethnography changes our way of being alive. [45]

5. Conclusion

I have used the construction and presentation of three stories to actively engage with an aspect of my fieldwork that I have an impulse to conceal, using a narrative structure to consider how I continue to process feelings of disgust over time. I have charted my emotion work during fieldwork in my initial and subsequent meetings with Vinith and how they affected my positionality in the Tamil-Vedda fishing village. Then I considered my emotions post-fieldwork, as I engaged with my emotions as ethnographic data, within my ethnographic writing, and across boundaries of time and place. In discussing this taboo topic so openly, I have attempted to shine a spotlight on an aspect of research that often vanishes, concluding that hatred is in fact something valuable that we can identify, own, and even come to honor. Laying bare my own struggle is an exercise in vulnerability, and one that I hope inspires other researchers to engage with a full spectrum of emotions, and to experiment with multiple versions of every story, especially when we inhabit uncomfortable terrains. [46]

Acknowledgments

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Citation