

## **A letter to my teachers**

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In this letter, written nervously from the field years ago, I reflect on the challenges of conducting fieldwork and the sense of impossibility that marks any act of knowing. The letter articulates my struggles at the time to make sense of a particularly challenging period of fieldwork and to settle with the dizzying oscillations between intimacy and distance that mark my experience of fieldwork and my formal education. By virtue of its intimacy, the piece responds to feminist calls for vulnerability in fieldwork experiences and accounts of our confusion, failures, and emotional processes as field researchers.

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A letter to my teachers:

Things have been strange for a while now, some two years after leaving school to see what I might do with myself, to see what it is that my education might have prepared me for. I'm not sure I have much of an answer to the question, aside from the kind of trailing narratives I construct in the hopes that an answer might emerge for itself. If only because what it is that I faithfully return to in such storytelling— my education — seems to exist at such a boundary itself: emerging like meaning from syntax, casting itself off of well-orchestrated and accidental juxtapositions, rendered visible only in moments of confrontation, lying in wait in self-assured readings momentarily derailed by silence, or worse yet, by shadows and the echoing, wooly ambiguities that emit them. Learning being something then of the synthesis that takes this crooked, tired, unrecognized shape, hammered out of use and bare necessity, forged by deeply lived and felt contradictions.

It is in such moments as this one, taken and humbled by the absurdity of the world and the unpreparedness, the crudeness, of my language to speak to it, that I find myself ruminating on my formal education in ever new varieties of questioning and suspicion, but equally in deepening gratitude and amazement. The last several months here in India escape comprehension, in part because I rarely find a moment in which to try to comprehend what is happening, but more so because my teachers, this place and something wise and good in myself have beaten the nervous, grasping instinct out of me. I find myself so incredibly far away from what I know, from the kind of knowing practiced in a classroom that has rarely demanded much of me, that I am compelled to follow what is outside it, to trace it for myself, to see who I might become as a student of it, and too, to convey such a beyond to my teachers, in recognition that they have attempted the impossible in trying to illuminate it for me and in some small way, by now rendered microscopic and invisible to all of us, that they must have succeeded in doing so.

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How often is it that I have no idea what the people around me are talking about. This morning, my peer said something along the lines of “I am excited to get back into the field today.” I assumed what she meant was that she was happy to be on her way to a different office of the NGO to interview some woman, as, up until this point, she has had some trouble fulfilling her preconceived sample size or whatever the case. She makes ample use of this field metaphor; her most oft quoted phrase in moments of distress — running the gambit from communication meltdowns, insect invasions, sexual frustration, chronic exhaustion - is “well, what do you do, this is fieldwork,” the challenges of which she fits neatly into accounts of her previous “work in development.” It leaves me wondering exactly what kind of work she is doing and what on earth constitutes this field of hers.

Me, I feel like I've yet to arrive anywhere, any conceivable field keeps stepping away from me. A few weeks ago, I finally made it to a village to stay. I am the only foreigner

among my peers that has such an opportunity, as these places are sufficiently rural that there is no chance anyone speaks English, nor do many of the people who work here. My Hindi has become sufficient after a month of no one helping me do anything and having to make arrangements not only in Hindi, but within the culture of Indian communication. As if that weren't enough, this is a tribal area, so there isn't such a great chance that people speak Hindi either, I found out upon arrival to the village.

There wasn't much of a choice then but to try to learn this language Nimari, which shares some syntax at least with Hindi and some words. It is hard to tell if it is really a dialect or another language, as the people I am learning it from don't seem to have the clearest sense of what is Hindi and what is Nimari anyway. After a few days, I could begin to hear it and pick up some meaning, at least enough to intervene when the family was shit talking about me. Once, as I was falling to sleep, they were commenting about how I was laying on the cot with my feet on the folded blanket (this is the level of scrutiny they held me to) and were somehow offended by it. I waited 5 seconds and put the blanket on. "She just put it on," one reported, all of them surprised at the coincidence. "That is because I can understand you" I replied.

Sometimes someone would translate it into Hindi, sometimes they wouldn't. Two months ago, I didn't think I could do this project in Hindi; I figured I could do a lot operationally and conversationally, but I would need a translator because my ability to speak far outruns my ability to understand. And here I am, talking to these people in Hindi, them replying back in some mixture of Nimari and Hindi. By now, understanding comes easily. I don't quite understand how.

This is just one example of the litany of absurdities that come up on a daily basis as I try to complete this project. I don't have any idea of how it is getting on at all, how I manage to understand as well as I do, how anything manages to happen, or if it even has. My peers seem to be getting along well, though they have the luxury of having translators, interview protocols, and recording devices to do their work in an office somewhere. I can't bring anything: a bottle of water, mosquito repellent, a piece of paper, a cellphone, medicine, let alone an audio recorder. Writing arouses an immense amount of suspicion. There is no way around it here.

It can't be much different where they all are, but they all go on doing it anyway: recording, writing, one even typing the interview as it happens on a macbook pro, asking questions one after the other, filling their data gaps and populating their samples, feeding it all into some software. Shouldn't I be able to do the same?

I can't. I'm not sure I'm cut out for this kind of work. Or maybe I'm perfect for it.

So I get along as I do, wondering if I've accomplished anything, or fallen into some weird diversion. I'm not sure how I haven't completely lost my mind or collapsed by now. I am incredibly thankful to have contracted, a month ago by now, some kind of low-maintenance bacterial infection or unusually accommodating parasite that does not cause a fever. It appears as a rational, well thought out decision to let it live for a few more

weeks until I am done in the village, so that I don't have to reencounter the water after taking antibiotics. I've carved two new holes in my belt. When I lay down to sleep, I'm so tired I can't locate my body. But the heat is the heat and there isn't much else to do but pull weeds in the fields or make my way into strangers' houses and try to get along with it. The exhaustion became dangerous a month ago. But I've got to stay with it for a few more days. I've got to go back to the village once more, to willingly reenter into that slumping, dimly lit earthen house, theory freezing in place, my identity dispersing into poorly explained Hindi anecdotes of American life and rehearsed sociality, my strange, unexplained purpose tolerated but nonetheless scrutinized.

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I'll go back to school soon, and I am very happy for it. I crave the security of it, the shuffling around to classes, the solitude, the accumulation of books all around me, splayed open to the current page, one on top of the other, lying, revealing themselves like lovers, being read against each other: soil ecology in conversation with architecture, Buddhism reflecting on field methods, high theory and anti-art conspiring together, Dada and Burroughs cutting in with their well-reasoned nonsense, Nietzsche's mad prophecy of self, for some ten years, having the last word on most every subject, stacked in piles as precarious as the ideas they tempt.

How desperately I need their comfort - my life becoming simplified into a list of books to be read - to return to my room, a dimly lit laboratory of artistic and conceptual experiments, if only to make walls around it, to shut the door, to live in my own atmosphere, my own language, my own universe recondensing, to do something to contain the monstrous hybridity of this world in the neatness of books and words and theory. I've gotten too tangled up, too close to something these days. I need to return to school to study it from a distance, to render it recognizable, to find out how I might tame it or otherwise come to know it. I couldn't tell you just what I mean, but if I stay here much longer, I fear I'll lose myself in it, in some sudden, unanticipated encounter with knowing, in a spontaneous flare of heat or a final flash of emptiness or any moment at all, even the most unspectacular, in the impossible infinitude of this search.

For the object of my knowing keeps receding, slipping out of grasp, into another language, another layer, a world that has only begun to come into focus, and captivated, amused, I follow after it, playing into its unfolding logics. With time I'd reach it: I'll get fluent in Hindi, I'll find some way to learn Nimari (though there are no books on it), I'll live in the village, I'll get farther and farther away from myself tracking after it.

But somewhere I know there is no end to it. This sensation is creeping up on me, the irrelevance of my progress, the benchmarks that dissolve into the latest gestalt shift. Before it overwhelms me, I must slip away myself, extract myself from the strange world I've found myself in, layer by layer, to find a more distant home somewhere at the boundary. Because I am starting to suspect that knowledge is only this feeling of moving, of following, of coming upon, of grasping after, of opening up, of intoxication and if I were to stop and look at it straight on, the object would disappear altogether and abandon

me, the bastard divinity of knowledge's impossibility cast in ironic high relief by a naked bulb and another vaguely familiar Bollywood song.

How will I pull myself away from all these things too close? How will I return?

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I had a thought about theory once or twice as I walked in and out of the toilet in the village. It was a safe place for me, literally the only moments spent alone, stalling, crouched naked and soapy on a broken wooden stool, trying to align my body to catch as much water as possible, judiciously using a small bucket of water I'd fetched from the hand-pump down the lane. I, taking the posture of the ubiquitous man stripped to his boxer briefs at every village pump, arms wrapped around ourselves, covering every inch in soap, for a moment I recognized his body in mine.

For whatever reason, coming or going from that place, I was thinking about theory more than once, and how useless it seemed, maybe even vulgar, demanding something more of the mundane, insisting it mean something. How could it ever mean anything? Who was mad enough to see it?

But too I was enchanted, I wanted it to mean something and somewhere I knew it did. One day I was walking through the fields thinking about ethnography as I do these days, imagining how much there was to notice, to learn here, in conversations meandering between two languages, in practices and gestures and tattooed faces. And I looked at the earth - red, dry and rocky - and thought it surely had a story too, it knew everything I wanted to know, and the corn too, this land and all its inhabitants having registered time, everything having been seen. And how much there was to this world, history and its worn accumulations and ambivalent meanings bearing themselves unabashedly, living on, growing uncontrollably, monsoon or not, everywhere a live end, and all of this ceaseless carrying on was there to be read, if only I knew its logic, its language. I thought then that I might learn it.

And the hot air, it too became thick with meaning, which meaning I wasn't sure, but I sensed it there, hanging, saturated, hovering over an era, if only the slow time of this place or the microscopic, fleshy epoch beginning in me, how present, how heavy it was that it forced a breath from us all: me surrendering to a sigh, a young buffalo, tied up forever, looking off with sweet innocence in his eyes but impossible suffering too, knowing his fate, taking it in, becoming it, some bastard alchemy turning it into flesh, coughing and bellowing it back into the air; time inhaled into humid plaster, swelling until it cracked, falling in pieces to the ground where ants were forever occupied disassembling and carrying away all kinds of beings before you even knew who they were or that they were gone. There was something to be read in all of it, its ceaseless, grotesque, pulsating directionless movement, time itself spitting out words, or were they just sounds I'd come to recognize, mistaking recognition for understanding. This story was happening so fast it would never be told, no one seeing it, but anyway some

unavoidable accumulation taking place, a lazy, earthy circulation of its endless senseless details.

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For a few years I've been thinking about poetry. It is a secret theorizing of mine which rarely leaves my inner world for lack of an audience with whom I need not explain myself, with whom there need not be distinctions between poetry and whatever else one might say or think or do. Where are they now? One dead, one gone irretrievably, beautifully mad, our own Christ, and the other otherwise lost to me. If they were here with me now, I'd grab them by the wrists and tell them what I'd seen today: that, just as I had suspected, though I couldn't understand it, and I still don't, that the world did indeed operate on poetry, that the unspeakable, penetrating suggestion of meaning, the quiet justice of the unapproachable might in fact be the founding premise of this world.

And just as I say it, as I think it, everything is imbued with a stupid, intolerable, sickeningly sweet fullness, my limbs shaking with my senseless, giddy faith. How could it be that, as a direct consequence of such a theory, that this verse goes on revealing itself, me frantically scribbling it down, tossing in punctuation, wedging myself into its ruptures, hoping to conserve it, to contain it; hesitating, taking rest at the line breaks, looking back for a last glance of this world, aware, nervous that the moment of irreversible transformation is dawning, that it will render everything, most of all, this innocence, unrecognizable, all according to the infinite logic that moves it with everything else: the unending, senseless need to become.

So isn't really anything then, this learning, this knowing. Maybe just a moment of recognition in flight, the sensation of moving through time or space maybe, both coming to denote something of this dimensionless, wholly unimaginable proliferation of meaning.

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God, how I want to leave this world-too-close, to escape it before it stops moving, before it consumes me (I won't tell you how close it has come before) to return to my quiet, safe intellectual life. But what an empty, impossible, stark moment I've lead myself to with these words. How will I ever return?

What will I possibly do in school? I hope they don't bother me with too much; I'd rather be left alone with it to sketch out my own curriculum, one that throws me out and catches me back in tides, dissonance and synthesis taking turns, my alienation and my faith constituting the most intimate dialectic imaginable: fissures and disjunctures, upswellings and cascades of meaning, overflowing voids and empty languages that, if they don't tempt or force a resolution themselves, might at least tear open a space in me of contradiction, of impossibility, of creativity, learning to contain such a paradox in myself being the only way I might come to understand something big and impossible and invisible. Perhaps you can understand how intimate of thing it is to me, my education.

But in any case, I'll understand well enough whatever it is they want me to, for whoever's sake, as per the required measures. Maybe something will come of it, how would I know, how could anyone.

But how I need them too, my teachers, if only to bear the burden with me. The worst among them issuing their petty traumas, forcing upon us the kinds of contortions that are only useful in demonstrating what one is not and what one fears becoming. Those with some vision that try, or even manage, to point toward something, if only their own idiosyncratic imaginaries and their classifiable, though unreplicable syncretic meanings, maybe it is them who might understand this education of mine. Perhaps they might comprehend what a delicate, risky operation it is to intervene in another's language, in another's world, careful not to disrupt its shaky architectures and ecologies, in the hopes of exposing its latent possibility.

Perhaps they might grasp the more pressing concerns of one's education, namely: who will I become there? There won't be anyone there to bear the weight of my language, this monstrous, unmanageable glut of meaning at the heart of me, a pinprick below the surface. Maybe they'll have me forget it, or sensing the winds of its extirpation, it will bury itself down somewhere deep, only surfacing occasionally in an anxious scribbled poetic protest or a hastily homemade tattoo, its secret symbols refusing explanation even to me, asserting themselves, emerging from the shadows of my learnedness, guarding a brushy territory at the edges that refuses to be cultivated, let alone rationalized.

I'll be left to walk around then, coming and going in silence save for the cautious suggestion of a building concern, wondering if their world is colonizing mine or only transforming me, how I might know one from the other, I'm not sure and maybe after all there isn't any difference. Anyway, it is all just motion, time passing, imprinting itself, eras and their thoughts, their stories, their selves, cementing and rupturing, never any closer nor any farther to anything, not even to myself. The only sign of progress being more and more of these words, setting off from me, but never quite leaving or arriving, never revealing what they are for, what they know.

Armed, filled, with them and with nothing else, what will I ever do in this place or in any other?

What is it that is to come to be of this mind?