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ESSAY

Special Section: Fieldwork Confessionals

"I've never told anyone that before …"

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I met Juan in the summer of 2019 at the Clínica de Comunidad Sinaí, a men's drug and alcohol rehabilitation center in Sinaloa, Mexico. His ongoing struggle with methamphetamine addiction formed the prelude to his time at Sinaí, and he had, his mother informed me, gotten carried away with the *malos recursos* offered by the cartels. Juan's story was certainly one about the kinds of spectacular violence often linked to the cartels. But it had far less to do with the groups than nearly any other story of armed violence that was shared with me during the three months that I spent in the clinic. Nevertheless, the threads that wove their way into the fabric of his life manifested and permuted the epistemes of violence that privilege violence-as-currency in the masculinized neoliberal order in which he lived (Valencia, 2010).

My first interview with Juan was just over three hours long and took place about halfway through my time living in the center with the 33 "patients," rotating attending medical staff, counselors, security officers, and a priest. Juan and I sat in the air-conditioned meeting room that served as my workstation while I was there and passed the first 30 minutes in relaxed conversation. He spoke with ease about his childhood experiences—even when the physical violence of his parents marked his remembering of those experiences as they had so long ago marked his body. When he began to talk about his wife of seven years, however, the nature of the interaction decisively changed. He looked at me and started to cough and choke so much that I walked over to the fountain to get him a glass of water. "It was so difficult," he mustered through his repeated throat clearing. He worked to make enough money to support the household, but she wanted to work as well. She had said it was to bring more money in, but …

I began to suspect other things.

He continued to cough, and the conversation paused. I offered to end the conversation, but he waved me off.

It's the air conditioning.

… which would have made sense but for the fact that he had spent the last 30 minutes with no issues at all and only the narratives of his wife's infidelity were those punctuated with coughs and strained airflow.

With few exceptions, the next 45 minutes of the interview appeared to be nothing short of excruciating for Juan as he recounted his wife's multiple affairs and his shame as knowledge of them spread throughout his town. The sheer force of physical will that he exerted to get the words out of his mouth was evident in the massive inhalations and exhalations that preceded each increment of his narrative journey. He often paused. For a very. Long. Time. So strange how silence can sound like weight, having a density that attracts in the way that matter does: everything, something, *anything* but more silence. I acutely experienced my own struggle to not fill those eternal silences with sound. Both in the original interview, and listening again to the recording, it was so clear exactly which kind of pause preceded confessional content.

*The naked pictures of her passed through the whole town. …People started calling me a cuckold (*chivo*).*

But Juan and his wife worked through it together with much difficulty, and things were better for a time.

Pause.

Silence.

Cough.

Another rumor made it back to me.

I had long ago turned off the air-conditioner, so there were no other sounds in the room save for the soft whoosh of a car driving by on the single-lane highway outside of the facility's walls. I watched, and when I felt uncomfortable about staring at him, I looked down at my notebook. His deep inhale and exhale blew open the door to the next chapter.

I exploded, and a monster came out.

The pace of speech quickened, and his wracked demeanor loosened as Juan described his actions. He stalked the men who had slept with his wife and circulated her nudity to the world, and on three separate occasions, went for them and killed them.

This is something my mother doesn't know.

He alternately dragged a man behind a truck, shot one multiple times in his testicles, disemboweled and scalped their bodies, and dumped their cars in the desert. Juan recounted to me the intricate details with the tonal style of a how-to guide for stalking targets and burying bodies and cars to elude detection.

My parents and my wife don't know these things.

He still keeps his trophy from those nights hidden somewhere. Once he found out his wife was pregnant, he went back to her and continued to launder money for the Sinaloa Cartel.

Moving on to more immediate matters toward the end of the interview, we debated which martial arts movie I would screen on the next movie night, since I had arrived with a most precious tool of fieldcraft—a Netflix subscription—and the men had tired of watching the same rotation of five DVDs Sinaí had in the library. He stopped behind me, pausing, on the way out. His silence tapped me on the shoulder, and I turned around.

I've never told anyone that before.

I nodded, finally pulling my weight by adding to the silence. His face relaxed and he smiled. I turned around and we both walked out.

* * *

This moment with Juan exemplifies a particular genre of fieldwork confession, which I am calling the *first disclosure*: those moments marked as the first utterance of a story that the speaker claims has never been told. It is the trying on of an act in a moment of suspension: simultaneously within the confessor's everyday lived experience but outside of the prescribed order of his social worlds and their potential consequences. Immediately, questions surface as to whether this was "really" the first time that Juan had told this story. While an inevitable curiosity, the force of the first disclosure comes not from its veracity but from the fact that it is how the interlocutor has decided to formulate the interaction with the researcher. It may be an intentional move with strategic intent—e.g., shifting relational or epistemological footings—or it may actually be the first time that he has given voice to past action. Regardless, certain individual and relational work is being done by this claim and thus warrants a distinct a categorical framing in which analysis of these dynamics might find their home.

Contextualized, Juan's first disclosure is about violence against the threat (or realization) of ongoing violence nestled into deeply Christian-influenced understandings of confession. I argue, however, that more than merely blurring the boundary between the religious and the secular, the embodied confession—Juan's words together with the somatic symptoms that accompanied them—also troubles dominant regimes of knowledge. Our discipline's attendance to embodied voice, method, and moment is well-suited to accommodate the multiple, ambiguous, and related aspects of such encounters. My encounter with Juan offers a chance to think about the commission of and return from acts of spectacular violence and what their recounting does for relationships to the self and the other.

BEYOND THE SECULAR CONFESSION

Foucault (1978) argues that confessions are a technique used to produce truth that long ago exceeded the ecclesiastical realm. The act of confessing modifies the confessor, in part by necessitating that they extract the depths of themselves under certain conditions of relations of power where certain consequences are at stake. It is not insignificant, however, that the verb "to confess" means at once "to disclose one's faults" and "to hear a confession." Thus, more than a modification of the confessor alone, the speaker and the listener are convened through this single action and, as a result, intersubjectively remade: *our confessing*.

Elsewhere in this collection, Forero Angel argues convincingly for the indispensable role of secrets in the constitution of the kinds of ethnographic intimacy required for our work. Furthermore, these dual meanings collapse onto one another in the same subject: I come to know my own interior depths by listening to myself confess them to you. In this way, the fieldwork confession is performative. It is both a moment of disclosure between interlocutor and anthropologist and a social act embedded in relationships that does things in the world. It can also bear an instrumental purpose, the content of which depends on the context of the utterance.

The force and effects of the fieldwork confession, however, exceed any such purpose. It is easy to imagine reasons why Juan may have chosen that moment to utter this first disclosure, not least plausible of which are the fact that I was an outsider who promised anonymity and bore no direct future effect on his everyday life. Perhaps something about my own confessions of self and story in the preceding days had hinted at a sympathetic audience?

Extant work in the field offers inroads into thinking about first disclosures in a way that force our gaze beyond the air-conditioned conference room in the Sinaloan desert and onto considerations of different domains and orders of magnitude. For example, in Rakopoulos's (2018) work on the Sicilian Mafia, murders committed by the *pentiti*, or penitent sinner, bind them to the organization's social body. Through the act of confessing, the *pentiti* removes the relations and obligations co-produced by his position within the mafia, which had been held in place by his prior silence. This was not the case with Juan, however. His crimes were not committed within the realm of organized criminal activity (though their successful execution was made possible by access to arms and know-how that such activity made possible). In confessing, he was thus neither released from nor at risk of retaliation from these groups. If the acts bound him more tightly to the social body of the Sinaloa Cartel, it was only through his refined ability to execute such acts of violence in a labor market that valued a man by his ability to do so (Valencia, 2010). Thus, for Juan, breaking that silence did not attain the same effects as it did for the *pentiti* of the Sicilian Mafia. My positionality rendered his confession entirely useless with regard to any institutionally sanctioned protection or absolution that may motivate the mafia *pentiti*.

It is also relevant that his confession was embedded within a context that is overwhelmingly Christian. Many of those in power—institutionally, politically, communally—were devout in their faith. The rehabilitation center where we met was funded by a private donor who prioritized the role of the Catholic faith in supporting the reformation of these individuals. This commitment was evidenced both by assertions to that effect by the program director and by the fact that the on-site church (in a relatively small town in which there was another church nearby) was nearly 50 percent of the size of the remaining built structures combined. The church was also the focal point when the facility gate opened, since the parking lot led up to its doorstep and the meeting room where I conducted my interviews sat in the literal shadow of the building. Even as Juan worked through this first disclosure that offered neither freedom nor absolution, his eyes rested on the front façade of the church as he gazed off into the distance, recalling.

Thus, the fieldwork confession as a subgenre nestles within myriad interlinkages between lived experiences, intersubjectivity, and context. The confessions of the *pentiti* of the mafia and the sinner of the Catholic faith both change the status of the individual (expelled, absolved); the fieldwork confession constitutes a reworking of relationships to the self and the other that produces emergent ways of knowing with transformative possibilities. One aspect of this knowing comprises the somatized phenomenological space between the researcher and interlocutor.

BODIES

Confessing—disclosing one's faults *and* hearing a confession—constitutes the "bodying forth of words" (Das, 2006). As Juan told his story of betrayal and revenge for the first time, a concatenation of that violence worked its way through his body, which had served as both a canvas for and an instrument of mundane and spectacular violence. If confessions require effort and revelations require overcoming resistance (Foucault et al., 1988), Juan's tortured recounting of his wife's infidelities and the chaos and pain being a known cuckold caused him could not have better fulfilled these requirements.

His obvious existential discomfort was met to some degree with my own. Though his lengthy and minutely detailed elaborations on acts of killing and dispensation were troubling, my own embodied struggle was not with processing the gore but with the "disciplined staying put" (Dave, 2014, 444) in the face of the self-sustained violence (and silence) of his recounting of the betrayal that preceded those acts. Contorted expressions, a tightened airway, and a clear desire to crawl out of his own skin: his first disclosure manifested relational and physical legacies of his past experiences with violence, rage, and shame. Reminiscent of Das's (2006) writings on whether pain can be felt in another person's body, Juan's confession made a claim on the listener, calling for response and recognition.

At the same time, the narrative of his homicides flowed into and through us—threads of violent knowledge (distinct from knowledge of violence) weaving together our "social skins" (Povinelli, 2006; Turner, 2012) and remaking our relationship to one another. In contrast to what I might have expected to constitute the troubling aspects of his story—the calculated pursuit of revenge, violence, and gore—it was instead the infidelity that wracked his body. This disjuncture between expectation and experience troubled my own preconceptions and, in its wake, co-produced my own shifting sense of self and understanding of the world. There were no heavy breaths and no pregnant pauses when he spoke of killing. He shared with me how he scalped one man and opened another's belly in a way that permitted only a slow spillage of his intestines in the same tone that he explained the daily toils of cattle ranching. If degree of confession were assessed only by degree of bodily exertion, it would seem that Juan's confession was elsewhere in the narrative.

SECRETS

This difference in demeanor, affect, and physicality prompted me to wonder what exactly it was that Juan was confessing.

I've never told anyone that before. Murder.

But his body suggested otherwise.

The first disclosure constitutes the inflection point between secrecy and circulation. Under certain conditions, the act can exonerate, redeem, purify, liberate, or offer the promise of salvation—all possibilities for the recrafting of the individual self (Foucault, 1978, 62). But fieldwork confessions, in general, evade this crafting in any formal sense given the positionality of the researcher, since she is neither priest nor juror. Instead, they occur in a space of suspension and can serve as the experimental field upon which the confessor tries on the act.

There are risks, however, associated with such experiments in violent and fragile contexts: the wrong people get the wrong idea about our conversation, Juan changes his mind about how good an idea it was to share this secret with me, or my own divulgence of the details of his secrets attracts the wrong set of eyes. Concerns about trauma, distress, (counter)transference, and retribution also surface. Furthermore, the protections of the Catholic confession booth and juridical trades of confession for leniency are not in place. In some settings, breaking codes of silence represents an act of treason or cowardice (Rakopoulos, 2018). Thus, even within the privacy of a private rehabilitation center's closed conference room, Juan's disclosure was not without its risks.

It does not necessarily matter what either of us thought was being confessed, nor does it matter whether it was all true. Confessions exceed their denotational content. They do things for identity and personhood (e.g., "killing who you are" in the Sicilian Mafia) (Rakopoulos, 2018). They also produce particular kinds of emic truths beyond projects that are overdetermined from the outside (e.g., pastoralism, punitivism) and potentiate an inchoate politics of becoming (Dave, 2014). In this way, Juan's first disclosure was performative in that it constituted particular kinds of relationships to knowledge and the other and of becoming together in both predictable and novel ways.

THREADS

Juan's enactment and my witnessing together formed an intimate moment of relational (de)construction. As he tried on the telling of this tale with me, he remade his relationship to self through articulating the story of his past actions and reactions. My witnessing this telling and processing the details of what was being told permanently reconfigured our relationship to one another. *Our confessing*—a mix of built environment, institutional context, research questions, speech acts, and personal histories—"thinned the human skin and thickened relationality" (Dave, 2014, 444).

I invoke Dave's theorizing on witnessing, developed in the context of work with animal activists in India, where she interrogated how they intentionally engage in acts of witnessing animal suffering in order to motivate their work. In her work, the act of witnessing is understood as being there when others might turn away, implicating oneself in the outcome of certain events and electing to be present for violence (Dave, 2014). By inviting Juan into a conversation about his life, I positioned myself as, among other things, a witness to his tales. Elsewhere in this collection, McLachlan delineates how the passivity implied in the notion of witnessing is complicated by the relational, affective, and dynamic motives and consequences attendant to the fieldwork confession. Thus, though witnessing may have motivated my presence that day, I inevitably surrendered parts of myself to him: those parts that might be touched, troubled, and hailed by the stories he had to tell and the embodied emotions manifested through his telling of them. I was not alone in this vulnerability; it was a mutual surrender, albeit with asymmetric stakes. Juan opened himself up to the pain of revisiting these memories, my potential negative reactions, and the possibility of punitive consequences should I report his story to the authorities. Beyond that, it fundamentally and irrevocably altered the qualitative elements of our relationship to each other and to others beyond our conversation that day. The violent threads extended from one frayed edge of the tapestry of his life and wove themselves into my own—and into that of anyone who may read these words.

These threads formed the connective tissue of a shared secret between us that bore new forms of knowing and relating in the world outside of the prescribed pedagogies of rehabilitation, recovery, and redemption. For example, on a few occasions, another patient named Reuben regaled me and others with animated recountings of the number of people he had killed and the ferocity with which he had done so. He spoke at one point over a small cluster of us huddled in a circle in the smoking section of the courtyard about how his clothes were bright red from all the blood after he had disemboweled someone that had deigned to set up his own meth production lab in already controlled territory. Juan, however, had previously described in graphic detail the greenness of the fluids that emerge from that area of a cleaved body and, separately, told me that this patient frequently lied or exaggerated his exploits. In this moment, we shared a look of recognition and acknowledgment with one another through the cigarette smoke that hung in the night air between us. That I had been discursively marked as the first and only person to know his secret connected us in that moment. It had reconstrued the relationship between us (I trusted him more because he had trusted me) and shaped how I understood (believed) Reuben's tales.

A Foucaultian read on confession leads to an examination of the ways in which confession-as-technique remakes experience as evidence that reproduces dominant regimes of knowledge-power. The polyvalent character of Juan's first disclosure moves us away from the notion that his words and our confessing upheld a single regime of truth—be that ecclesiastical, juridical, or otherwise. It instead opened emergent ways of knowing about experiences with relational and physical violence-and their sequelae- for being in the world and potentiated emergent transformative possibilities. Born out of the *malos recursos* that his mother had worried about, his embodied confession provided an instantiation of the same for the ethnographer—a "bad resource" that she might use to plumb questions of pain and the weight of experiences with violence. Thus, to mark a narrative as a disclosure for the first time is to set forth an entire entanglement of experience and relationality that can never be known until it is put into words. It is to coax a fish out of a net that drags in the whole sea behind it.

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