

### INTRODUCTION

A sharp intake of breath, and then: “Don’t put this in your book.” A cheeky grin, and then: “I know I shouldn’t say this.” A subtle shift in posture, affect, tone: “You need to hear this, but you didn’t hear it from me.”

Such uttered and embodied cautions frame an ethnographic genre that we call the *fieldwork confessional*. This is a genre marked by partial knowledge and moments of conditional disclosure, when our interlocutors compel a kind of intimacy with strings. These moments skirt the edges of revelation. They both underscore and bracket the disclosures that come next. And in this double move, fieldwork confessionals call us to attention: on the one hand, to the charged speech being offered up before us; on the other, to the fourth wall that these offerings break, cutting through “the field” to its presumptive aftermath and insisting on a say in what it means to do ethnography.

Fieldwork confessionals thus proffer lessons about the social worlds we study—about what is speakable and sensible in those worlds, about what it means to hold the admissions of another, about how bonds are formed and frayed along the way. But in this special section, we pay particular attention to what they reveal about the knowledge practices that compose contemporary anthropology.

First, why confession? The word derives from the Latin *con*, “together,” and *fateri*, “to admit.” This awkward and evocative construction, “admitting together,” is perhaps uniquely suited to the awkward and evocative moments from which we write—moments of critical co-production and thickened intersubjectivity. It presses questions like: Is admission predicated on togetherness? Is togetherness admission’s inevitable result? Must every admission, together, be mutual? What does admission do outside the bounds of togetherness it draws? And in a field structured by solo authorship and guarded borders between field and desk, what does it mean, and what would it take, to admit together in our writing?

To begin, the frame of “admitting together” draws attention to relations made and unmade through confessional encounters. Sometimes, fieldwork confessionals generate intimacy. At other times, they announce intimacy’s hard edge. Many confessions we confront do both, enacting relational demands that authors are not always able, or willing, to meet. We glimpse confessions premised on love as an opening to reciprocity, intensifying bonds but also binds. We heed confessions of violence that draw researchers into contingent, complicated closeness. Through these and other forms, we find that the fieldwork confessional is never just about a whisper’s content; it speaks equally to the forces that elicit whispers to begin with and direct their subsequent effects (Luna, 2018). To focus on the fieldwork confessional therefore affirms the ongoing centrality of vulnerability to ethnographic insight (Behar, 1996), while complicating intimacies often understood as foundational to ethnographic expertise (Hanson and Richards, 2019; Mahmud, 2013; McGlotten, 2013).

“Admitting together” also highlights the doubleness of writing the fieldwork confessional: we are contending at once with what is confessed to us and with what we might ourselves confess. Though ostensibly about the former, confessions raise the specter of the latter by centering our presence and our purpose in the field. The exhortation, *Don’t put this in your book*, for example, signals an interlocutor’s keen attention to our representational power and makes an intervention in that power. It places conditions on a piece of writing that does not yet exist, which may shape that text more profoundly than would any whispered speech.<sup>1</sup> If ethnographic storytelling has historically meant unfolding social secrets (Jones, 2014), and more recently been punctuated by refusals of the same (Simpson, 2014), then fieldwork confessionals push us past this dyad. Instead, they foreground complex co-productions and relations marked by instability. Building on long-standing questions of representational power (e.g., Behar and Gordon, 1996; Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Starn, 2012)—without taking for granted who gets to hold it (Jackson, 2013)—these essays center our interlocutors’ role in shaping the narratives that we produce. But we are not staging another *Writing Culture*. Here, the challenge to our work precedes the writing process and comes, moreover, from beyond the halls of anthropology.

And within the halls of anthropology? We must admit that power is a fickle thing here, too, whose reach exceeds representation and whose effects cannot always be recorded. Whispers structure disciplinary life as much as they permeate our research. This is another sense in which the fieldwork confessional works double-time, naming the unspeakable stories shared with us and those we may or may not wish to share about ourselves. So, while we honor our interlocutors’ opacity without exception throughout this collection, maintaining gaps in the ethnographic record and keeping confidentiality intact, authors take a range of stances on our own transparency. In particular, we consider what disclosures are welcomed on the part of ethnographers, which are demanded, and which remain difficult (if not impossible) to make. It seems it is not only “the field” but also “our field” that compels confessions and requires silences—“our field” that spins around a range of “formally unknowable stories” (McLachlan, this section) that might undo us if they entered into text or speech.

Finally, “admitting together” opens pathways for co-thinking and co-writing too long marginalized within this discipline. We are hardly the first to name this problem (see, e.g., Berry et al., 2017), but here we mean two things specifically. First, we have already marked how our interlocutors participate in the final products of our work. Recognizing their interventions as meaningful, if at times unsettling, acts of *authorship* invites a different conversation than anthropologists have long rehearsed about our own authority. Second, our—and here we speak as a more intimate “us,” us editors, us authors, not us anthropologists—ability to grasp these dynamics in the field and grapple with them on the page has meant building a multivocal but intentionally quiet space over several years. That space has held our own admissions and omissions, writing games and weighty conversations, mutual challenges and material support. It has taken time, trust, play, and a clumsy breakup with the fiction of autonomous voice to land us on this page, together. We hope, in the future, to share more of the “how” behind this collaboration because this lonely discipline needs more of it.

For now, we welcome you into this collection of partial revelations. It is our suspicion that many readers will see slivers of their own experience in the following pieces. Small asides cordoned off from everyday talk. Voices that become whispers even when no one else is in the room.

Bodies that inch close as the confession takes its shape. Eyebrows that rise as if to say: there is more here than can ever be said. Moments when knowledge is marked as covert and then shared anyway. It is their impulse to dwell upon these moments that unites the contributions, which span a range of regional contexts and confessional forms (including admissions of violence, love, contempt, state secrecy, and more). Together, they reflect on the messy relational processes through which ethnographic truths cohere and power's coherence breaks down. And they make a case for understanding the fieldwork confessional as a genre that challenges all sorts of commonsense regarding what it means to do ethnography today.

## BOOTH, PRECINCT, CLINIC, FIELD

To speak of "confession" is to lug in some heavy baggage, given other likely points of reference. From the courtroom to the clinic, confessional modes of knowledge production structure many hierarchical regimes. They "sign . . . the truth" of one's sin, one's crime, one's trauma, to invoke Foucault's (1977, 39; 1978) foundational account. And if done right—according to generic rules about how such speech acts become felicitous (Austin, 1962)—they begin the work of realigning a confessor with orders of normativity.

In the American criminal-legal context, for example, confessions may only be admitted into court as evidence if they are "voluntary," "knowing," and "intelligent" (this, at least, in the story the US justice system tells about itself). Confessing to a crime does not, of course, absolve a "criminal," but it does convey a deference to the law and a plea for forgiveness by the law that can at times result in lighter sentencing (on these dynamics in transnational contexts, see Bartel, 2018). In its ecclesiastical form, confession is no less rule-bound nor certainly less normative (and it too can be a site of grave abuse; O'Neill, 2019). Addressed to a priest as a holy sacrament, the Catholic confessional shepherds the penitent from a state of sin to a state of grace; it folds them back into the body of the Church. In classical psychoanalytic practice, confessional modes of self-accounting open onto the truths coded in neurotic symptoms, whose recognition enables resolution (Freud, [1920] 1966; for a critical account of this framework, see Carr, 2010). In each of these contexts, the presumption is that what is being disclosed in confession is the self of the confessor, that such a self can be restored through that disclosure, and that the truth of the confession lives within the manifest or latent content of one's speech.

Anthropology has historically dealt in some of these presumptions, and it would be easy to repeat them here. It is also surely true that, like their canonical reference points, fieldwork confessionals elicit guilt, shame, trust, truth, repair, and transgression. But there are many reasons not to identify as cop, priest, or therapist in response to the challenges they bring.

For one thing, doing so would invest us, as representatives of our normative institutions—our universities, our journals—with the power to "sign truth" and condemn or liberate our interlocutors. For another, fieldwork confessionals are fundamentally ambiguous things. Held apart from everyday speech by the self-conscious prelude, or what Ahmann (this section) calls "the bracket," these utterances open questions, rather than fix answers, regarding who or what is being disclosed, how and why disclosures should be apprehended, and where power lies in any given scene. So while at first glance, moments of confessional disclosure may appear to snap ethnographer and interlocutor into their most prototypical arrangement (the person telling and the person being told), they are always about more than what is said. Instead, each marks a pointed and often strategic intervention into the project of knowledge production, disrupting any pretense that ethnography means merely "listening."

Fieldwork confessionals also interrupt one of the organizing fictions of our discipline—that we move from "the field" to "the desk" and that we decide the terms of that movement—by calling across the space between these sites and the subject positions they imply. It is not at all the case that the ethnographer simply receives the confession of another and goes off to draft the truths contained therein. Confessions are just as often offered by us, about what it means to do ethnography. Consider moments in touchstone texts when the personal overtakes the professional and eventually reveals a more perceptive analytical approach (Behar, 1996; Rosaldo, [1989] 1993). Consider the generic confession of cultural incompetence that opens the generic narrative of ethnographic mastery. Consider, too, how confessions of one's closeness to a topic can sometimes be the price of admission for making claims about that topic, hitching an ethnographer's authority to her willingness to give her full self over to the discipline (Huang et al., 2018; Mariner, 2020).<sup>2</sup> The fieldwork confessional comprises all of these.

In this collection, then, we sketch the contours of a genre that traverses field and desk, world and text. The fieldwork confessional names at once a quintessential kind of field-based encounter and a set of habits that structure how we navigate the aftermath of those encounters, including in writing. In holding these together, we draw on approaches to genre that look beyond text-objects and toward lived patterns that manifest in the world as well: a mode Lauren Berlant (2011, 6) describes as "watching something unfold, whether that thing is in life or in art."<sup>3</sup> The following essays therefore trace the work of fieldwork confessionals from situations of actual speech (where we ponder what about our fieldwork habits elicits such disclosures) to disciplinary practices of knowledge production (where we query the work confessions do in ethnographic texts). The essays also grapple with the intersubjective entanglements that bind us to, and across, these twinned sites of disclosure, asking what ambivalent attachments of our own the fieldwork confessional reveals.

In short, if the confession as ideal type names a genre that does normative work—making it possible to absolve sin, to punish crime, to resolve symptoms—then the fieldwork confessional opens up a stranger world. A world of profound irresolution that makes us want to pause and contemplate what is being ruptured, what orders of predictability opened through disclosure. These confessions make claims on power and take risks in relationships, raising not-at-all rhetorical questions about whose interests are directing inquiry. What is being asked of us as ethnographers in these moments? To whom, and to what, are we being held to account? The fieldwork confessional draws us into ethical arrangements from which there is no easy out: a truth of one kind compromises another, an offering compels reciprocation, a shared secret proves impossibly heavy. These sticky moments demand that we stick *with* them. When we do, we may find that they have at least as much to do with us as with the lives and worlds of other people.

## WRITING FIELDWORK CONFESSIONALS

Our shared desire to pause in these vexing moments—or, more honestly, our failure to move on from them—forms the basis for this collaboration, which began in the early days of the pandemic. It was a time of intense and intensely uncertain isolation that found us in various states of incoherence: knocked swiftly out of rhythm and completely out of touch with the world beyond our cramped apartments and computer screens. In flailing around for something to sustain us in “these unprecedented times,” the five of us found each other in a writing group with no prepandemic roots and no programmatic goals but with a shared curiosity about our own confessional moments and no choice but to stretch into new habits. What has emerged has been a surprising sort of collectivity.

Perhaps it was the context, perhaps it was the content, but we were struck by how quickly we found ourselves inside each other’s heads. If at first we turned to one another’s words by happenstance, we soon started channeling this impulse through writing games that deliberately stretched our worn routines. What if my story were to start where yours leaves off? What if I were to tell my confession of love in the same way you tell your confession of harm? How might we conjure what a secret feels like without spilling any beans? Provocations like these framed each of our encounters, and each encounter marked an effort to suspend old disciplinary habits—especially the compulsion to divulge that esoteric, hidden knowledge so long held out as the reward of cultivated closeness with a place, a people, a language, a form of life. We worked instead to pause, together, at the edges of disclosure and listen for all that is gathered up with the intake of breath before confessions enter into speech.

This process strengthened each of our texts, to be sure, but it also nurtured a collective voice capacious enough to hold more than any one of us might bear alone. We have come to feel that the work of admitting *togetherness*, composed of both serious play and serious care, has been essential to unfolding the confessional dynamics theorized here. So, as we expanded our collective to encompass the larger group whose work follows this introduction, we committed to extending this collaboration. Each piece has been workshoped iteratively and communally—made, unmade, and reworked in this experimental mode. We might therefore think of them, akin to the confessional scenes from which they spring, as exercises in distributed authority.

If thinking the confessional, together, has required certain process interventions, it has also led us to a set of formal commitments—and specifically to the essay form. While each of the encounters we describe could be expanded into a conventional article, there are things about that genre we wish to suspend: airtight arguments, firm conclusions, polished positionality statements, performances of mastery. Drawn to the fieldwork confessional precisely for what it confuses, we sought a form of writing that could hold our questions open and that might also hold us back from escaping to high theory once our work becomes too close for comfort. Essay: a short piece of writing on a particular subject. Essay: a tentative effort. Essay: to try. Each essay tries to sustain that echo between “the field,” a site of intimate relation and complex obligation, and “the desk,” where life’s ambivalence finds partial form in ethnographic writing.

The field, of course, is many things—diner, river, operating room—and each context foregrounds different questions and distinct confessional modes. Some grow from bonds of kinship, some implicate us in transgressive acts, some sting like sin, some burn like lust. And many shapeshift in between. Of the many clashes and half-rhymes between the confessions in these essays, we want to reiterate three of core importance to the discipline at large.

First, pushing forward conversations on ethnographic authority, these essays pose matters of *representational power* as a question: Who wields this and other modes of power in these scenes? Second—by showing how confessional bonds are formed and forced, cherished, resented, and refused—they unearth the many forms that fieldwork *intimacy* takes, pushing back against the commonsense that closeness is and ought to be the mark of “good” ethnography. Third, contributors ask after the “how” of *ethical praxis*, sitting in the difficulty of what to do when the demands of our interlocutors and our discipline part ways and (for some contributors) when both diverge from our own politics. Here, there are no easy answers. If our relations are dynamic, embodied, historical, and particular, then there can be no singular prescription for responding to the confessional and the challenges it poses, no one way to respond to the obligations that our fieldsites press on us.

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We begin on a dark Icelandic night with a phone call made to Alix Johnson by a man eager to share secrets about a decommissioned military base—each one proffered with the hedge, “I have no proof . . .” But proof is not the point, and neither are these secrets in the strict sense, as few contain what we might consider covert content. Instead, Johnson shows, they take on force through the confessional form, a mode of conspiratorial disclosure that generates a charge around what is, in this case, “depressingly mundane”: the slow violence of military presence and the surprising pain of its withdrawal after the closure of an anchor institution. In foregrounding form, Johnson not only offers lessons about how the mundane is made to matter for the scholar who will someday represent it. She also makes the affect that surrounds confessional speech her object of analysis, setting up a mode of attention that carries through the essays that follow.

In Chloe Ahmann’s piece, the brackets around confession—“I know I shouldn’t say this, but . . .”—mark off transgressive speech that yields a vulgar pleasure for the speaker. The context is late industrial Baltimore in the early days of Trump’s campaign, the speech (not repeated) is extravagantly racist, and the speakers’ pleasure comes in impugning liberal norms projected onto the ethnographer. In a present marked by avid consumption of political spectacle on both sides of the aisle, Ahmann finds herself on the receiving end of a performance about what it means to be white working class: a caricature of the poor right that assumes a caricature of the prim left as its final audience. In the process, who is analyst and who is analyzed becomes an open question, and the bracket reveals itself to be at least two things. It is a wink staged by speakers in the “know” about the kind of story that a budding academic must be after, and an indictment of the liberal appetites that underpin the business of ethnography.

Whereas Ahmann’s writing opens questions of complicity, itself a kind of intimate relation, Amy Krauss puts those matters front and center. Writ-

ing from an abortion clinic in Mexico City, she foregrounds the racializing and gendering pedagogies that compose the medical gaze and asks how feminist ethnography might refuse the force of their conscription via praxes of accompaniment. From her entry into the clinic (“full of discomforting dissimulations”) to an intense encounter in the operating room (where disclosure takes embodied form), Krauss examines her enrollment in the slippery zone between medical terror and everyday objectification. She then pushes us to ask: To whom do we lend our expertise? What complicities might we refuse? And for a feminist ethnography that does not shy away from the political, what sorts of bonds are worth embodying?

Intimacies chosen and intimacies forced wind through Amy Leia McLachlan’s reflection on adoptive kinmaking with Uitoto people in the tangles of colonial Amazonian history. Engaging a parenthetical writing practice that honors her interlocutors’ insistence that sharing stories is a form of world-making praxis, McLachlan considers the world-making power of confessions offered through “the address of love.” Sometimes treasured, sometimes risky, sometimes fragile, sometimes fierce, these stories forge connective bonds that come with hefty obligations. What does it mean to be the archive of others’ volatile stories, to hold them in your body and your life? McLachlan shows that it can mean embodying trauma. This is one of the “formally unknowable stories” around which our discipline coheres: that many move through anthropology with untellable stories that bind us to the field forever. Would that we shared a field that “loved us better”; this one doesn’t.

The long reach of political trauma draws Alonso Gamarra into disclosure, too, in neoliberal Peru, where large-scale mining has had a devastating impact on family farmers. This essay centers one exchange with an elder antimining activist, coauthor Señor Aurelio, who was prompted to recall his experience of right-wing state violence upon hearing that Gamarra’s apartment had been robbed. Señor Aurelio connects these experiences, decades apart, as “the negative moment of the dialectic,” before tiptoeing into forms of confession suspended somewhere between history and fiction. (This somewhere is the space of memory.) In this connection, Gamarra finds himself implicated in Aurelio’s memory practice: given a picture of reality, shown an open wound, and sought as company.

Navigating her own recruitment into expressions of state violence, offered here by perpetrators, not their victims, Ana María Forero Angel’s work approaches open wounds with a different refrain in mind: “This cannot leave here. It is a dialogue between you and me.” This line precedes confessions of the mortifying actions that colonels and soldiers in the Colombian army committed in combat. In her writing, Forero Angel pursues the possibility of ethnographic forms—narrative style, representational aesthetics—that might keep these secrets present without disclosing that which “cannot leave” the moment of confession. Along the way, she argues that secrecy is not an obstacle to ethnography. It is constitutive of it.

If secrecy is constitutive of ethnography, the secrets disclosed to ethnographers are not always what they first appear to be. From a drug rehabilitation center in Sinaloa, Mexico, Erin McFee explores a moment of disclosure set apart from daily life, in a suspended space where one might try confessions on. It is in just this sort of space where she hears the “first disclosure” of a young man struggling with addiction, prior affiliations with the local cartel, and the tough path toward redemption and recovery. This first disclosure—the first utterance of a story never told—is simultaneously knowledge of violence and violent knowledge, working its way out of a body that struggles to manage the task. But the struggle, McFee acknowledges in retrospect, did not align with the confession’s overt content. While the man punctuated his confession of a triple homicide with “I’ve never told anyone this before,” it was the recounting of his wife’s prior infidelities that seemed to ravage him on their way out into the room. Once voiced, this secret was transformative, remaking at once the man’s relation with himself, his relation with McFee, and McFee’s relations with a range of others.

McFee gives us a scene where the ethnographer is an ideal first ear, poised to receive the draft confession of a disgraced informant, but in Ali Feser’s work we see these roles inverted. Thinking from the sedimented city of Rochester, New York, after the coming-apart of Kodak—which for generations was a “total institution” and whose closure left a rush of devastation in its wake—Feser finds people grasping for answers to the question of whether it was “worth it” to have gained and lost so much. When someone poses the question to her, a researcher who can surely “provide relief from this tension,” she struggles to respond and ultimately refuses. Then, in an attempt to clarify her own commitments, she reframes the question with ambivalence. To move forward with accountability, she suggests, requires giving up liberal notions of agency and turning instead to an understanding that most actions spring from an “unfrayable knot of will and necessity”: a turn that demands a tragic understanding of the subject.

Finally, we hear from Shaka McGlotten, who has rarely struggled to confess, having written candidly for years about queer worlds and public sex. McGlotten has long composed in a confessional mode to understand “how queer worlds are built, nourished, and sustained,” as well as put under pressure. But what happens when confession becomes habitual, or worse, “a schtick, a fallback?” Against the backdrop of the pandemic’s eerie early days, structured by routines turned strange, and a growing repulsion from academic life, McGlotten shares a struggle to write otherwise—not against confession per se, but away from habit and toward a practice that is truly vulnerable, poised to remake their writing and self alike. Opening a space for confessing the limits of confessional efficacy, they invite us to consider which habits of confession may be getting in the way, and which have come to hold together lives and worlds we love.

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Admitting together these unresolvable challenges to our field and to our fieldworker selves, we offer this special section as an invitation to sit with the disclosures that both underwrite and undermine our work. To sit with moments when we were each hailed as a stand-in for the discipline: *Don’t put this in your book*. Which is to say, *I know that you will write about me, but in this moment we are more than characters, and I insist on these conditions to your project*. In troubling through these moments, we reach toward an ethnography willing to abide the tough work of not knowing and to be less precious about getting the last word. Not only about the force and meaning of any one encounter but, ultimately, about the how, when, why, and whether of ethnographic knowledge.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Opposite attention to ethnography's "afterlives," or the uptake of our texts following their publication (see, e.g., Shange, 2019, 153–57), the fieldwork confessional raises the matter of a text before production. It points, in other words, toward moments when our interlocutors make claims on representational, not merely interpretive, power.

<sup>2</sup> This call to bear one's ties to certain kinds of work interrupts Mariner's (2020) essay over and over: "How did you get interested in this topic?"

<sup>3</sup> Anthropologists have much to say about genres of textual production among our interlocutors (genres as *objects*), as well as those that compose our disciplinary work (genres as *objectives*). The first approach broadly characterizes approaches to genre in linguistic anthropology, the ethnography of speaking, and ethnopoetics (for an essential overview, see Briggs and Bauman, 1992); here, genre pertains to textual performance in the world. The second approach has largely animated critical examinations of genre in ethnographic writing, and specifically of representational power as a reinscription of political power (see, i.e., Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Fabian, 1983); here, genre pertains to discursive inscriptions of the world. Recent anthropological uptakes of genre from literary criticism (Bakhtin, 1981; Kristeva, [1969] 1980), queer theory (Butler, 1993, 2005), and affect theory (Berlant, 2011, 2018; Levine, 2015; Stewart, 2017) have opened space for considering genre beyond textual objects or textual outputs—beyond "actual speech" or "disciplinary discourse"—as a way of approaching phenomena that traverse these divides. Drawing on the latter, we use "genre" as a lens for understanding recognizable forms of talk, habitual modes of discursive production, and a set of expectations about and attunements to encounters in the field.

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