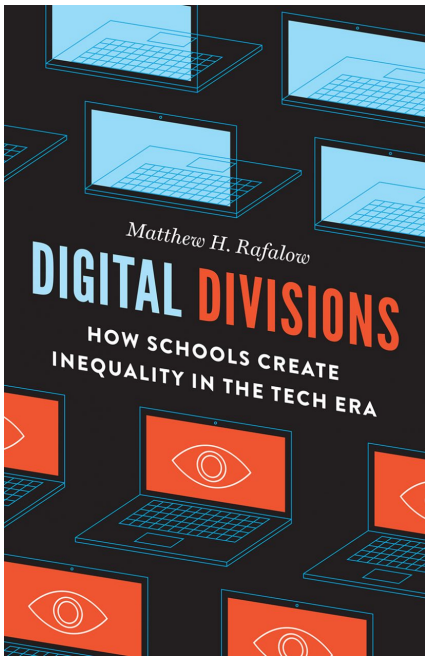
Digital Divisions

Charissa Dechène
July, 2021

In the search to close the digital divide, which has been even more exposed since the COVID-19 pandemic, the insights about technological use within schools given in Matthew H. Rafalow's meticulously written ethnography are much welcome. In *Digital Divisions – How Schools Create Inequality in the Tech Era*, Rafalow shows how students, even when having access to similar technologies, are not given the same opportunities to develop and distribute their digital skills as cultural capital. He does so by looking at how digital play is disciplined in three different schools.

"While digital tools are important artifacts in each school, this project is a study

of kids' *play* and how teachers see its value – social systems animate teachers' interpretations of play, whether or not digital tools are involved, rendering it a sociological phenomenon worthy of study" (19-20). Rafalow demonstrates how teachers differentiate their students' potentials not as a result of their (unconscious) bias against students of colour, but rather as a result of the school culture in which they work.



His theoretical framework is inspired by theories of social reproduction, school socialisation, organisational culture and colour-blind racism. He draws on Michel Foucault's notion of 'discipline': "the term does not simply refer to the correction of students' bad behaviour but rather describes an institutional process that determines appropriate behaviour and internalises norms in students". With a compelling comparative methodological approach, he argues that the way digital play is disciplined within educational pedagogy has huge effects on how students interact with technology. "Disciplinary practices, in the form of teachers' routine messages to students about their digital play, can uplift students (transform kids' digital skills into cultural capital) as well as systematically hold them back (deny cultural capital)" (139).

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Rafalow carried out his fieldwork within three different middle schools, all located near a big western city in the US (17). One private and two public schools: Heathcliff Academy which schools wealthy and White students, César Chávez Middle School whose students are mostly working-class Latinx, and Sheldon

Junior High with mostly middle-class Asian students.

During his fieldwork he observed the day-to-day life in each school including classes and lunch breaks, interviewed teachers and students and attended faculty meetings. His research in middle schools is important as they are often overlooked and are key sites for children's psychological and social development. It is especially interesting for this research subject as middle schools are "increasingly targeted as a time for teaching key digital skills like online collaboration and production" (17). His in-depth analysis of how each school deploys digital technology for learning, exposes how inequalities are reproduced through the disciplining of play.

Rafalow found that in the school serving mostly White students, teachers thought of themselves as serving the elite and saw digital play as essential to school (101-105). Teachers would encourage students to use digital tools for their school projects and saw their unlimited potential by addressing them as future scientists, historians, etc.

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At the school with mostly Latinx students, teachers were seen as an extension of the students' family. Digital play however was conceived as irrelevant to school. When students at Heathcliff were invited to explore their creative expressions, students at César Chávez Middle School were limited to learning basic skills for technical jobs in which teachers thought their students would end up in (40-42 and 65).

At the school with mostly Asian American students, the work culture was 'every man for himself' and teachers were cautious about themselves and their work (91). Digital play was seen as a threat to school and students were not taught digital skills. Instead, when students used digital tools, they were heavily policed

and regulated and even publicly shamed if they communicated with each other online. Moreover, “digital proficiency was seen as making Asian students threatening” (61).

As a result, Rafalow shows in chapter 4, students at each school perceived and valued their online behaviour and digital play differently, essentially how they view their creative selfhood as being valuable or not. Heathcliff students had a highly visible presence online creating and sharing content curated for future college admissions. César Chávez’ students were also highly visible, but would create and share media for their peers. Sheldon Junior High’s students rarely created content and restricted their online presence to media consumption to avoid punishments from teachers. In addition, students were also noticeably affected by how they viewed their own successes as a result of the racial and class perceptions of teachers. White students learned their achievements (and failures) were their own whereas Asian and Latinx students learned that theirs were not their own. They were instead attributed to stereotypes about their respective groups (model minority vs. Tiger parent, cutthroat and hacker, and benevolent immigrant vs. future gang member).

Moreover, in interviews with teachers and school staff, white students were seen and described as individuals, whereas Latinx and Asian students were characterized as representations of their respected class and race, hence reproducing the dominant racial ideology (160).

Rafalow shows in four chapters that theories of cultural mobility and the existing theory of cultural inequality are false. According to the latter, if children possess the same currency of valued skills, teachers would reward students similarly with good rewards and grades. However, Rufalow shows that although the students in his study have very similar digital skills, teachers discipline and reward them differently based on their race and class.

Although he admittedly states that a “considerable weakness […] is that none of these schools had enough Black students […] to provide additional comparison”,

his findings are extremely valuable, especially in today's social climate where there is a rise in anti-Asian violence and racism.

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For youth to participate in youth culture today – and transform their digital skills into cultural capital – they have to be able to learn how to "communicate online and engage in digital production" (46). *Digital Divisions – How Schools Create Inequality in the Tech Era* invites us to see digital play as an asset for learning. Rafalow remarkably demonstrates that the social dynamics within schools – most importantly teacher's racial and class perceptions of non-White students and workplace dynamics – shape how teachers discipline play and reproduce inequalities. It is a must read for academics who research and other professionals who work within the field of education.

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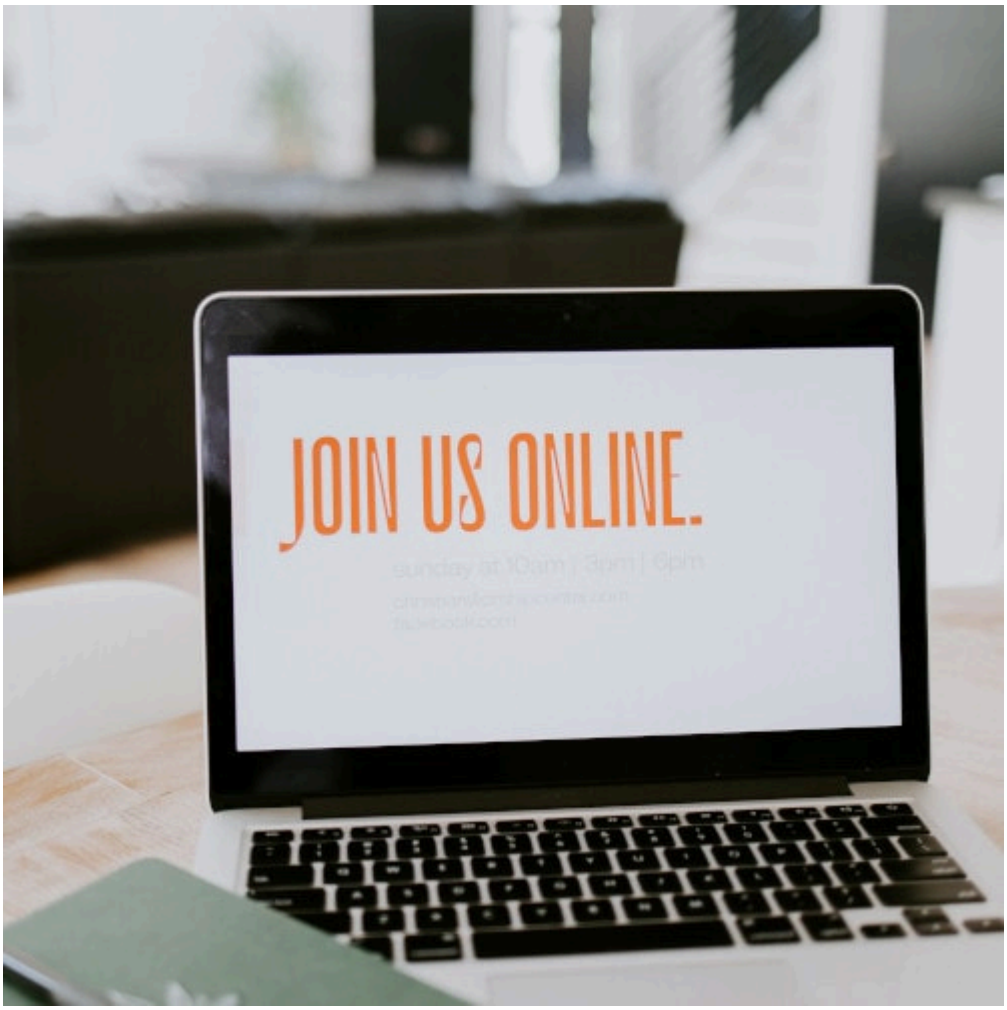
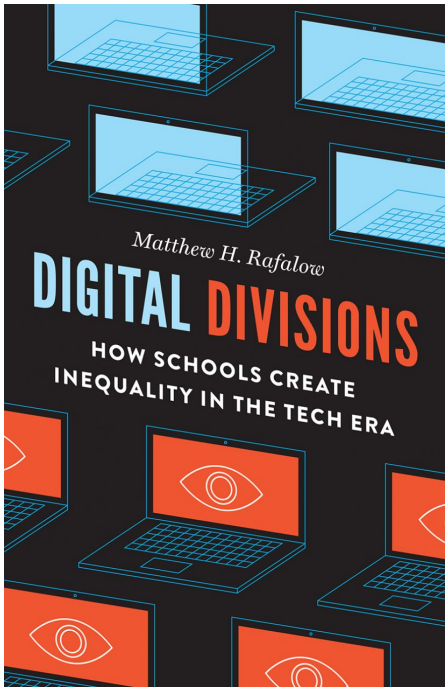
Digital Divisions

Jess Auerbach
July, 2021



In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic the optimism of the early days of the world wide web appears to have completely abated. The pandemic has proven justification for a host of the more insidious practices of internet surveillance to become much more mainstream. In this context, *Digital Divisions: How schools create inequality in the tech era* becomes even more relevant. It is a book that I believe should be widely read beyond the field of education.



The text provides extensive empirical evidence to show how pervasive structural violence is. In this, technologies are far from neutral: rather contemporary technologies layer on, rather than disrupt, the systems of inequality, prejudice and imagination that define the contemporary US, as well as the rest of the world. My wish is that every executive in Silicon Valley could read this book before preaching disruption and change and suggesting that an app could make the world a better place.

The 'world' is absent in this book. I point this out here not so much as a critique, but rather in recognition that in the same way different tiers of US schools track students for particular roles, children in different parts of the globe are increasingly tracked towards differentiated futures – of, by, and with technology. In order to understand the true impact of these technologies for learning and for the future, scholars need to be able to think across the micro, and the planetary scale. This book is an excellent example of the former, but the latter is now urgently needed – particularly in the wake of the global pandemic.

This is a book about children in the United States, and therefore about the future of the United States as well. Through a detailed exploration of the way that children play online in three middle schools with very different histories and socio-economic contexts, it highlights the many ways in which imagination, innovation and critical thought are disciplined. Through these micro-acts of discipline, students are "tracked" towards adult roles that perpetuate – and in some cases exacerbate – the tracking of futures that has taken place in almost all education systems of the industrial – and now perhaps post-industrial age.

In the introduction Rufalow lays out the context of the study: three middle

schools, all within driving distance, that serve very different student populations. One group of students is largely affluent and largely white; another is largely "middle class" and majority Asian; students from the third school come from working class homes and are mostly Hispanic. He writes that:

"To assess whether and how schools are preparing students for the digital age, we need to take a careful look at day-to-day life in today's technology equipped classrooms. We need to assess how teachers at these schools conceive of the value of digital technologies for achievement and use technological tools for instruction. Digital divides, while worrisome, are only one roadblock to students' potential, and documenting teacher's perceptions and practices will enhance our understanding of innovators' genesis beyond more simplistic garage theories." (p7)

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Rufalow does this work effectively, by illustrating ethnographically how teachers use the *same* technologies for very different purposes, and with different results. Affluent students are taught to "create" and "innovate" with technology, whereas the rest are disciplined by the same tools: surveilled, embarrassed, and often policed. This, Rufalow argues, will have significant consequences for their admission into university, their choices of employment, and the likelihood that they will become knowledge creators as opposed to knowledge consumers – arguably a key divide in the so-called "knowledge economy".

Digital technologies are situated by the context of the students *and also the expectations of the teachers.* Left to their own devices (literally and figuratively) the book explores how children use available technologies in similar ways. The crucial differentiator has less to do with the children's understanding of what the technology can be, but instead the 'discipline and punishment' they experience

from authority figures. In an economically under-resourced school, play is treated as a punishable offense. In the middle class school, it is simply ignored. Where there is wealth, play is celebrated for its potential to yield original insight and critical thinking.

In order to make sense of the different patterns of disciplinary action that Rufalow observed over approximately 600 hours across the three schools, he reflects on how teachers themselves internalise notions of appropriate behaviour. Importantly, he asks the subtle question 'appropriate for who?' which allows him to go deeper than a surface analysis of publicity, friendly diversity and inclusion. In the process, he reveals a great deal about whiteness that is of value at the current moment, where in the US, in particular, whiteness is now one marked category amongst many rather than an unquestioned category of privileged identity.

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Through careful ethnographic analysis, he provides examples of the expectations that teachers have for their students' lives: 'the next Steve Jobs' from the wealthy school, a solid middle-manager from the 'model minorities' in an Asian-American area, and perhaps a content-moderator in the mills of social media review from a child whose parents were assumed to have worked, at best, in factories. In this way, he argues, schools act as 'socializing agents' for participation in differentiated digital life that mirrors the offline world. Far from 'disrupting' the future, technology perpetuates existing patterns, and by the time kids apply for university, their futures are no less tracked than they were in the age of physical encyclopedias.

Reading this book as a scholar of curriculum transformation in South Africa, Angola and Mauritius where the digital divide is very real and the pandemic has likely set school-children's learning back by many years, I found myself

processing a great deal of grief. The differentiation experienced by children in three schools in one of the wealthiest countries on earth will be magnified in myriad ways across the globe.

To reflect on equity in education we have to think of not only digital cultures within countries, but also between them. Just as teachers prove the gatekeepers to the learning of young Americans, we may find that diplomats, politicians and importantly corporations dictate expectations and inform the realities of play, imagination, and work expected from today's young minds in the global South – in addition to the roles played by their teachers. Technology remains a tool that can be used for radical transformation. Yet as *Digital Divisions* shows very clearly, it is the limitations of human imagination, and the manifestation of this imagination in policy and politics – that ultimately guides their use.

Featured Image by Samantha Borges on Unsplash

Being a parent in the field

Konstanze N'Guessan
July, 2021

Ethnographic fieldwork resembles a dance on the wire between distance and closeness, seesawing between participant immersion and analytical retreat that turns the anthropologist into a tool of data generation. The reflexive – and more recently the affective – turn have acknowledged that data is not out there to be found or dug out by the anthropologist but is produced in encounters and interactions between human beings. It is therefore important to reflect on the ethnographer's social identity and the roles that she brings along when entering the field and that she establishes in everyday interactions with informants. Feminism has taught us that ethnographic knowledge is always situated (Haraway 1988) and therefore it has become good practice to disclose race, class, gender. How are differences between us and our research partners highlighted or downplayed in the designing of research projects, the construction of the field and the discussion of results? Reflections of that kind belong to the standard

building blocks of good ethnographies.

What has escaped the scholarly realm of reflection for a long time is the fieldworker's family status and the kin ties he or she carries along to the field when doing research in the company of family members. The mythicized imaginary of the lone, white, male Indiana-Jones type of fieldworker obviously stands in the way of a profound discussion of family entanglements and how these shape the research process. This stands in stark contrast to the fact that ever since Victor and Edith Turner embarked with their three little children to do fieldwork among the Ndembu, many, if not most anthropologists have found creative solutions to reconcile family life and professional life by doing long-term fieldwork as parents in the company of their spouses and/or children. Even though she never took her daughter to accompany her on fieldwork, Margaret Mead once even declared the three-generation family ideal for the ethnographic enterprise (Mead 1970: 321). Despite the factual presence of children in the field and the acknowledgment that they might actually facilitate and smoothen the process of immersion and trust building, we do not get to know much about their presence in the field, or only catch a glimpse of them in the acknowledgements section or footnotes.

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Being a Parent in the Field sets out to fill this gap by exploring the practical, methodological, epistemological and ethical implications of doing ethnographic fieldwork in the company of family members. It stands in the tradition of a body of literature that, beginning with the feminist critique of representation in anthropology, has investigated fieldwork as a family enterprise. Joan Cassell's *Children in the Field* (1987), the first edited volume to address this silence, was soon to be followed by a number of edited volumes and papers addressing the implications and challenges of accompanied fieldwork and exploring ways of

representing the findings of research as a family enterprise (see e.g. Strecker, Strecker und Lydall 1995; Gottlieb, Graham and Gottlieb-Graham 1995). Most of these works – and the present volume is not an exception – have grown out of the concession that whereas taking one's children to the field does impact fieldwork, this impact is rarely acknowledged in the monographs that come out of such fieldworks. For example, Nancy Scheper-Hughes had prepared her contribution to Cassell's edited volume in advance of her Brazilian fieldwork with her three children.

While in Brazil, she asked them to keep their own field diaries (Scheper-Hughes 1987: 221) and turned her eldest daughter into a research assistant (ibid. 236). Yet, in the monograph that was subsequently published based on this fieldwork, *Death without Weeping* (1993) – a first person account ethnography on infant mortality and motherly love – the presence and importance of her children during research is only mentioned in the epilogue/acknowledgments. Reflections on fieldwork with children apparently take place only in a highly specialized niche of anthropological literature that is often more anecdotal than theoretical.

> *Whereas many earlier accounts of children in the field are more or less anecdotal, the present volume does have a theoretical approach and concern.*

What then is it that Braukmanns, Haugs, Metzmachers and Stolz's edited volume adds to the discussion? The book is the outcome of a workshop held at the University of Cologne in 2018 and derives much of its attractivity from the coherence of the individual papers that seem to have gained much from comparative discussion. Compared to many other edited volumes, the contributors to the present volume do speak to each other and address cross-cutting issues in a comparative perspective. Whereas many earlier accounts of children in the field are more or less anecdotal, the present volume does have a theoretical approach and concern. The careful selection and ordering of the individual papers in the book according to three related topics – positionality, similarity and difference; producing ethnographic knowledge; constructing the

field – is convincing, but could have been introduced better in the introduction, which instead discusses cross-cutting themes under a different angle distinguishing practical, epistemological and ethical issues. This is all the more surprising, as most papers at least implicitly suggest that epistemological practical and ethical issues are not neatly divided, but rather entangled or even account for one another. Pragmatic or practical decisions concerning logistics and finance as well as the need to reconcile family matters with research interests feed into epistemological issues such as how and by whom the field is constructed and who participates in the knowledge production process and in which ways. In turn, research interests impact practical issues. When relatives are involved, the need to immerse oneself in the field raises ethical challenges: Where does the field end? How is the transparency of the data collection process to be ensured when the researcher is widely associated with being a mother first before being a researcher (see e.g. Häberlein)? Which kin ties matter in the context of ethnographic research and how do "fictive" and locally acquired kin roles (e.g. as adoptive daughter or godparent) fit into existing kin networks?

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Similarly to the contributions to Cassell (1987) *Being a Parent in the Field* brings together male and female voices from a variety of academic positions (from the student to the professor cultivating long-term research relationships) and a broad range of research settings and topics. This diversity enables the authors to ask: under what circumstances do children make a difference? (see e.g. the contributions of Pauli and Girke). The focus of the present volume lies – as a matter of fact – on affiliative links that do make a difference. It would be worthwhile to explore in more detail under what conditions doing fieldwork with family members does not impact the research process as much (such as hinted at by Felix Girke's contribution) and why that is so. Julia Pauli explains the fact that

her “not-yet-being-a-mother” mattered greatly in terms of access and social closeness in Mexico, whereas the fact that she had children seemed to make no difference for her research partners in Namibia with divergent levels of family normativity. While in the Mexico case there was a strong moral norm concerning how proper families should look like, in the Namibian case there was much more leeway for alternative models. Similarly, in my West African fieldsite, where temporal child fostering and transnational migration are common (see also Alber, Martin and Notermans 2013) most people did not find unusual and thus not worthy of any discussion the fact that I had left my children behind for a professionally motivated research stay, whereas they interpreted my coming with children as a holiday trip. In this sense another topic that could have been discussed more is the impact of absent children or spouses (dealt with by Pfeiffer) and their (dis)continued absent presence in the field.

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In the introductory remarks, the book’s editors argue that bringing one’s children to the field allows one to explore the actual boundary-making processes between public and private realms, field and not-field. Andrea Hollington’s contribution deals with the methodological practice of boundary-making, of editing and clearing of undesired side noises or information out of the ethnographic narrative: what is “important” and what is left out as “irrelevant”? What can we learn by paying attention to the side-noises of our children and how do we succeed in producing a polyphonic account?

These are questions, even though not “new”, of burning actuality, as the blurring of work and private spheres during the pandemic has shown. Parenting in the field disrupts the lines we have so carefully drawn between the “private” and the “public”, the “personal” and the “academic”. According to Judith Okely “to describe the dailiness and minutiae of personal encounters in the field is to

question the ‘fine distinctions’ between public and private” (1992: 11). This stands in stark contrast to Erving Goffman, whose “on fieldwork” we still use in teaching anthropological methods classes, and who commends: „cut yourself to the bone“ declaring “one of the problems of going with a spouse, […] (especially if you go in with a kid), [is that] it gives you a way out” (1980: 127).

> *What can we learn by paying attention to the side-noises of our children and how do we succeed in producing a polyphonic account?*

And yes, the limited possibilities of financing fieldwork with children and the prejudice that “doing research with children is less efficient” continue to haunt young anthropologists. Discussions on doing fieldwork with kids way too often only take place amongst young researchers during coffee breaks instead of in panels reflecting on the epistemic possibilities opened up by children’s presence in fieldwork. In other words, even though feminist anthropology has highlighted back in the 1980s the male-bias in sciences, the dichotomy between the reflexive/personal and the academic/political is still potent and continues to influence the design and the representation of ethnographic research today. It seems like we still need to abandon the idea that children “pollute” fieldwork and remind ourselves that the idea of children belonging to the private sphere comes from a Eurocentric and therefore un-anthropological perspective.

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Instead, as Erdmute Alber concludes in her afterword to the book, “taking one’s children and other kin into the field is first and foremost nothing other than putting the ethnographic method of observation and participation into practice” (282). *Being a Parent in the Field* offers an important reminder and therefore, is a welcomed contribution to the methodological and epistemological discussions around the making of ethnography, one that should be read in ethnographic

methods courses.

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Images:

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Children playing: Photo by Andrew Seaman on Unsplash.

Child doing arts and craft: Photo by Sigmund on Unsplash.

Children's drawing: Photo by Cheng Qi Huang on Unsplash.

Amazon Sidewalk Needs our Trust for its Security

S.A. Applin
July, 2021

On June 8, 2021, Amazon deployed an “opt-in” way for people to enable the company to expand its private network into communities, creating infrastructure to peddle even more devices and services in the future. These steps from Amazon, with the cooperation of its customers, could dramatically change the way we behave in our neighbourhoods, as we are joined by more surveillance, tracking, and noisy devices that extend beyond the walls of our homes, and borders of our yards, to a near half-mile range away from them.

Background

For years, Amazon has grown, from peddling books to becoming a behemoth in retail durable goods, and, through its AWS back-end technology, a necessary component for many internet businesses and services. Amazon has crept into

many homes via its Alexa smart-agent voice-controlled software. Alexa controls Amazon's "Echo" line of home-speakers that play music, retrieve information, and perform other functions. Amazon has gained a large customer following with its "Ring" video-recording home doorbell and other home surveillance and security products. These had so far been confined to the home. With "Sidewalk", Amazon now offers a service that expands the range of people's Amazon devices and services outside the walls of their homes by extending people's network capacity through cooperative sharing. Each home gives up a part of their network bandwidth to Amazon, which uses it to create a neighbourhood network. This enables Amazon's hardware to function in backyards and on the street—beyond the private environment, outside, to be utilized in newer, unforeseen ways.

> *Each home gives up a part of their network bandwidth to Amazon, which uses it to create a neighbourhood network.*

Amazon's announcement indicates more surveillance and less privacy in the Commons. The Sidewalk service offers a way for people to connect Amazon devices outside of their residences, using fractions of their and their neighbours' wireless networks. Sidewalk works with Echo as well as with Tile and Level, two types of Internet-of-Things (IoT) "tracking" discs that can be attached to pets or items to locate them. Sidewalk takes advantage of the goodwill of people and their neighbours to provide shared "mesh" connectivity outside of the home. Amazon refers to this as a "crowdsourced community benefit," but there is reason to be suspicious. Will this benefit the 'community', or Amazon? Even if someone thinks the best of Amazon's intentions, Sidewalk may affect the way we interact within our local neighbourhood community—even if we aren't Amazon customers.

Borrowing a "Cup of Bandwidth"

To introduce new products and capabilities that connect consumer data functions inside the house, to the community outside of the house, Amazon needs more bandwidth. This is acquired either by leveraging a consumer's mobile device, or

by using private internet bandwidth. Sidewalk works with Amazon devices that contain so-called Sidewalk Bridges, which includes most Echo devices and some outdoor floodlights and surveillance cameras. Sidewalk uses “Bluetooth, the 900 MHz spectrum and other frequencies” to create a private mesh-network between a household’s Sidewalk Bridges and its neighbors, with the idea that if a network goes down, or needs more bandwidth, it can use shared low-bandwidth from other households with Amazon devices that contain Sidewalk Bridges as well. For Sidewalk to work, consumers will be footing, however minor to each person, the cost of the network access that Amazon needs. Amazon claims that the “total monthly data used by Sidewalk, per account, is capped at 500MB” and adds that this is “equivalent to streaming about 10 minutes of high definition video.”

Will this benefit the ‘community’, or Amazon?

But Amazon needs people in neighborhoods to agree to crowdsource their bandwidth (i.e.: free to Amazon) to enable these products, so Amazon has made Sidewalk an automatic “opt-in”: it is turned on automatically for Amazon customers who have compatible devices, rather than each customer selecting whether or not they want it in the first place. The advantage for Amazon is that the shared network is available immediately, and instantly builds their infrastructure, rather than Amazon having to wait for those who participate to “opt-in” and leave Sidewalk start off patchy and spotty. To opt-out, people will have to *tell* Amazon—and preference controls can be hard to find on Amazon’s website.

Amazon acts as if people will be willing to share a fragment of their network bandwidth with their neighbours in order to extend and increase their own network range. Ostensibly, one could install security devices more remotely on property, or potentially anywhere in the Commons, on the actual sidewalk or in shared community space—up to a half mile away—as long as the Sidewalk network was available.

Amazon has made Sidewalk an automatic “opt-in”: it is turned on automatically.

Co-opting the Sidewalk

Amazon chose a name that evokes communal connectivity. It isn't Amazon "Backyard" or Amazon "Outside," it is Amazon Sidewalk. The sidewalk is physical pavement that is owned collectively by the Commons and offers us, through shared investment, a way to move through neighbourhoods and access each other's homes as well as retail environments. Sidewalks are a pedestrian space. They also function as barrier between people and cars, and a place where children play. Sidewalks imply walking, and pedestrian mobility. They're how we get around. Sidewalks provide municipal connectivity, too, in that they are akin to networks. Amazon, a private for-profit company, naming their low-bandwidth network project in this way suggests that the service is intended to extend beyond personal driveways and backyards—especially with that half-a-mile range. Along this "Sidewalk", we move along, from one low-fi mesh-network to the next low-fi mesh-network that enable our Amazon devices. It seems a kludge, but it also allows for a type of "roaming" that Amazon can wholly control, as long as there is sufficient bandwidth in the form of crowdsourced community cooperation in the form of Amazon customers who choose to participate, each forfeiting even a small amount of their paid-for network bandwidth to Amazon.

> *Amazon chose a name that evokes communal connectivity. It isn't Amazon "Backyard" or Amazon "Outside," it is Amazon Sidewalk.*

Amazon mentions further "unique benefits", such as supporting other "Sidewalk devices" in the community, and suggests that future developments of "new low-bandwidth devices that can run on or benefit from Sidewalk" such as "pet tracking," which has been seemingly 'rebranded' and extended to the elderly with dementia, and other offerings that may use location-tracking capabilities. In its advertising, Amazon mentions that Sidewalk could help with "appliance and tool diagnostics," too, which could provide a foothold for Amazon to learn about

people's appliances—and how we use them.

People's readiness to offer their bandwidth to enable these products in a way shifts the development of Amazon products that reach beyond the home and into the Commons onto its existing customers, making them unpaid financial backers and "creators" of a sort—by funding the network capabilities that enable Amazon's expansion, and deploying the devices that increase Amazon's reach. Customers will do this even as they pay for Amazon's services for the products they already own, such as the Ring doorbell hardware the extra for "Ring Protect Plans" that cost anywhere from US $3-$10 per month.

Expanding Amazon's Reach

Amazon encourages such a coordinated network participation to include more objects, more ways for surveillance, and more infrastructure built to process the "more" data that it is collecting—in addition to an extensive global retail empire that sells its customers just about anything. These factors, combined with Amazon's extraordinary data footprint, the ability to analyse extensive retail consumer behaviour, and long tail of relationships with the Police, make Amazon's growing Ring/Echo/Alexa surveillance apparatus have the potential to generate very real and unfortunate consequences that could impact people's lives in deep, severe, and unforeseen ways—even if unintended by Amazon.

Photo by Claudio Schwarz on Unsplash

Amazon envisions us stuffing our homes with Amazon products that are tied together with Alexa—and, now, Sidewalk. It is also planning an "indoor drone" to capture in-home surveillance footage, a Ring Car Alarm, a Ring Car Cam, Mailbox Motion Sensor, and even an Alexa Guard Plus service. The latter offers "listening and watching" Smart Alerts surveillance, including ways to take action on commands that Alexa either enacts on the customer's behalf, or via command. On the back-end, these commands appear to be broken down in tiers of algorithmic triage—if someone has paid for the service.

> *Citizens purchased Ring doorbells on the advice of their local police department. Thus, public servants became an authority for advertising for Amazon.*

For example, if Alexa is set into "Away Mode", but "hears" sounds that are abnormal, such as shattering glass, footsteps, coughing, water running, or other

‘break-in’ predetermined conditional clues, Alexa will respond in a series of steps. First, it will send the customer a Smart Alert. Alexa might “increase its reaction” if the sounds are of a potential intruder—however they’ve classified these—which is potentially another problem. At that point, Alexa will “react” by playing a siren through an Echo device. If the homeowner has the outdoor motion detection option for cameras and lights, Amazon Guard Plus will work with smart cameras to turn on lights and play sounds of dogs barking to deter break-ins, too. If someone is home, the Amazon Guard Plus service includes options to call Emergency Services directly using Alexa—if the homeowner has signed up and paid for Alexa Guard Plus at $4.99/month, or $49/year. Amazon Guard Plus also offers “hands free access to an Emergency Helpline,” staffed by “trained agents who can request the dispatch of emergency responders — such as police, the fire department, or an ambulance — based on information you provide on the call”. It is unclear what credentials or training these agents would have. Amazon responded to my author’s inquiry about how these agents were trained, and what they might know: “Amazon enlists the help of a professional monitoring service to train and staff the Emergency Helpline with agents who are available 24/7, 365 days a year” (personal correspondence). This means that if this third-party service is used to broker between an Amazon customer and emergency services, there may be additional routing vs. directly calling an emergency code such as “911,” when used in the US.

Amazon is increasingly becoming an algorithmic replacement for the police, and in ways is changing how police gather information on communities. It first joined the home security market by offering Ring video doorbells that could help people monitor their properties by recording outside the home. Amazon has a huge data processing network on the back-end of their Ring doorbells and other products, which has computing power that no police department can dream of matching. Additionally, since Amazon heavily partnered with Police departments to promote Ring to citizens for “safety,” citizens purchased Ring doorbells on the advice of their local police department. Thus, public servants became an authority for advertising for Amazon.

> *Amazon's product creep pushes community boundaries into territory that is the responsibility of municipalities.*

It seems hard to imagine that Amazon is solely creating Amazon Sidewalk and other products, especially Amazon Guard Plus, as a goodwill measure to increase people's security and the robustness of Ring. Rather, it appears to be more of a business decision to build products that are both likely to sell well and increase Amazon's data cache. But from outside, it is hard to speculate about Amazon's further goals, or how its various product announcements could work together. Amazon has also announced its intent to capture video footage in and around its delivery vans by installing AI-enabled surveillance cameras that will film drivers and the public streets in front of and behind vans. Depending upon range and scope, that may inadvertently (or purposefully) include sidewalks, driveways, and front porches. Described as a way to keep package delivery safe, the data these cameras collect will be owned by Amazon.

Pushing Community Boundaries

Amazon's product creep pushes community boundaries into territory that is the responsibility of municipalities—and it is continuing to develop more and more different ways for watching, listening, and collecting neighbourhood data. With mobile surveillance, Ring, Sidewalk and potentially other devices together, Amazon is creating a surveillance enterprise by which there could be sweeping community monitoring, even if Amazon claims to be collecting "minimal data" with Sidewalk. An Amazon spokesperson wrote that Sidewalk "uses one-way hashing keys, cryptographic algorithms and rotating device IDs to minimise data tied to customers" and that "routing information … for operating the network components of Sidewalk is automatically cleared every 24 hours." But Amazon already has detail on what is inside our homes and our minds that surpasses anything a municipality could clock—and with Sidewalk, the extension of data

seems imminent. People are continuing to pay Amazon for surveillance services, and while their neighbours or passers-by become the objects of surveillance, the Amazon customers themselves could be monitored— even if they are not at home.

The worst-case scenario could be when the aggregate of the Amazon Sidewalk/Amazon Guard Plus-enabled devices are shrieking, barking, flashing lights and generally reacting to every nuanced "different" algorithmic match outside of our homes. Our neighbourhoods will change, first with Amazon Sidewalk and various sonic disruptions from their devices. Backyard Sidewalk-enabled music, commands, controls, alarms, and warnings may increase neighbourhood conflict, as people have different preferences for outdoor space, and extend their devices' ranges outside their homes. The "outsourcing" of surveillance to automated algorithms will have an impact, whether it is as mild as devices being noisy or more severe such as misdirected emergency resources. Artificial Intelligence is great at pattern-matching—if it has learned the pattern. With so many new algorithms and services being deployed simultaneously in communities, the possible range of errors across all of these, and the potential for these errors to be magnified in aggregate, is concerning.

> *We are trading our peace and quiet for the clamour of Amazon's warnings.*

More seriously, valuable community resources may need to be deployed if Amazon Guard Plus algorithms claim a break-in in progress and people call for help to stop the ongoing alarms in their neighbourhoods. These resources (paid for by taxes) may be dispatched to investigate Alexa-enabled calls more frequently than required, as algorithms (and people) learn the patterns inside (and outside) of homes. Imagine people needing Emergency Services and not being able to get access to them because the responders are busy reacting to potentially miscalculating algorithms setting off alarms. This shift to algorithmic policing (by a private company) also in part replaces the police and/or the patrols of professional security firms. Machine-learning algorithms can "listen" but cannot truly see—even with cameras. Lastly, the various permutations and surveillance

combinations that customers can create with Amazon's product line-up may also create different kinds of heterogeneity that compromise the very security it is attempting to provide. Not all people's device combinations may necessarily work in the streamlined fashion that Amazon seems to be advertising, and with such heterogeneity often comes vulnerability.

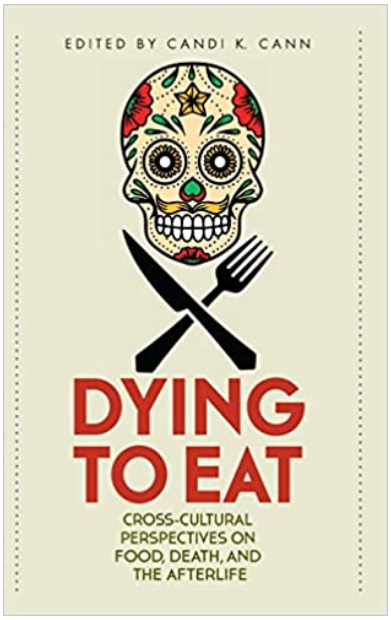
The kicker in this entire 'Amazon subsumes the Commons' product launch is that customers are paying for the whole thing: Amazon Ring and services, Amazon Guard Plus, Amazon Sidewalk network bandwidth "micro-funding", taxes for emergency responders, job forfeiture out of the community to algorithms, the list goes on. But most of all, we are paying with our way of being and we are moving our sense of social trust onto Amazon. We are trading our peace and quiet for the clamour of Amazon's warnings, we are trading our trust of each other (and perhaps in this case more rightly trust in the police) for trust in shared networks, and moving that trust to Amazon and other third parties to manage.

Featured Image by Tom Rumble on Unsplash.

This article is an expanded version of a shorter piece by S.A. Applin, which was published in Fast Company on March 31, 2021.

Dying to Eat

Rituparna Patgiri
July, 2021



Dying to Eat: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Food, Death, and the Afterlife (2018), edited by Candi K. Cann, is an interdisciplinary study that cuts across various approaches, including the anthropological, religious and ecological, to explore the relationship between food and death (pp. 1). The use of rich and textured materials such as images and detailed recipes makes the book captivating.

The book's scope is vast, as the authors examine the relationship between food

and death, drawing on examples from China, Korea, America, Mexico, Morocco and South Africa. This geographical diversity drives home the argument that food and death are interrelated worldwide. This argument is worth pondering over when scholarly discussions of the link between sustainability, nourishment and inequality have gained renewed attention due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Belik 2020). These deliberations have highlighted the global aspects of these issues and the need for a diverse and interdisciplinary approach, like the one used in *Dying to Eat*.

The book is divided into two parts – *Dining with the Dead* and *Eating After: Food and Drink in Bereavement and Remembrance*. The first section builds on examples from China, Korea, Mexico, and the United States to explore food's role in mediating between the living and the dead, enriching the existing literature on this topic. The second part looks at the role food plays in remembering the dead. Drawing on examples from Latin American, Morocco and South Africa, these chapters explore how food is used to maintain and negotiate social relationships after the deceased have left.

> *Food is used to maintain and negotiate social relationships after the deceased have left.*

Similar studies have been carried out in the past. Social anthropologists like M. N. Srinivas have looked at how mourners offer food to the deceased person's spirit every day until the purification ritual is performed amongst the Hindus in Coorg (Srinivas 1952). This food offering functions as a mediating agent between the dead and the living. Thus, when one reads *Dying to Eat,* it is interesting for the reader to relate it to existing anthropological works on food and death.

In this review, I will look at specific chapters from each section of the book to discuss how the contributors explore the association between food and death. Food has social, economic, cultural, political and religious meanings. It is also a mediating agent between life and death. As an integral part of death rituals, it helps the living to stay connected with the dead. Building upon such existing

scholarship on food as a mediating agent between life and death, the chapters are illustrations more than radical reconceptualisations. For instance, Emily S. Wu looks at how, amongst Han Chinese communities, food offerings to ancestors help keep their memory alive and include them in the community. Maintaining the connection between the dead and the living after death is a rather widespread concern, as Jung Eun Sophia Park's chapter also clarifies.

> *Building upon existing scholarship on food as a mediating agent between life and death, the chapters are illustrations more than radical reconceptualisations.*

Park argues that amongst the Koreans she studies, performing ancestral worship is seen as one of the most important kinship duties. Food is an integral part of this ritual as descendants of the dead ancestor cook and eat together to pay their respect. Young San Jae is one of the most significant eating rituals for the dead. It traditionally takes place on June 6th, on the occasion of Kore's Memorial Day. During this festival that involves singing, dancing, and food, the departed souls are ritually invited to eat food to ensure their social inclusion in the community.

Interestingly, certain types of food express the relationship between the living and the dead more than others. Drawing from the examples of China, Mexico and the United States, Candi K. Cann explores the role sugar, starch and wine play in remembering the dead. According to her, sugar – as found in foods like American Halloween candy, Mexican sugar skulls, Chinese wine and brown sugar funeral candy – is often used to lessen the pain of death (pp. 58).

Food is used to remember the dead, connect the dead and the living, and remind the living of their kinship duties. Certain foods like sugar and starch help the living mediate the pain of losing their close relatives and cope with their grief. Thus, specific dishes become known as 'funeral foods' – for example, the Maw Maw's Chess Pie in the American South, which is gifted and prepared to help remember the dead. Similarly, it is customary to serve couscous amongst Muslims in Morocco after a family member passes away, as described by David Oualaalou.

Gathering to eat couscous together helps remind everyone that mortality is a universal fact, and nobody can escape it.

> *Certain foods like sugar and starch help the living mediate the pain of losing their close relatives and cope with their grief. Thus, specific dishes become known as 'funeral foods'.*

Lacy Crocker and Gordon Fuller's chapter shows that food plays a central role in remembering the dead and connecting the living with the world of the dead amongst Jewish communities. During the mourning period, food with round shapes like lentils and hard-boiled eggs are often prepared, as they symbolise the life cycle and the continuity between the living and the dead.

In most cultures, mourning rituals – including eating and drinking – happen in stages. These phases can be broadly divided into prefuneral, funeral, post-funeral and post-post funeral (pp. 174). Radikobo Ntsimane explores how the Tswana and the Zulu use food to mourn the dead in four stages. These phases consist of social feasts to which no formal invitations are extended, as they are open to all. It gives the poor and the hungry the chance to eat a good meal. In return, they pray for peace for both the departed and the living.

The gendered nature of bereavement and grief is also noticeable across cultures and communities, as described in multiple chapters. Women are often in charge of preparing the food for ancestral worship and remembrance, overseeing all the preparation work and paying particular attention to following the dietary law. For instance, Jewish women must prepare the food according to the kosher rules, although following these is not limited to mourning ceremonies (pp. 111). Many of the recipes and traditions are passed from one generation of women to another. The role of women in food preparation has been emphasised across anthropological literature. For instance, amongst the Hindus, women prepare food for all rituals and ceremonials, including death (Dube, 1998).

> *Dying to Eat argues that the relationship between food and death rituals is*

universal, although its cultural manifestations are different.

Dying to Eat argues that the relationship between food and death rituals is universal, although its cultural manifestations are different. However, the inclusion of one or two essays from European contexts would have enhanced the geographical diversity of the book. Although there is a chapter on Jews, the field site is not mentioned. It is not my argument that to be 'global' in nature must mean including every region. However, since the book looks at cross-cultural comparisons, the omission of Europe is disappointing as it reinforces the exoticisation of these rituals and customs by omitting to show how Europeans participate in similar traditions.

Similarly, although essays explore the role of food in Asia, there is no reference to India and Hinduism. The relationship between food and death throughout India has been widely studied in both sociological and anthropological literature. For instance, M. N. Srinivas, in his study of the Coorg, had illustrated how food was at the centre of death rituals amongst the Hindus as early as 1952. The mourning period is marked by the observance of certain food taboos like non-consumption of areca nut and betel leaves when a relative passes away (Srinivas 1952). Other contemporary works have also explored how food is an integral part of death rituals amongst Hindus. For instance, women's role in cooking large amounts of food during death rituals and ceremonies was highlighted by Leela Dube (1998). Therefore, this omission can be considered a gap in the book's scope as it refers to almost every other major religion.

Notwithstanding these drawbacks, the book is an essential contribution to anthropological theory building on the relationship between food and death. This book brings together a rare collection of interdisciplinary essays on the relationship between food and death that will be of interest to anthropologists and students willing to deepen their cross-cultural understandings of death rituals.

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Image: Altar de Día de Muertos en Actopan, Hidalgo, México (2016). Cropped, by RubeHM. Found on Wikimedia Commons, (CC BY-SA 4.0).

ResonanceCast

Allegra
July, 2021

ResonanceCast is a new multimodal series that seeks to tease out timely shared concerns. After their articles have been published on Allegra Lab, we invite two authors to come together to discuss each other's texts and the wider-ranging issues both speak to. Their conversation is moderated by someone from the Allegra Lab editorial collective. We hope to continue this emergent, generative

and dialectic format into the future!

ResonanceCast #1: Vulnerability features Pascale Schild and Sandhya Fuchs talking about their articles ‘Reciprocal vulnerability in the face of patriarchal violence‘ and ‘Strange Bedfellows: On Trauma and Ethnographic Vulnerability‘

ResonanceCast #1: Vulnerability

Sandhya Fuchs
July, 2021

Podcast with Pascale Schild and Sandhya Fuchs, moderated by Ian M. Cook

Allegra Lab · ResonanceCast #1 Vulnerability

Referenced articles:

Reciprocal Vulnerability in the Face of Patriarchal Violence, by Pascale Schild

Strange Bedfellows: On Trauma and Ethnographic Vulnerability, by Sandhya Fuchs

About the ResonanceCast

ResonanceCast is a new multimodal series that seeks to tease out timely shared concerns. After their articles have been published on Allegra Lab, we invite two authors to come together to discuss each other's texts and the wider-ranging issues both speak to. Their conversation is moderated by someone from the Allegra Lab editorial collective. We hope to continue this emergent, generative and dialectic format into the future!

Dreams and Personal Pursuits in Seoul: Part II

James Bo Gyu Jang
July, 2021

The partial biographies presented in this piece are situated as stoppages that mark generational experiences of structural change in South Korea. In Part I, I considered how biographies of subjects do not necessarily fit within grand narratives of structural transformation specific to South Korea. The partial biographies of Part II illuminate further how subjects experience generational stoppages such as structural transformation through highly particularised ways and how these experiences can be accounted for by the Korean word *pok* (luck/fortune) that intersects with structural and gendered limitations.

As The Food Cart Vendor (introduced in Part I) had explained to me, people are either born with a lot of *pok* and live well, or not: those who do not find fortune in their lives, such as the chance encounters that might transform one's socio-economic position, often live difficult lives no matter how hard they try to make a

living.

> *As such, pok is a word that denotes a world in which each subject is born with dispositions toward becoming a successful person.*

Cosmological conceptions such as *pok* are more readily discussed by the generational cohort such as The Food Cart Vendor, The Driver, and The CEO (the latter two will be discussed in further detail in this piece) and less so by those of The Student's generation (introduced in Part I). What becomes apparent in these discussions is the linkage between the kinds of measures put in place by state-bureaucratic policies and the relation of *pok* to gender.

Those who grew up during Park Chung Hee's state-led mass participatory movements include a 60-year old retired *taeriunjŏn* driver (chauffeur service). Although The Driver, much like The Food Cart Vendor, left the province of *Kangwŏndo* to seek out work in Seoul (*mŏkko sallyŏgo* – to eat and live), he had spent his youth helping to reconstruct his village as a part of the *Saemaul Untong* (New Village Movement) that began in the 1970's. At that time, the disparity in material conditions between urban cities and rural villages had grown to such an extent that Park Chung Hee set out to restore the poverty-stricken farming life. Park Chung Hee had dedicated as much resources as was required in order to further mobilise the *Saemaul Untong*. After the NACF (National Agricultural Cooperation Foundation) donated 335 bags of unmarketable surplus cement to the countryside in order for villagers to use them for communal projects, the *Saemaul Untong* developed into a widescale development project that had been presented as a spiritual movement, one that would build a sense of self-help and self-reliance (Lee, 2011, pp. 364-365). The Driver had lamented that in contemporary Korean capitalism, there was no longer any drive toward mass coordination that he had reflected upon so fondly, but rather, that people no longer "work hard anymore". People were only "interested in their own work" (*chagi ilman hanikka*), and the cooperative labour conditions of communal village restoration projects such as the New Village Movement could no longer be

observed.

Photo by author

The CEO had been less fortunate in his youth. He had left his home due to domestic problems (*chiban sangt'aega an choasŏ*) and had found himself on the street, making himself an income cleaning people's shoes. What followed, however, was a chain of events, chance encounters, moments of luck attributed to the word *pok* that transformed The CEO's living conditions. After re-uniting with brothers and sisters who had scattered throughout Seoul, he had met by chance a manager at *H* car manufacturing company who had offered him a job on the marketing team that was designing advertisements. Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 104) has suggested that people do not necessarily move about in social space randomly, but that inherited capital offers a set of foundational trajectories that can lead to positions of equivalence. Unless, of course, people are subject to collective events such as war or crises in which life trajectories may shift accordingly (Bourdieu, 1984, 104). The CEO's life trajectory in the context of an industrialising nation, recovering from war and colonial occupation, had seen a rapid socio-economic shift in his life trajectory, from cleaning shoes on the street to rapid social mobility partly due to chance encounters. The CEO had spent his

youth under the chaotic conditions of a rapidly industrialising nation, and his *pok* (luck/fortune) did not arrive until some chance encounters had re-united him with family members, and he was offered a job position at *H* car manufacturing company during a time when men were hired in greater numbers in the heavy and chemical industries. This *pok* proliferated in subsequent years, as in the years he spent at *H* car manufacturing company he was able to amass enough resources to launch his own marketing company where he holds his role as a CEO.

The interaction between state mobilisations, *pok* and gender emerges in the way in which the disparity of opportunity in gendered national roles allow particular openings for *pok* to have agency in the life of The CEO, for rapid shifts in socio-economic trajectories that had allowed him to ride on the agency of his fortune. In taking this partial biography seriously, as a mark of a generational stoppage within the context of a rapidly industrialising society, I could not retreat into sceptical assumptions about whether or not to believe his story. Whether or not the events truly happened in the sequence of events he had re-counted, whether they truly happened at all – a case like that of the CEO reflects a cultural imaginary, of belief in the possibility for life trajectories to shift in the kinds of rapid ways in which The CEO had recounted.

> *I see it as an ethnographic imperative not to debate about whether or not such events took place, but to consider how such an imaginary through social processes can make the partial biography of The CEO, along with the biographies presented in Parts I and II, a reality.*

For those who shared their biographies with me, it was as much about narrating their lives as about enacting and transmitting inter-generational knowledges. To consider these partial biographies in their relations with structural transformations is – as Haraway (1988, 585-586) suggests – to be seeking out perspectives from points of view that cannot be known in advance, that promise extraordinariness: the knowing self is partial, never finished, stitched together imperfectly. The partial biographies can lead us to relations with narratives of a

situatedness within national projects which are experienced through divergent, conflicting, and personalised ways.

The interaction between *pok* and gender, and state-bureaucratic mobilisations can be understood through the partial biographies I have presented in Parts I and II. For those of the generation who grew up under Park Chung Hee leadership, they had experienced a rapid speeding up of time and space in which the state instituted a wide-scale movement toward industrialisation that produced a fast-paced work ethic that came to impact upon personal lives.

> *This speeding up of time and space in the wide-scale industrial movements of Park Chung Hee's authoritarian leadership is what Chang (1999) and Hae-Joang (2000) refer to as compressed modernity. What I want to emphasise is how each person experienced these alterations in time and space in distinctly personalised and gendered ways.*

It was influenced by their own life trajectories, access to resources and job security that had provided the means through which *pok* could flourish for those such as The CEO, while allowing The Food Cart Vendor to negotiate the production of income and a business of her own.

For The Food Cart Vendor, her dream to live in a large rural *hanok* (large traditional multi-room home) remained with her, and although she has now come to reside in a *tchokpang* (small one-room space with shared kitchen and bathroom) in the neighbourhood where she works, she nevertheless remains ambivalent to this fact, working to make a living running a food cart on the sidewalk. The Driver reflects upon his time participating in the *Saemaul Untong* in such a way as to render his memories as if they had been dreams; the new realities of contemporary Korean capitalism could no longer bring together the kinds of communal participation that he had experienced during his youth. The CEO, too, explained his chance encounters from living on the streets cleaning people's shoes for an income, to re-uniting with family and working at *H* car manufacturing company as almost impossible realisations of dreams he could not

have imagined working on the street as a shoe cleaner, that could not have happened at another time.

For The Student, his friendship groups, and those of his generation who occupy similar spaces living with family in residential apartments, they are yet to tell of their life trajectories. As Hae-Joang (2015, 446-448) suggests, those of The Student's generation have come to internalise the neoliberal logics of competition and compliance in which they were more inclined to micro-management, and time management in order to accumulate higher qualifications by foregoing leisure. And yet, The Student cannot be easily located within these spaces, choosing instead to pursue his personal ambitions. What contemporary Korean capitalism has made possible is this emergent contradictory condition: to live in the relative comfort that the former years of rapid industrialisation has brought, all the while being subject to the competing forces of neoliberal logics that demand of the youths of The Student's generation to commit to exhaustive laborious study in the hope to acquire qualifications. As I have outlined, The Student very much seeks alternative options, and flees these generational commitments in favour of personal pursuits that look beyond economic and social incorporation. This is not to suggest that cosmological concepts such as *pok* no longer have any relevance in the biographies of those growing up in contemporary South Korea – it is not yet clear what those of The Student's generation will have to say about their biographies and how *pok* will play out in their lives. This can only be reflected on as passing moments in one's life.

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Reciprocal Vulnerability in the Face of Patriarchal Violence

Pascale Schild
July, 2021

“Everything is research data.” As PhD students we must have heard this statement from teachers, mentors, and supervisors a hundred times. The advice points to the widely held assumption in anthropology that everything we experience in the field is worth writing about, even if we might (falsely) consider it an adversity or failure. Yet, what comes as well-meant encouragement for inexperienced researchers can also end up perpetuating a false and problematic image of fieldwork and ethnography as being detached from the researcher’s

emotions and vulnerabilities and the local politics of their writing. We cannot always decide freely and with the expected emotional distance and political commitment what we write about and what we leave out in our ethnographies. At times we are simply driven by our unresolved traumas and the suffering that we bring home with us from the field. Here, I want to discuss an experience of violence from my PhD fieldwork several years ago that I have neglected and repressed since then. One reason is the trauma of the violence I witnessed, but perhaps the most important one is the silencing of such testimonies in academia more generally. To unsettle the image of the privileged researcher in anthropology, I focus on the social relationships created by the intersection of our vulnerabilities as anthropologists with the suffering of the people we work with through the epistemological lens of "reciprocal vulnerability".

> *What comes as well-meant encouragement for inexperienced researchers can also end up perpetuating a false and problematic image of fieldwork and ethnography as being detached from the researcher's emotions and vulnerabilities.*

It was a mild autumn day in Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistani-administered Azad Kashmir. I was visiting my friend Ambar at home, to spend the morning with her and her family. As so often, we were talking and drinking tea in the front courtyard of her house, from where one had a good view over the *mohallah* (neighbourhood). From time to time, Ambar did some chores, washing the dishes and sweeping the floor. She was a young unmarried woman who was living with her mother, brothers and sisters in a small side-valley on the outskirts of Muzaffarabad. We had met in the city, where from 2009 to 2012 I was doing fieldwork on reconstruction after the 2005 earthquake. That morning, our mood was depressed. I had told Ambar about the day before, when I wanted to visit another woman friend, Bilqis, who lived on the nearby hillside across the street. As I approached Bilqis' house that day, I noticed from a distance that many guests, mostly older men, had gathered in the courtyard. To my surprise and consternation, the neighbours explained to me that Bilqis' wedding (*nikah*) was

taking place at that very moment – against her will.[i] That was why the guests had come to her home.

The terrible news about Bilqis' forced marriage made Ambar angry and deeply concerned. She lamented that Bilqis was very young and had only recently started higher education. The *Raje* people – that is, the people of Bilqis' kinship group (*biraderi*) – were very strict and violent, Ambar bitterly added. She claimed that in her own *biraderi* – the *Abbasi* group – women would not be married against their will. I rather doubted that. Her accusation, however, made it clear that criticism of patriarchal power relations could only be voiced in a concealed manner, such as in the social language of group rivalry.[ii]

> *Criticism of patriarchal power relations could only be voiced in a concealed manner, such as in the social language of group rivalry.*

As we were talking, Ambar and I suddenly heard terrible screaming coming from Bilqis' house. In the courtyard, a large fire had broken out. We saw that a few women quickly extinguished the fire. Meanwhile, from all over the *mohallah*, women left their homes and ran towards Bilqis' house to see what had happened and to help. Ambar and I did the same. On our way to the opposite slope, Ambar whispered "God forbid that it is Bilqis." But in the courtyard, about twenty women were standing around Bilqis, who sat huddled on the ground. Bilqis' body was wrapped in a large cloth. She wore a headscarf, so that only her face was visible, pale and covered with soot stains and small wounds. Blood dripped from her torn lips. She seemed impassive. With the help of some women, Bilqis' father lifted her on to a *carpai* (traditional bed). Getting up caused her pain. She whimpered. Her father and some other men from the *mohallah* then carried Bilqis on the *carpai* down to the main road, from where she was taken to the local hospital in a Suzuki bus.

Bilqis' mother explained that the fire was an accident and had spread from the gas cooker. However, most women did not seem to believe her. As we headed back to Ambar's home, a woman turned to us and whispered that she had noticed

the smell of petrol (*mati ka del ki bu ati hai*). This confirmed our terrible suspicion that Bilqis had attempted to commit suicide by setting herself on fire to escape her forced marriage. The burns were so severe that she had to be immediately transferred to the hospital in Rawalpindi, five hours away. There, Bilqis died from her injuries four days later.

> *Behind closed doors, most women did not believe it was an accident.*

In the following days, I was terrified and paralysed. Seemingly out of nowhere, crying fits shook my body. I could not believe that Bilqis was dead: the young, cheerful, and ambitious woman who had wanted to become a medical doctor. But even deeper was the shock that she had been driven to suicide by a forced marriage and that this brutal violence had to be accepted by those around her, including myself. Behind closed doors, most women did not believe it was an accident. They considered Bilqis' death a forced suicide, a desperate attempt to escape a forced marriage. They kept telling me how cruel and morally wrong it was to force a woman into marriage. However, despite the rumours of her violent death, "nothing" happened. There was neither a police investigation nor a public outcry. Bilqis' self-immolation was treated as a tragic but normal accidental death. The reason was that, in many ways, it was a normal death – not for me, but for the women around me and in other countries of South and Central Asia (such as Afghanistan, Iran, and India) and Africa who live with this facet of patriarchy and domestic violence (for an anthropological reading of female suicide as resistance, see Billaud 2012). Bilqis' death spread fear and reminded women of their powerlessness when it comes to their lives and bodies. This also affected me. Witnessing the cruelty of a forced suicide for which no one was held accountable felt like heavy hands wrapped around our throats, choking us, scaring us to death, and silencing our voices. We were reduced to rumours and silent outrage, grief, and anger as the only way to resist patriarchal violence.

We attended Bilqis' funeral and performed the mourning rituals at her home. After some days, we all went back to our lives. I went back to my research and,

later, home to Switzerland.

> *In many ways, it was a normal death – not for me, but for the women around me.*

I have never written about the violence I have witnessed and experienced in the field. I was ashamed of my silence and cowardice, although no one in the field accused me of that. I felt guilty for not having done anything to ensure justice for this young woman's violent death. It was not only that Bilqis was my friend, but that I was an anthropologist. I expected myself to act as an ally of the people I worked with and to speak up against the violence and oppression they were suffering. This moral expectation did not match the scared and traumatised woman I had become in the face of patriarchal violence. My professional self-image crumbled. It was painful to learn that the feeling of shame and of having failed as an anthropologist and ally is an effect not only of the violence and gendered silences *in the field* but also of the male-dominated heroic image of the politically engaged researcher that prevails in anthropology *at home*. In this way, my experience as a woman researcher was shaped by power relations in the field that were inseparable from those at home. I feared that to write about my inability to speak would cast doubt on my professional work, political commitment, and moral integrity as an anthropologist.

> *As anthropologists, we are not always in a privileged position to oppose and speak up against oppression and violence.*

Rethinking engaged anthropology from our embodied experience of fieldwork, Maya Berry and her colleagues criticise the fact that "activist anthropologists are expected to engage in lone acts of bravery in order to shed light on the struggles of others with less relative privilege" (Berry et al. 2017, 547). This image ignores that the power relations within the societies and groups with whom we work can operate on our bodies and minds in equally constraining and oppressive ways. As anthropologists, we are not always in a privileged position to oppose and speak up

against oppression and violence. At times, we are terrified, vulnerable, and condemned to silence in much the same way as our research interlocutors. Indeed, the ways in which cruelty "invades our minds and bodies poses a challenge to the idea of the researcher who is inherently privileged in relation to her field" (2017, 550). Despite the reflexive turn in anthropology, it is often still precisely this idea of privilege that shapes our understanding of professionalism and political engagement. The false and damaging self-image of the privileged researcher in anthropology is also one of the reasons why so few women anthropologists write about sexual assault in the field, even though we know that many have experienced it in one way or another. It seems that there is fundamentally a "'shut up and take it' mentality" (2017, 538) in academia toward gendered and other forms of violence in the field. We are expected to remain silent about our traumas so that we conform to the prevailing image of the heroic and adventurous able-bodied, male, and white researcher. This silencing of the fieldworker's experience of abuses, fear, loss, and grief disguises the contradictions of politically engaged research and ends up undermining anthropology's longstanding struggle for reflexivity in academia. Rather than understanding our vulnerabilities as a failure and lack of professionalism and political engagement, we need to ask how we can produce ethnography through engaged research in violent contexts from which we cannot be completely detached: "How does our involvement in patriarchal relationships, as marked but relatively privileged women, affect local dynamics, the knowledge we produce, and our methodologies?" (2017, 540).

> *We were reduced to rumours and silent outrage, grief, and anger as the only way to resist patriarchal violence.*

From my fieldwork experience in Azad Kashmir, I have only a partial answer to this question. My involvement as a woman ethnographer in local power relations and society exposed me to patriarchal violence. At the heart of this "ethnographic vulnerability" lies an intimate intersection of my witnessing of violence with the suffering of the women I worked with. I experienced, at least partially, on my own

body and mind the oppression and silencing that shapes the lives of my research interlocutors. This is not to say that I was not privileged over them. I was able to leave the field and escape certain forms of violence against women, forms that I was not exposed to at home. And yet, the trauma of witnessing violence, concerns about the well-being of my friends, and the vague feeling of having forsaken them stayed with me – and always will. Privilege is relative and can vanish in certain situations. While in the field, our shared experience of Bilqis' violent death and the patriarchy's cruelty bound us together through networks of what I understand as "reciprocal vulnerability". Looking at researchers' vulnerabilities through the analytical lens of reciprocity allows us to focus on the ways in which shared experiences of violence, fear, loss, and grief create relationships and exchange between the anthropologist and their interlocutors. The question is: what do we give to each other as vulnerable women in the face of patriarchal violence? As I see it, vulnerabilities not only render lives precarious but also foster social alliances and possibilities for healing, mutual support, and resistance to violence and oppression (see also Butler 2015). In many encounters and conversations with women after Bilqis' death, I experienced solidarity in how we sad and scared women consoled each other and reassured each other of common moral values, such as the rejection of coercion. Marriage, as the women assured me and each other again and again, must not take place without the consent of the bride.

> *I experienced solidarity in how we sad and scared women consoled each other and reassured each other of common moral values*

Perhaps being an ally in the field and at home, sometimes, means precisely that: accepting our powerlessness as anthropologists, which we share with others in and across certain places and times. In this acceptance, I believe, lies the courage and power to break the silence in academia about our own vulnerable bodies and minds as researchers by participating in and reflexively writing about our interlocutors' informal and suppressed networks of survival and care in the face of violence and death.

Podcast

Here is the ResonanceCast podcast where Pascale Schild discusses further on the topic of 'Vulnerability' with Sandhya Fuchs, moderated by Ian M. Cook.
You can also listen to our other podcasts at the Allegra Lab soundcloud.

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Footnotes:

[i] In the Islamic context of Azad Kashmir, *nikāh* is when the marriage contract is signed by both the bride and the groom. This usually takes place months and sometimes years before the couple is actually married and the bride leaves for the groom's home (*ruxastī*).

[ii] *Biraderi* refers to a person's patrilineal descent group going back to a common ancestor. Despite the solidarities between *biraderi* groups and their members as neighbours, friends, or relatives (through marriage), there are also rivalries and conflicts among them, evident, for instance, in social and political forms of

exchange, preferential marriages, and prejudices.

Featured picture (cropped) by Abuzar Xheikh, courtesy of Unsplash.com

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Dreams and Personal Pursuits in Seoul: Part I

James Bo Gyu Jang
July, 2021

In this piece, I document partial biographies of two residents of Seoul that were narrated across the course of fieldwork between 2019 and 2020. These fieldnotes consider what these two interlocutors, at opposite ends of a generation, have to say about the rapid political, social, and economic transformations to have taken place in South Korea across the past 50 years. I draw attention to what Fortis and Küchler (2021) refer to as biographical time, the ways in which persons live in and navigate time. Time is navigated by both an inner experience and by how the passing of time can be gauged in intersubjective and generational ways; particular stoppages caused by the external object world allow a multiplicity of viewpoints. I reflect upon these distinct generational and gendered experiences of growing up in South Korea during two separate periods of structural transformation.

Biographical stoppages mark generational experiences of structural transformation.

Rather than considering how persons are incorporated into grand discourses of structural transformation, I inquire how the partial biographies are situated in relation to the political, industrial, and economic transformations to have taken place across the past 50 years, as biographical stoppages mark generational experiences of structural transformation. I begin with who I will call in this piece The Student, the term by which most of those who are of his age are referred to in South Korea. Those of The Student's generation are met with the increasing realisation that they only have two options in which to negotiate their future trajectories. This is to either study and labour, and consequently burn out, or to willingly or unwillingly flee self-exploitation (Hae-Joang, 2015, 458). The Student, as I will show, has chosen to pursue the latter option through personal pursuits.

The Student is a 24-year old who is employed at an electronics store in walking distance from his apartment complex in Seoul. Although I refer to him as The Student, he sees himself to have fallen behind his peers with whom he finished high school. He was one of the first among his friends who received a notification that it was his time to enter the military service. When he emerged two years later, most of his friends were about to or had already decided on a direction in which they would take their lives post-university and almost none of them had completed their service. Although military conscription applies from the time Korean men turn 18 or 19, given that most of The Student's friends did not receive notification for mandatory military conscription some years after him, The Student found it somewhat unusual to have received a notification so early on. Not only did his friends verify that this was a peculiar case, but also that his decision not to defer his service could be seen to be an uncommon choice among young men such as The Student.

Photo by author

The Student often expresses his frustrations over having to assist people who he describes as middle-aged women and men, typically called by the general terms *ajumma* and *ajŏssi*. These suggest a particular generational and relational point in one's life in which one is no longer considered young, but rather, someone who bears familial and societal responsibility. The Student laments that *ajumma* and *ajŏssi* often call on the electronics store to order items that cannot be delivered but must be picked up in person at the shop. It is not only this, but he often complains about how he dislikes serving customers in general, even though it is a part of his job and states that during any break he can catch, he will go to the rooftop of the shop for a breath of fresh air and something to eat. Such expressions of frustrations are no desire to change his circumstances in particular, although he often discusses how he will quit his job soon to study or to move to Australia. He has expressed an interest in Perth and in getting to know my friends there, which he imagines is a kind of utopia regarding personal freedom. At the very least, it is a space where he imagines he can pursue his own desires without the pressures of parental guidance and societal norms that limit

his possibilities by which to pursue his *kkum*(dreams) of becoming a film director.

> *A hegemonic form of maleness became instituted through mandatory military conscription.*

Mandatory conscription was introduced through the enactment of the military service law in 1949, which had not been effectively implemented until 1957, given post-war instability (Moon, 2005, pp. 45). Although there had not been such a long history of nation-wide conscription prior to Japanese occupation, it became a prevalent force to producing polarised gendered formations during the emergent years of South Korean industrialisation (Moon, 2005, p. 45). Seungsook Moon (2005, pp. 50-55) argues that the Park Chung Hee years (1961–1979), when the state mandated authoritarian policies including mass-participatory movements toward industrialisation, were the critical time in which **a** hegemonic form of maleness became instituted through mandatory military conscription and such ideals spread via the media and in education. In that period, South Korean men were expected to perform the ideals of what constitutes a man – and for those who attempted to evade this incurred punishments. For The Student, along with many young men perceive of conscription, his service, as a time that had impeded on his personal pursuit – in his case: film-making.

> *Neoliberal restructuration had resulted in contradictory and complex conditions.*

Others that I had spoken to had not had such an issue with conscription. In fact, they had seen it to just as something one does in the hope of making it out the other side. The Student, however, was adamant to pursue his dream, and this might have as much to do with the limitations and potentialities imposed on those of his generation through the implementation of neoliberalism during what South Koreans refer to as the IMF (International Monetary Fund) period. Since 1987, when the South Korean market opened up to international trade, the IMF led neoliberal restructuration in the early 2000’s and the democratisation process

that was integral to this time had altered the forms of work to eradicate life-time job security and produced emergent conditions of job casualisation (Lee, 2010, pp. 30-33; Song, 2010, pp. 2-3). The generation of youths that was immediately afflicted by these changes, who many had referred to as the 'new generation', quickly adapted to the possibilities that the changes made available, and embraced the desire to express themselves through appearance, cultural taste, and refutation of social norms (Hae-Joang, 2015, 438). Hae-Joang (2015, 455) suggests that the generation that followed had already been incorporated into neoliberal logics that transformed Korean children into workers who met the demands of the neoliberal economy. Although neoliberal restructuration had resulted in contradictory and complex conditions, produced through unstable labour conditions and new forms of creative expression among youths, The Student diverges from his generation in that rather than pursuing the acquisition of professional specialisations through time management and respect for his parent's wishes, he had utilised his time working at an electronics store in order to consider the best way toward pursuing his dream.

> *What she does have in common with the women of her generation is what Abelmann calls a melodramatic sensibility.*

The Food Cart Vendor is a 72-year old woman who runs a food cart on the sidewalk of a neighbourhood in Seoul. I lack sufficient ethnographic resources to fully account for The Food Cart Vendor's life trajectory and her subjecthood. As an unmarried woman who has spent the past 40 years in Seoul working at various side street food vendors to make a living, she never fulfilled the social expectations of marriage instilled in family and nation-building that many of the women who belong to her generation had come to negotiate. What she does have in common with the women of her generation is what Abelmann calls a melodramatic sensibility. The Food Cart Vendor's biographical talk and her enormous capacity for self-reflection denote the gendered tension and ambivalences of daily life (Abelmann, 2003, 283). For The Food Cart Vendor, just as the women of Abelmann's ethnography, does not represent economic and

political dispossession, nor does she consider herself an activist. And yet, this ordinariness can take on dramatic sensibilities. For The Food Cart Vendor, never having married is an ambivalent fact, and in her struggles on the sidewalk to make a living she is less concerned with never having married than with paying the rent of her *tchokpang* (a small one-room space with shared bathroom and kitchen). The Food Cart Vendor's life trajectory is not so much a political move toward activism. But it does reflect a gendered generational consequence of not having married given that the resources of her family home were transmitted to her older brothers. Within The Food Cart Vendor's personal and biographical stops, the ordinariness of her daily life is intertwined with gendered struggle, located in the ambivalences and dramas of daily life.

> *In her struggles on the sidewalk to make a living she is less concerned with never having married than with paying the rent of her tchokpang.*

Jesook Song's ethnography provides some anthropological clues as to why unmarried women of The Food Cart Vendor's generation are absent from ethnographies of South Korea. It is not as such that unmarried women of her generation do not exist in South Korea. What Song's ethnography reveals is how the particular biographical stoppage of neoliberalism allows us to see the divergent forms of female subjectivity across these two periods of social, political and economic transformation. It thereby allows one to gauge the kinds of conditions under which The Food Cart Vendor spent her youth. Jesook Song (2014, p. 78), for instance, documents the women who continued to pursue personal affectations as their lifestyles converged with the production of plastic subjects, the fitting and moulding of persons into unstable job markets in the emergence of neoliberal capitalism in South Korea. This convergence overshadowed the leftist-leaning attempts to counter authoritarian and capitalist production, as when women sought out ways of integrating their personal pursuits for leisure (such as travel and alternative forms of communal life) that aligned with their personal identifications of *pihon yosong* (un-associated with marriage).

The ordinariness of her daily life is intertwined with gendered struggle.

This form of identification intentionally rejected the normative familial expectations of seeking out economic stability through marital life (2014, p. 21-27). Song shows how women who identify as *pihon yosong* instead negotiate the constant challenges by men at the workplace as well as those of family members who criticise their active disinterest in marital life, and their pursuit of living alone. *Pihon yosong* provides some clues as to why women such as The Food Cart Vendor are so rarely encountered in ethnography of South Korea. *Pihon yosong* is a form of identification that emerged out of the IMF and neoliberal structural changes, marking a point when female social formations could diverge from widespread state-produced female subjectivity during industrialisation, aimed at inculcating normative reproductive and domestic duties for women (Moon, 2005, 75). This is further reflected in the state's active shaping of feminine subjectivities through calls for rational household management during the years in which The Food Cart Vendor spent her youth (Moon, 2005, 90).

Acknowledgements

For The Food Cart Vendor, to whom I promised a short visual piece but whose story is better captured here.

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Strange Bedfellows: On Trauma and Ethnographic Vulnerability

Sandhya Fuchs
July, 2021

I never expected that laughter would be part of the solution. I had set out on fieldwork with rather vague notions about the importance of sensitivity and silence when researching intimate stories of violence and loss. However, an unforeseen form of interaction would help me build trust with my interlocutors. In the midst of conversations about the most painful moments in their lives, my respondents seemed to find relief and agency in opportunities to laugh with me, and also frequently at me.

In the autumn of 2016, I arrived in North India to research a unique piece of legislation: the 1989 Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes Prevention of Atrocities Act. The so-called Atrocities Act aims to prevent and punish violence against Dalits (ex-untouchables) and Adivasis (tribals) by members of upper castes and has polarized political opinion in India. Despite its historical importance as India's only hate crime law, the social life of the Atrocities Act had not yet been subject to dedicated ethnographic enquiry.

> *How could I establish intimacy and trust without raising concerns that I might exploit vulnerabilities of already traumatized families?*

I embarked on my research in Rajasthan, an Indian state that has consistently recorded exceptionally high of violence against Dalits in India, aiming to peek behind the curtain of statistics and conviction rates. How was the Atrocities Act experienced, perceived and mobilized by survivors of caste-based violence? To answer this question, I planned to trace how attacks on Dalits in Rajasthan were reported, investigated and eventually turned into cases in lower courts.

However, this goal gave rise to a complex ethical dilemma: As a European woman who moved around Dalit communities to learn about atrocity cases, how could I establish intimacy and trust without raising concerns that I might exploit vulnerabilities of already traumatized families? Though I had lived in India during much of my childhood and was always accompanied by local activists and members of affected communities during my research, I was anxious to ensure that people felt in charge of their own narratives. How could I communicate and write about atrocities without taking fragile stories of injury out of the hands of communities that had been marginalized and hurt repeatedly? How could I encounter survivors and ask to hear about their experiences without "feasting" on their stories and heightening the power differential between us (Chatterjee 2013)? A month into fieldwork, I – quite literally – stumbled across an unexpected answer.

The Buffalo Incident

On an unbearably hot day, I sat in a cool, shaded room inside a small cement house in Rajasthan's Jhunjhunu district. Next to me, meticulously sewing a new sari blouse, was Rupa Devi, a forty-year-old mother of three who belonged to the Meghwal Dalit community. Rupa Devi's husband had registered a complaint against four upper-caste men under the Atrocities Act. The men, who belonged to the high-ranking Rajput caste, had beaten up and seriously injured Rupa Devi's two sons when they had demanded fair wages for the agricultural labour they performed on the Rajput fields. Subsequently, the Rajputs had vandalized Rupa Devi's family home and insulted her in front of the entire village. That afternoon Rupa Devi openly spoke about the fear, anger and humiliation she had experienced. Soon we were joined by her mother-in-law and daughter. Together they talked.

> *'We don't really have buffaloes in Germany,' I tried to explain, 'plus I am not wearing my glasses.'*

However, the women had not always been this open with me. In fact, I had gained their trust through a rather curious series of events. A week earlier, I had come to visit Rupa Devi's family along with a local Dalit activist called Sonali. We wanted to learn about the dynamics behind the violence and understand the ongoing legal process the family was embroiled in. While Sonali as a local Dalit woman had immediately inspired trust, the family had been more hesitant to talk to me. Though I spoke Hindi fluently, I was less familiar with the local Marwari dialect and clearly looked like a foreigner. Rupa Devi later told me that she had feared I might tell her story in a way that would bring further shame to her family. Sensing the family's discomfort upon our arrival and determined to let Sonali do her work, I had excused myself to use the bathroom. Unfortunately, I had misunderstood the directions Rupa Devi had given me. Having turned left instead of right, I suddenly found myself face to face with a giant water buffalo instead of a bathroom. Letting out an audible squeak, I tripped over a rope, flew through the air and landed firmly on my bottom in front of a giggling horde of children. As I recovered, I thought that the accident was unlikely to inspire much confidence in my research.

However, I was wrong. The 'buffalo incident', as the children quickly termed it, inspired a fair amount of ridicule**.** "We don't really have buffaloes in Germany," I tried to explain, "plus I am not wearing my glasses**."** This defensive plea only caused more laughter. But it also broke the ice.

Sonali and I stayed with Rupa Devi's family for a week. I spent a lot of time re-enacting the buffalo incident for the amusement of the children. Soon, I learned that it was precisely this willingness to show vulnerability and joke – often at my own expense – that convinced Rupa Devi that I was someone she could confide in. In a strange juxtaposition, I was only granted insight into the family's painful feelings around the violence once they were able to *stop* thinking of me as a serious professional.

The day I watched Rupa Devi sew, she said something that struck me.

*Ever since we were attacked, activists, politicians and NGO people swarm around wanting information. It makes us feel like everyone is talking about us even while we are in the room. So, I didn't trust you at first. But that now we can talk to you like this, jokes and all, like family, it makes me feel like we are alike, like you are our daughter: that you will listen and not write something I don't want. Because when we can joke with someone, it means they are one of us (*apna*) and we are no longer just a victim family (*pidit pariwar*) to a researcher.*

Humour as Humanization?

I do not wish to make light of the suffering families like Rupa Devi have experienced. Nor am I here to advocate that every fieldworker should engage in slapstick comedy when trying to build intimate relationships. However, Rupa Devi's statement highlighted something important: She wanted to retain agency over her story after disclosing it and to trust the person in whose hands she placed it. In her eyes, the buffalo incident had broken down the boundary and hierarchy between researcher and researched by giving her family an opportunity to laugh at an outsider who held the power to share her experience with the world. The incident had humanized me and exposed my vulnerabilities, which gave her family a new feeling of control. The fact that I had clearly shown that I could be laughed at and laughed with like a child allowed her to return to a role she was confident in: mother, care-taker, and teacher.

Anthropologists have often discussed how their own performances of folly can be productive in negotiating access and establishing ties of friendship in the field. German anthropologist Klaus Peter Koepping has praised anthropologists' willingness to place themselves "at the disposal" (1987, 29) of their interlocutors, as a unique way to create conversations at eye-level. Meanwhile, recent anthropological scholarship has increasingly emphasized the need to write *with* respondents, rather than about them (e.g. Blasco and Hernandez 2020).

> *Vulnerability and humour on part of the ethnographer can engender a sense of shared humanity.*

Though rarely discussed in this context, I have often thought that such insights are especially relevant for debates about respectful ways to understand violence, trauma and marginality through ethnographic engagement. Commonly, anthropological accounts have revealed how brutality and suffering create relational trauma, which throws social interaction into question, and leads to a loss of voice (Robben et al. 2000; Lester 2013). Efforts to elicit narratives of

violent events from survivors, therefore, creates the potential for re-traumatization (Mulla 2014). Consequently, anthropologists have proposed that ethnographers should impart a sense of agency and relief through the very act of listening (Das 1990; Gupta, Bhattacharya and Priya 2019): Listening, Richard Burghart writes, "transforms" both listener and speaker, whose full humanity is acknowledged by being heard (2008, 300). Silent acts to hearing, thus, allow ethnographers to grasp the meaning and effects of violence (Kidron 2009).

However, Rupa Devi's words highlight something that goes beyond the mutual respect and acknowledgment imparted though silence and listening. By emphasising that my willingness to be joked with made me 'one of them,' she showed that vulnerability and humour on part of the ethnographer can engender a sense of shared humanity and lead to interactions that feel socially 'normal' and more equal.

Taking a Joke

Rupa Devi's daughter told me that my (un-)intentional performances of imperfection, and the laughter it inspired, convinced her there was a mutual willingness to drop defences: "You falling down, and us laughing about it, showed me that you were still learning about our life and unsure of yourself," she said, "so we understood that you weren't some big foreign Madam. And that you were playing with the children and acting it out for them like a big sister, that was really nice!"

> *And as one of them, I could be trusted with their pain.*

The way I chose to handle the buffalo incident and the ensuing ridicule indicated to the women that I was here at their 'disposal,' to be instructed on local life and to be interacted with as a person willing to learn. Letting the children laugh at me revealed a willingness to be part of a family. This insight gave Rupa Devi a sense of control over her narrative as it travelled out into the world. By letting the family poke fun at my expense, I had given myself to them in a way that made me

theirs. And as one of them, I could be trusted with their pain.

Making a Joke

Rupa Devi also stressed that her family could laugh *with* me. During my time with the family, I not only learned how to take a joke, but also how to make one in return. Hesitant at first, considering my role as a visitor and the family's painful recent history, I soon realized that the family appreciated banter and mutual teasing. It entertained them, provided relief and a sense of normalcy, while reinforcing the idea that I was not separate from them. At the most difficult time of their lives our attempts at shared humour created a sense of mutuality: they hinted at a potential for equality, which would not have arisen otherwise.

Though anthropological studies of humour as a cultural practice and as a methodological tool are limited, scholars have explicitly acknowledged its power to build rapport and trust (Swinkels and de Konig 2016). While humour can be one of the most difficult cultural practices for anthropologists to grasp, and engage in, once mastered, it forms the strongest bonds of intimacy. Eva van Roekel's work in Argentina highlights how 'laughing together' allows ethnographers to better access and understand hidden meanings in post-conflict settings (2016).

Vulnerable Conclusions

My fieldwork with survivors of caste atrocities in Rajasthan revealed that, above all, many survivors wanted to be engaged with as three-dimensional interlocutors – people with history, emotion and agency – and not simply ‘victim families’. However, my respondents also taught me something more.

When ethnographic vulnerability becomes a medium for humour, it can do something anthropologists of violence have often struggled to accomplish. It can give survivors a new sense of control by reducing professional distance, while simultaneously providing a moment of escape for both sufferer and researcher.

This is neither an easy nor entirely comfortable insight, and raises a number of new questions: How can humour be used sensitively and productively during fieldwork? How can ethnographers engage in humour respectfully to create

agency, rather than to limit it? Humour taken too far can demean and heighten power differentials rather than reducing them. How can ethnographers walk the line?

> *Laughter can mask suffering and painful reality, while simultaneously representing an orientation towards hope.*

As someone whose background often makes me both insider and outsider in India, I am inclined to propose an *openness* towards humour, and a conscious preparedness to embrace opportunities for joking and laughter when interlocutors offer them. I don't believe that humour can, or should be, used strategically in anthropological research. Doing so would defeat the organic power of connection that inheres in humoristic practices and shared laughter. However, after almost two years of fieldwork on caste-based atrocities I am, nonetheless, here to make a case for ethnographic vulnerability and humour as a way to foster feelings of agency in interlocutors, who are anxious to maintain jurisdiction over personal stories after violent rupture: a joke, silliness, a willingness to be laughed at, or even moments of teasing and poking fun can be sensitive ways to build connections.

However, rather than proposing an active ethnographic mission to *use* humour, I believe that we should endeavour to actively learn to recognize opportunities and moments when we might receive and return it. In the aftermath of violence laughter can mask suffering and painful reality, while simultaneously representing an orientation towards hope; anticipation of the return of joy (Smith Bowen 1964). As anthropologists we should find a way to be part of that.

Toni, a teenage Dalit girl whose family had been attacked by upper caste men following a land dispute, provides a fitting conclusion to these reflections:

'My family likes joking about the things you say and do sometimes. It is nice to laugh and to feel like we get to observe somebody who is here to write about our lives. It means we aren't always the one being looked at and we are more than the

atrocity.'

Podcast

Here is the ResonanceCast podcast where Sandhya Fuchs discusses further on the topic of 'Vulnerability' with Pascale Schild, moderated by Ian M. Cook.
You can also listen to our other podcasts at the Allegra Lab soundcloud.

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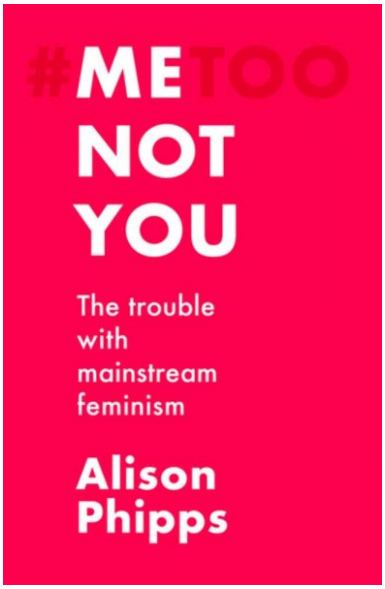
Me, Not You

One Pusumane
July, 2021

In *Me, Not You*, Alison Phipps uses the #MeToo Movement as a backdrop to her work to illustrate how privileged white women using mainstream feminism as a conduit, can silence, side-line and sacrifice both marginalised women and minorities. The kind of feminism promoted by media, institutions, corporations and the state, is what Phipps posits as "mostly Anglo-American public feminism" (pp.5). The work centres race as a springboard on a discussion of how white feminism, whether reactionary or mainstream, plays a role in violently reasserting whiteness. This scholarly work is essential, especially in a time when race is central to various movements across the world- from #BlackLivesMatter in the USA to #EndSARS movement in Nigeria. The reality is that across the globe there is a collective outcry for social justice which highlights the need for intersectionality within and across movements.



Intersectionality underscores the need to account for how factors such as class, gender and race inscribe meanings to the experiences of individuals.

Although scholars like Cho, Crenshaw and McCall (2013) and Hancock (2016) argue that intersectionality is critical to shifting approaches to politics, theory and methodology, others have dismissed it as "merely descriptive" (Alexander-Floyd 2012: 5). Moreover, some scholars have argued that intersectionality runs the risk of over-politicising the role of race within feminist discourses, which can potentially undermine the goal of feminism (Zack, 2005). Through gaslighting other scholars who raise the importance of race and the intersectionality of

struggles, mainstream feminism privileges “white bourgeois wounds at the expense of others” (pp.80), making it easier to sacrifice marginalised people. Phipps argues that this is another way of saying “Me, Not You”. Intersectionality is central to feminist scholarship as it can help disrupt knowledge production and theorising that takes place in the “context of colonial and imperialistic conditionalities” (Wane,2008:193). Particularly, intersectionality underscores the need to account for how factors such as class, gender and race inscribe meanings to the experiences of individuals. There are myriad ways in which gender is experienced and white feminism turns to curtail this nuance. It is important to explore “alternative school of thoughts and counter hegemonic narratives” in feminist discourse and activist work (Tamale, 2020:43 ; Oloka-Onyango and Tamale 1995) because these varied “femininities of women do not easily fall into neat categories” (Mekgwe 2007: 21). As such, accounting for bodies that transcend gender binaries and norms is essential both within and outside academia walls. In her work, Phipps uses trans bodies to demonstrate the exclusionary politics of white feminism.

The book title is a play on the #MeToo movement, and Phipps suggests that the “Me” is about her as a white feminist and the “Not You”, a pointer to how white bourgeois mainstream feminism excludes. Because ‘the personal is political’, white identity’s narcissism is a narcissism under threat despite its position of domination and control. To counteract both mainstream or reactionary and trans-exclusive feminisms harness the ‘outrage economy’ (pp.36) to shape the political grammar and social markers of issues that require visibility. Because the “colonial/modern gender” system “accommodates rather than disrupt[s]” binary framings for understanding power (Lugones, 2008:23), mainstream feminism reinscribes this binary by policing bodies. Simply put, the #MeToo power dynamics reflect how carceral feminism and colonialism are inextricably linked. By other[ing] the bodies and communities of ‘natives’, the coloniser laid the necessary groundwork to justify violence instigated against these communities. An intersectional approach enables to visibilise race in activist discourses and knowledge production systems that play a role in [re]creating the ’other‘. Adding

to this idea of creating the *other*, Lugones (2018:29) argues that "they [indigenous people] were understood as animals in the deep sense of *without gender*, sexually marked as female, but without the characteristics of femininity". By categorising 'natives who were deemed the 'other', the violence experienced by these bodies was deemed necessary to bring them closer to western values of civilisation (Said,1989; Sarukkai, 1997). For example, as trans bodies do not conform to gender essentialisms and dualisms (Chatterjee,1986), white feminism views and frames them as departing from western civilisation thus justifying the policing of such bodies.

> *Within the purview of politics of respectability, carceral feminism is dovetailed by a narrative of feminism that polices bodies that depart or deviate from what a woman is 'supposed to be'.*

Turning to the idea of respectability politics and justified violence, Kendall (2020, pp. 88) argues that "the structure of respectability requires adherence, not autonomy, and relies on dominant norms to create a hierarchy of privilege inside marginalised communities". Within the purview of this politics of respectability, carceral feminism is dovetailed by a narrative of feminism that polices bodies that depart or deviate from what a woman is 'supposed to be'. Because trans-bodies and the agency of individuals who participate in sex work threaten the "ideal woman" trope, white bourgeois mainstream feminism tends to police and "correct" these bodies. The very notion of carceral feminism hinges on punishing bodies that somewhat overstep the boundaries of what it means to be a woman within the confines of white bourgeois mainstream feminism, reflecting the link between carceral feminism and colonialism.

Throughout six chapters, Phipps addresses the book to her fellow white women/feminists and outlines how they can be active participants in fighting against sexual violence through their capacity to comprehend the intersectionality of struggles. Phipps effectively acknowledges her privilege as a white woman and perhaps, a scholar who is anxious about her whiteness while writing on issues of

race (Ahmed, 2007). Many of the arguments she advances are nothing new for other scholars writing on how white women benefit from mainstream feminism and act as gatekeepers. However, her positionality allows her to put into dialogue different scholars and to thread together a consistent argument against mainstream feminism.

> *Being a victim and a perpetrator is not mutually exclusive as white women can still be victims of sexual violence yet be perpetrators of white supremacy through political whiteness.*

The primary basis of mainstream feminism hinges on transnational solidarity over women's issues, reflecting a universalistic approach that considers women's issues as transcending nation-states and other markers of difference. By acknowledging her privilege, she advances one of the book's fundamental premises: being a victim and a perpetrator is not mutually exclusive as white women can still be victims of sexual violence yet be perpetrators of white supremacy through political whiteness. Phipps deploys political whiteness to describe the relationship between mainstream feminism and white supremacist systems to highlight different types of behaviours and values that help concretise white supremacy. This includes "narcissism, alertness to threat and an accompanying will to power" (pp.6). She suggests that the interaction between supremacy and victimhood produces political whiteness which:

begins from the premise that white subjectivities are shaped by the structural position of white supremacy, and that whiteness and class privilege are fractured but not erased, by gender and other relations (pp.60).

By setting parameters of whose politics matter via the grammar fashioned from political whiteness, mainstream feminism can deploy narratives of "us" versus "them" when under threat, thus using victimisation when entitlement is lost. Some examples of this include white women breaking down/crying in situations when their privilege is called out or when they feel they do not have a platform to be heard. Therefore, the tears are both personal and political. The author

suggests that political whiteness is underpinned by a form of feminism that does not seek to overthrow the system because white bourgeois women know the benefits, they can derive from it: they want a place, a voice, and visibility in existing power structures. Examples of this feminism include corporate feminism and governance feminism which is a form of "feminism [that] advocates for women on banknotes but does not necessarily dispute the hands that the majority of these banknotes are in" (pp.82). To gain solidarity and visibility in digital spaces, white bourgeois mainstream feminism uses trauma as a form of capital investment. This trauma relies on the currency of likes, shares and retweets. Through this, white bourgeois women can mask complacency in popular issues. Through their privilege and as gatekeepers of feminism, bourgeois white feminists hyper-politicise trans bodies to police gender expectations and notions of womanhood. On the one hand, they argue that these bodies threaten the safety of (white) women in various spaces which challenges institutions, structures and the state to protect or ensure their safety and comfort. One of these institutions include religion: the synergy that exists between mainstream feminists and the religious right conceals trans-exclusionary, conservative binary framings of gender and discriminates against trans and sex workers communities. On the other hand, white feminism positions trans bodies as a threat to gender expectations and its performativity (Butler,1999;1988). For capitalist patriarchy to function, the nuclear family must be protected so that the supply of able bodies is insured. In this regard, white feminism turns to religion to weaponize and police trans bodies because if patriarchy is unable to police who has sex with whom, where and how, it becomes difficult to keep women in the unpaid care economy.

To police sex, anti-sex work groups frame sex work as paid rape and by doing so, these groups ignore and violate the agency of sex workers. Furthermore, equating sex work to paid rape diverts the attention away from core issues around sexual violence and the main perpetrators or structures that make it possible for rape to be used as a tool to wield power and control women. More importantly, women from marginalised communities who struggle for their livelihood because of the

precarious conditions in which they live are sometimes exposed to sexual violence. Consequently, by turning to religion or to the idea that trans bodies threaten society's social fabric, political whiteness reinforces the *us* versus *them* narrative.

> *The current war on so-called "gender ideology" has enabled mainstream feminism to emphasize women's safety and turn to gender stereotypes to protect the nuclear family.*

Firstly, the respectability politics surrounding sex within mainstream feminist discourses can be weaponised via the hyper-politicization of sex work as it can be framed as a catalyst to human trafficking, sexual immorality, and as a threat to society's social fabric. Who has sex, where and how hinges on the idea and set up of the nuclear family. Sex work threatens the household narrative supported by white bourgeois mainstream feminism. Moreover, religion permeates into how the household is imagined (Reilly, 2011; Thornton, 1985), that is one man and woman coming together under the institution of marriage to procreate. It then becomes essential to ask: how do we situate gender in a far-right moving world? Addressing this question, Phipps suggests that mainstream feminism utilises performative trauma to advance a punitive agenda under the banner of protecting society in a context where the state is seen to be inactive. Under such a banner, "sex threatens the state" (Aderinto, 2014) because the issue of human trafficking emerges as state priority thus evoking strict citizenship regimes, the fortification of borders and hoarding of resources from communities who need them (Bernstein, 2012). These dynamics demonstrate that mainstream feminism is complacent in some of the violence it claims to be fighting. The current war on so-called "gender ideology" has enabled mainstream feminism to emphasize women's safety and turn to gender stereotypes to protect the nuclear family. Perhaps more importantly, it becomes easier to gather public and state support since mainstream feminism can evoke rage by questioning how the state uses taxpayer money to supply resources to non-binary bodies and investment into educative programs regarding gender and sexuality. This is a reflection of how

the intersections of neoliberalism and mainstream white bourgeois feminism have created “inequalities of distribution”, making it possible for the “good woman” (cis, respectable, implicitly white) (pp.107) to decide who has access to resources.

> *Collectively, the respectability politics dovetailed by white supremacy alongside white rage makes it possible for white feminism to have no issues with using the others as collateral damage*

Secondly, Phipps highlights how white bourgeois mainstream feminism uses marginalised communities as collateral damage. The (mis) use of anger by white bourgeois feminism contributes to creating a society where “one side’s dehumanisation of the other is just presented as an opinion” (pp.96). Collectively, the respectability politics dovetailed by white supremacy alongside white rage makes it possible for white feminism to have no issues with using the others as collateral damage. White carceral feminism represents sex workers as underserving victims whose voices and experiences are erased (Andrijasevic and Mai, 2016; Bernstein, 2012). Through this narrative of underserving victims, white feminism makes it possible to increase punitive measures against sex workers which further marginalise them and intensify the precarious conditions they encounter in their profession. This demonstrates how white feminism also fails to consider the structures, histories and global processes that contribute to their precarity. Mainstream feminism is dovetailed by carceral and trans-exclusionary politics that instrumentalise marginalised communities when passing legislation (Gallagher, 2017; Gerassi, 2016). For example, the ‘migration crisis’ sparked conversations around how immigrants are responsible for increased unemployment, crime rates and public expenditures. This, in turn, created a “keep them out” reaction from different states (Weaks-Baxter, 2018:34; Berry Garcia-Blanco and Moore, 2016). However, *the keep them out approach* was deployed under the premisses of protecting individuals from being smuggled and dying at sea. Therefore, white bourgeois mainstream feminism can support such legislation by arguing that they protect marginalised women and children who may be victims of human trafficking and child labour (Sharma, 2017; 2003).

In short, reactionary trans-exclusionary and carceral feminism “amplifies the narcissistic Me, Not You of the mainstream” (pp.160). More importantly, this narcissism reveals the coloniality of gender (Lugones, 2016) and reinforces the position of white feminists as gatekeepers of what it means to be a ‘woman’ who can take up space, speak and be seen. The book raises important questions about the possibility of being an ally and comrade in struggles for equality. On the one hand, comradeship requires white feminists to play a role in disrupting systems surviving off political whiteness and to ensure that legislation and resources are available to those who need them. On the other hand, allyship means “supporting the struggle but not being in or of it” (pp.161). Is it possible to be there for support and let others take up space when white feminism is so much used to power and demands it? Following off the work of Sara Ahmed’s (2017) ‘killjoy survival kit’, the conclusion outlines six key questions white feminists can ask themselves in their everyday activism and advocacy work. Phipps suggests that the solution is not to dump the ideologies of white feminism but to examine how their existence has enabled certain narratives. Thinking from this perspective can help “dismantle power, not merely demand a shift in who wields it” (pp.164) as a critical examination can produce “solidarities of care” which can benefit us all (Emejulu and Bassel, 2018).

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