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Secrecy and silence in fieldwork: reflections on feminist research on violence in Latin America ¹

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The famous

Northern reticence, the tight gag of place
And times: yes, yes. Of the "wee six" I sing
Where to be saved you only must save face
And whatever you say, you say nothing.

This is an extract from one of Seamus Heaney's rawest poems about the conflict in the North of Ireland, 'Whatever you say, say nothing'. In the poem, Heaney speaks of what he calls the 'The famous Northern reticence, the tight gag of place'. His poem evokes a context where a particular language of silence and euphemism exists to navigate the violent everyday in very political ways. The everyday dynamics of this 'tight gag of place' are revealed in how people negotiate and survive their violent realities without necessarily giving explicit voice to the horrors of the conflict and the prejudices that underpin it. Though it may seem out of place in a reflection on fieldwork in Latin America, this poem speaks to me on a visceral level and its central message resonates with how I approach my own research on violence.

I grew up in the context about which Heaney writes: Derry, in the middle of the Troubles, unconsciously trained in sectarian shorthand and the importance of saying 'nothing' in order to survive the everyday politics of violence (see Hume, 2007; also MacGinty 2014 on everyday peace). The foundations for much of my own research were laid during both my experience as a child but honed during my several years as a development worker in a Salvadoran feminist organisation. El Salvador's civil war had officially ended and people were able to finally tell their stories. The 'tight gag of place' that should have been lifted with the peace accords, was instead reinforced by an amnesty law cynically brought into force to coincide with the publication of the Truth Commission's report to deny people any recourse to justice. Everyone I met seemed to have experienced both violence and loss. At the time, I remember repeating the question of how can people have their voices heard when everyone has a story to tell? This was the 'abnormal normality' in which people survived and negotiated the challenges of everyday life in a post-war context (Martin Baró, 2003). The more I worked with women and the more I became embedded in the post war challenges of everyday life, the more I could hear that these stories were full of their own gendered silences and omissions (Hume, 2009a).

¹ Conversations with Ellen Van Damme and Ariana Markowitz on their recent fieldwork experiences helped me reflect on some of the issues I discuss here and I am grateful for their input. I would like to thank Dave Featherstone for comments on an earlier draft.

While not wishing to essentialise or homogenise how biographies shape research, I can trace linkages between who I am and what I do. Growing up in a conflict situation most likely shaped some of my instinctive responses to threat and danger, which I had been used to dealing with from a young age, but also trained me in the subtle arts of 'saying nothing' and following the rules of a 'tight gag of place'. It most likely also shaped some of my substantive research interests, although I am very aware that this is all too easy to rationalise *post facto* and remains deeply subjective. Three years working in El Salvador in the late 1990s exposed me to the difficulties of peace, particularly for women living in low-income urban and rural communities. The everyday violence and multiple insecurities that women I worked with faced in peacetime were very different to the idealised notion of peace I had grown up with. Official conflict had ended but violence had mutated and still shaped people's everyday life in a range of (highly gendered) ways. These experiences underpinned my doctoral research and have continued to shape my research interests in subsequent years.

I am a feminist researcher interested in violence and most of my work has explored everyday violence in El Salvador, while also working in other Latin American countries that are dealing with protracted conflict and violence. I am specifically interested in how hegemonic (which I read as 'masculinist') accounts of violence rely on silences and 'saying nothing' (Hume, 2009a and b). I have been interested throughout my research in the localised workings of 'tight gag of place' and specifically how these are both gendered and gendering. My research involves both a deep interrogation of violence against women and girls but also studying generalised violence as gendered. More recently, I have been working in Colombia in the context of a river that has been recognised as a bearer of rights, following years of conflict and destruction. Since people's identities and livelihoods are so bound up with the river system the court ruling recognises that any attack on the river is an attack on its people and vice versa. I am interested in whose knowledge matters and how the river's 'voice' has been silenced through conflict. While this latter research does not engage explicitly with violence against women and girls, my approach remains feminist.

In this paper, then, I attempt to reflect on fieldwork in and on violence in Latin America as a feminist. I specifically focus on research over many years in El Salvador on the gendered politics of violence. My feminist politics are not only integral to my own identity, but also what and I research. I cannot pretend to offer neat answers here, but I will try to foreground key elements of learning over almost two decades. From the outset, it should be noted that I remain committed to thinking about fieldwork as a 'dialogical process in which the research situation is structured by both the researcher and the person being researched' (England, 1994). As I have got older, had a child, been in secure employment, gained funding, my relationship with my research and specifically the fieldwork element, has evolved and changed. I have carried out research in 'new' places and on different issues. I think of fieldwork not a separate bounded period of time in another place, but as an integral part of the research process and this is reflected in the discussion below. Some of the challenges I now face are different to those I faced as an early career researcher, but

the pull of fieldwork remains consistent. With every new fieldwork experience comes new learning and it becomes both more challenging and more necessary to reflect on what I wish I had known. At the outset, it is important to say that I have been in secure employment for most of this time and I do not underestimate the changing nature of academic research and the increasing precarity faced by those at earlier stages of their career. The discussion below informed by conversations with newer generations of researchers with whom I have had the great privilege of working. Their intellectual curiosity, political commitment and energy inspire, but also the challenges they face act as important reminders that the academy is not immune to the various workings of its own 'tight gag of place'.

The paper is structured around four interconnected sections. First, I engage briefly with elements of feminist research methodology to situate the discussion that follows. In the second section I speak about the importance of forging spaces to be open about the emotional impacts of and reactions to research in an academy that is still largely dismissive of talking about feelings. Linked to this, in the third section I discuss issues of safety, foregrounding the importance of open discussions about fear and danger since these have both practical and emotional implications. In the fourth section, I reflect on how we approach substantive issues of research in contexts of 'abnormal normality' (Baró, 2003) in which violence and accounts of violence are underpinned by gendered norms and silences. Finally, I explore some of the unresolved tensions that we face as researchers.

Feminist Research Methodology – more than adding women and 'stirring'

I define myself and therefore my research as feminist. There is no one way of doing feminist research, nor indeed a singular feminism. Instead feminist research is distinguished from other research methodologies by its explicitly political underpinnings and 'a desire to challenge multiple hierarchies of inequalities within social life' (Doucet and Mauthner, 2007: 42). I insist that researchers of violence and conflict have much to learn from decades of feminist research. Many so-called 'turns' in International Relations, for example, are merely 'discovering' what are already well-rehearsed debates among feminist researchers on, for example, emotions, power, the everyday. All of these are very bound up with the politics of fieldwork. In this chapter, I draw on two interrelated lessons from feminist research on violence inform my approach which I use to structure the subsequent discussion:

Firstly, feminism refutes the positivist myth of value free objective research. Feminist methodology also demands a deep interrogation of my role as a researcher. Feminist researchers have long emphasised the importance of researcher identity to the research process, encouraging researchers to engage in critical reflexivity at every stage. Reflexivity, defined as 'self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher... is critical to the conduct of fieldwork; it induces self-discovery and can lead to insights and new hypotheses about the research questions' (England, 1994: 82). For me, as I have written elsewhere engaging in critical reflexivity is necessarily more than 'an indulgent account of the 'me 'in fieldwork' but allows me question and 'make explicit the

potency of hegemonic accounts of violence and our interactions with them' (Hume, 2007a: 481). While reflexivity can enhance our awareness of power asymmetries in research relationships, it does not remove them (England, 1994).

Secondly, feminist research on violence exposes the immediacy and ordinariness of violence in everyday life, specifically foregrounding its pervasiveness in familial and intimate partner relations. VAWG is a 'stubborn' feature of many societies. I am interested in tracing the gendered **political connections** between different forms of violence in everyday life. As such, I don't see VAWG as a mere subset of 'real' violence nor do I see issues of conflict related sexual violence as 'separate' either to the normal machinations of war nor to prevailing hierarchies outwith conflict (Stanko, 1990; Boesten, 2014). As researchers, the slipperiness and dynamism of violence can be challenging to grasp (Taussig, 1987), but by looking at how different violences connect, we can see how diverse actors and groups mutate, update and develop violent repertoires at different political moments (Auyero and Berti, 2015). Importantly, this can offer clues into how meaning of violence emerge and how some violences become rendered more normal than others. Many feminists have conceptualised violence along a continuum: from war to peace (Kelly, 2000) sexualised violence (Kelly, 1988) as 'gendered' linking different acts of violence that women experience at various sites, from the personal to the international (Cockburn, 2001: 31- 37); recognising the linkages between social, political and economic violence (Moser and McIlwaine, 2004). In this sense, I do not categorise violence as a set of discrete acts but look at the way violence is embedded in and nourishes existing social and political inequalities.

The importance of reflexivity: Where emotion is allowed

Reflexive research demands attention to our own (shifting) positionalities, our methodological and analytical choices and the framing and communication of research (Malterud, 2001, p. 483-484). Fieldwork is an intrusive process – I ask people to tell stories, often painful and for my research participants, my research often offers intangible outcomes. This can often leave me feeling guilty or indeed as Sharon Pickering (2001) suggests even 'dirty' when confronted with people holding deep prejudices or having committed terrible atrocities (see Hume, 2007b). All researchers should have unresolved tensions. Those who claim not to are being less than honest, indifferent or failing to reflect deeply on the ethics of what they do. Dealing with the emotional fallout of fieldwork therefore requires work but importantly, demands that we create safe spaces as academics in which to speak about research emotionally. It is to the emotional element of research I now turn.

Working in contexts of extreme violence require us to be constantly thinking about violence – both in terms of trying to understand the problem intellectually and politically, and trying to cope with everyday fear and threat. This can be particularly challenging for those of us who engage in immersive fieldwork and spend long periods of time in dangerous places. Fieldwork is exhausting – often physically and almost certainly emotionally. Like many researchers, I have struggled with an acute sense of 'imposter syndrome' at various times. I have also felt that my sense of being

overwhelmed by the challenges of fieldwork and research on violence were reflective of my own inadequacies as a researcher. As outlined above, like most researchers my first immersive period of fieldwork was my PhD work when I spent twelve months engaging in multi-sited ethnographic work on violence in El Salvador. I had lived in El Salvador for three years and was familiar with the context. Seeing heavily armed men dotting the urban landscape in their role as security guards for a growing number of neighbourhoods no longer shocked me and, indeed, on some levels I had bought into the myth these 'men with big guns' offered 'protection' (Hume, 2007a). While on a rational level, I knew this was nonsense, it helped me get through everyday survival in a context in which I frequently felt afraid. I have tried to be honest about the contradictions, challenges and emotional toll in my own research practice, but as time passes, it is easy to forget the rawness of my feelings and how these underpinned my 'imposter syndrome' as a researcher.

I was starkly reminded of this recently when speaking to a younger woman who is doing necessary and challenging research in Central America. She suggested her difficulty in coping with the intensity of everyday horror and violence cast doubt on her research skills. To her mind, she was somehow not 'up' to the task. She was not the first early career researcher I had heard blame themselves for finding this research challenging and I could empathise immediately. Why is admitting fear in a scary situation so alien to the research process? If we study other people's pain, violence and recognise that these have hugely traumatic effects, why do we cling to these positivist frameworks that assume researchers are immune? We are not and we damage both ourselves and future generations of researchers by assuming that fear is simply a risk to be mitigated or something to be objectively 'managed'. In my own experience, fear has been an ever present companion during fieldwork. If fieldwork is a 'dialogical process' (England, 1994), by trivialising emotional effects of research, we are denying this permission to newer generations of researchers.

I have faced countless situations over the years where I felt my 'reactions' to my research were somehow 'wrong' or too emotional. Examples might include: disliking or even liking research participants in the face of on in spite of horrific acts of violence they claim to have carried out; fear of being in communities affected by violence day after day; exhausted by having to be 'alert' to the ever presence of a potential threat; dread of having to face another day of feeling afraid; despair and hopelessness at the magnitude of the suffering people must endure and tremendous guilt at being conscious of my worldly advantages and ultimately being able to leave. On the other side, how do I balance these negative feelings with a constant amazement at the tenacity of women and men who live in the most horrendous of circumstances and who still manage to struggle for a better future for their families and communities, and an overwhelming sense that I can never do justice to their dignity and courage through my research. This gamut of emotions can be very paralysing even for a very seasoned fieldworker. Sara Smith (2016) reminds us that words linger and words matter, meaning that researchers have huge ethical responsibility to those who have shared their stories.

For one PhD researcher I worked with, remembering this sense of responsibility finally allowed her to tell the stories of her research participants in an academic setting. She had spent months grappling with the all too common sensation of 'what's the point' that often hits the PhD researcher while trying to make sense of a mountain of data and the feelings that underpin it on leaving the 'field'. For many, including myself, revisiting interview recordings and transcripts that recount deeply traumatic experiences is difficult. These are not anonymous stories of suffering, but I can see and hear the person who I usually know by name and as time passes, often have built a relationship over years. Feelings and how to deal with them rarely feature in methodology curricula and there has been very little in 'mainstream' literature that even acknowledges the integral place this 'emotional work' plays in research.

In my own case, I have found that writing helps. As a postgraduate researcher, I struggled with all of the feelings mentioned above. I struggled with the sense that my feelings were self indulgent since I was only a witness and not the direct victim of violence. To try to make sense of this, I used my emotions as 'resources' to delve deeper into some of the tensions and complexities of the research. I found writing about these experiences cathartic and it helped me process some of the horrors that people recounted. I know that other researchers have found similar sanctuary in writing. Writing about my feelings also helps me think more conceptually about my work. As a PhD student, I was lucky. My supervisors trusted and encouraged me to talk about the emotional aspects of my research and to write my emotions into my methodology chapter. This is not necessarily the norm, nor are researchers always comfortable in speaking about the challenges they face. It is interesting that even several years on, I feel lucky that I had their 'approval' to engage in this emotional work explicitly.

This is perhaps because writing emotionally comes with risks. Speaking about my feelings and insecurities, difficult ethical challenges and how I negotiated them – albeit in a very supportive environment – made me feel very exposed and often deeply uncomfortable. As a younger woman, it was perhaps more acceptable for me to be emotional and indeed it is a truism that female researchers still must do the 'emotional work'. Paradoxically, at the same time and as a young woman in a Politics department, I was more vulnerable to being dismissed by colleagues as 'emotional' and this used to cast doubt on the 'rigour' of my research. On various occasions my decision to work with 'real' people was questioned and my in-depth ethnographic work was dismissed as 'anecdotal'.² While this may say more about certain disciplinary biases, mine is not a unique experience and this can be very risky in the UK context where 'outputs' are graded through criteria developed in the Research Excellence Framework. In a US context, Wolf (1996: xi) speaks about being advised to not talk about certain issues before going up for tenure: '

Years of positivist-inspired training have taught us that impersonal, neutral detachment is an important criterion for good research. In these discussions

² I have never quite got to the bottom of who are people who are not 'real', but my sense is that this is more a comment on working with non-elites.

of detachment, distance, and impartiality, the personal is reduced to a mere nuisance or a possible threat to objectivity. This threat is easily dealt with. The neopositivist's professional armor includes a carefully constructed public self as a mysterious, impartial outsider, an observer freed of personality and bias.

What I remember clearly from this period as a 'junior non-promoted woman'³ is my need to seek out spaces— particularly feminist ones – that felt safe and where I could speak honestly about the effects of my research. I actively tried to build these 'safe' political and intellectual spaces out in the same way as I actively tried to create safe physical spaces in San Salvador to help manage the everyday fear of being immersed in a violent context while doing fieldwork. Outside these spaces, however, talking about emotional engagement with research was often dismissed as irrelevant at best. This reinforced feeling of self-indulgence and imposter syndrome. These different reactions to being open about the emotional challenges confirm that researchers are not immune to the disciplinary 'tight gag of place' in terms of what we deem as permissible intellectual work.

I ultimately published my paper on emotion in a feminist journal (Hume, 2007b), but only after a spectacular and very short rejection from a prominent methodology journal calling into question my 'fitness' to do the research, without any apparent engagement in the subject matter that I had addressed. As a young researcher, this was devastating and hugely damaging to my confidence. I now look back on it and I struggle to remember the detail. I sat on that paper for over a year, worried that it was rubbish – and more damagingly, that I was indeed unfit to be a researcher - before a senior professor of feminist politics suggested submitting it to a feminist journal. While not strictly about fieldwork, what this episode alerts us to is that there are still risks in a largely positivist academy when speaking emotionally – and I would venture to say, honestly - about the research process.

Despite hopeful signs of change with new generations of researchers rightly demanding more open discussion, while writing this I saw debate on twitter that recounted how someone was told to 'man up' when reflecting on the risks of lone fieldwork. Who, how and where we can speak out is invariably shaped by our intersecting ethnic, gendered and class identities, which limit the boundaries of acceptable speech Wolf (1996: xi) has termed these 'secrets of fieldwork'. How these secrets can have very practical implications for researcher safety will be discussed in the following section.

Fieldwork safety and secrecy

On a very practical level by maintaining the 'secrets of fieldwork', there is a danger that the physical and emotional precarity of new generations of researchers is increased. This is particularly acute for those who work in conflict zones where risk of violence is heightened. I have made unsafe decisions because I felt this was what was demanded of me as a researcher: staying in communities alone after dark to

³ The phrase a colleague used to justify my membership of a research committee

attend meetings, forgetting to tell a trusted local contact of my movements, forgetting to check in with my university or feeling 'tested' by local actors and responding in ways that were perhaps not the most sensible. All because I thought a 'good' researcher should not worry about such trivial things as their own safety. I have learned from these experiences, but I would still say that this is a continual dialogue and we are required to make immediate decisions during fieldwork that perhaps we would not make in other circumstances.

Practical advice differs depending on context and often violence can escalate very rapidly, so researchers are forced to 'react' to difficult and unexpected situations. Increasingly universities are taking researcher safety more seriously, which I welcome. Unfortunately, this is often only the response to things that have gone very wrong. When I did my PhD research in the early 2000s, I did not have to secure ethics approval and, to date, I have only had to do one risk assessment for research in Central America when UK government travel advice changed for a brief period following the 2009 coup in Honduras. I was given no training in research safety and checked in with supervisors about once a month. I think I may have had to buy my own travel insurance as well. I am not criticising the supervision. I had excellent supervision, but this was the norm.

The fact that universities are encouraging robust risk assessment procedures is tied to insurance procedures and diplomatic travel advice. However, when used well as part of researcher training, risk assessment can encourage researchers to think more in depth about what might be required and about what can be done to mitigate risk. At the very least, opening up a conversation about ethics and risk requires some local knowledge and demands of researchers to interrogate some of the secrets of fieldwork. However, these can also become overly bureaucratic exercises in Northern Institutions that fail to acknowledge other ways of knowing and the salience of local knowledge. For the most part, I have found my own institution to be thoughtful, but I have knowledge of others whose risk mitigation strategy would actually expose them to more risk. For example a colleague was required by his institution to take a satellite phone to a remote area of Colombia, which anyone with any local knowledge would immediately advise against. Luckily, his bag was delayed since this would have associated him (and our entire research team) with armed groups and put us more at risk.

With this logic, Kovats-Bernat (2002) advises a 'localized ethic' whereby researchers follow the advice and recommendations of trusted people in determining how, where and when to conduct the research. Relying on local knowledge should better ensure the safety and security of both the participants and the researcher. I have often had to change plans at the last minute due to security concerns and on the advice of trusted, local contacts. Maintaining flexibility and adaptability in conflict research is necessary, but can be frustrating especially if working against the clock and within a very limited budget. This is particularly acute for those at early career stages who do not have sufficient financial support or research grants. Precarity can force people to make unsafe decisions around very practical issues in the name of research, for example around transport, accommodation and even medical care.

Precarious finances can underpin exclusions that determine who can or cannot do fieldwork and who can do it as safely as possible. The decisions I make around safety have certainly been helped by being in more secure employment. At a most basic level, I will now take taxis as opposed to buses in many circumstances, my university provides comprehensive travel insurance and I choose accommodation carefully. I am aware that this is an advantage that those in more precarious positions might not have, but institutions have a duty of care to staff and students and sufficient finance to make safe decisions should be built into any risk mitigation.

Listening to everyday narratives of violence repeatedly and living in dangerous places can be traumatic for the researcher (see Warden, 2013 on urban Guatemala). While the very practical coping strategies outlined above are necessary, it is important also to build in emotional self-care. This can be difficult since it demands countering the mythology of overwork in academe, which is particularly pernicious for early career researchers who are trying to complete a thesis against the clock or trying to secure employment. During immersive fieldwork, I have found that taking breaks is necessary. Fieldwork can be very lonely and even boring, which can lead researchers to only think about work. During long periods of fieldwork I build in breaks - go away for the weekend when funds permit or even just spend time in the fresh air (or under an air conditioner if available in some contexts), a favourite café or time with friends. Keeping in contact with friends and family is both necessary and increasingly easy due to technological advances.

The discussion thus far has focused significantly on the effects of research on the researcher. In the section that follows, I will reflect on how we think about the substance of the research. In this I am guided by the feminist imperative to expose the immediacy and ordinariness of violence in everyday life and the gendered connections between different violences.

Fieldwork in contexts of 'abnormal normality'

Working in contexts where levels of trauma constitute what Martin Baró (2003: 295) has termed 'normal abnormality' is challenging on every level. Suffering is "a normal result of a social system based on persecution, exploitation and oppression of human beings by human beings... The psychosocial trauma takes then part of a social normal abnormality" (Martín-Baró, 2003: 295). A real challenge for my research as a feminist is to uncover the everydayness and immediacy of violence to women's lives when this is often sidelined by more spectacular or public violences. Violence against women, especially sexual violence, is used strategically in conflict as a weapon of war, but 'common' (civilian) sexual violence and other forms of violence also pre-exist and increase during and after conflict. Reporting in such contexts is difficult for obvious reasons, so data are weak. One of the most lessons I have learned is not to trust numbers and an oft-repeated mantra is that data and 'evidence' are different things. For example, I have found zero recorded instances of domestic violence for one year in local police statistics. Rather than this absence suggesting the problem does not exist as some might easily conclude, it reveals serious problems in official recording mechanisms.

There has been significant research done by feminists in a variety of conflict and post-conflict settings to try to uncover these silenced violences. Research from Northern Uganda, for example, indicates that a majority of rape cases during conflict involved non-combatants: boyfriends, husbands, and 'suitors' (Porter, 2015). In Northern Ireland, the police had a particular term for intimate partner murders - 'ordinary decent murders' - during the 'Troubles' in order to distinguish them from politically motivated killings (McWilliams and Ní Aoláin, 2013). Such language betrays the gendered normative structures that silence violence against women. How these gendered silences and silencing practices – or localised tight gags of place - function is a real challenge for field research.

Since the mid 2000s, I have been carrying out research with various women's groups on the urban periphery of San Salvador. One of these is an area I am very familiar with, having first worked there in 1998 as a development worker and returning periodically as a researcher. In 1998, I used to visit communities alone and work with women across communities. While I usually let women know I would be arriving, I could call in unannounced and walk between neighbouring communities. There was a gang presence, but it was nascent and conflicts between gangs in neighbouring communities, shaped but did not regulate everyday life. As the years passed, the security situation escalated and my entry strategies to these communities changed. I now only work with and through local NGOs. While this is for safety reasons, equally it is to ensure that my research will reach beyond the confines of narrow academic debates.

By 2011, women in these communities could no longer visit friends or work with women in neighbouring communities because of gang rivalries. My research participants, many of whom were affiliated to a campaign to prevent gender violence, were advising me to stay away from certain residential areas and instead we met in 'neutral' locations. But what is a neutral location in these areas? For example, the public health clinic is located in a neighbourhood known for a heavy gang presence. This restricts access to basic healthcare. I was acutely aware of the groups of men, noting entry and exit when I was visiting the clinic. The level of surveillance felt threatening to me – an outsider who left at the end of the day. It was even more problematic for women who needed medical attention, particularly but not exclusively those who had suffered violence from gang-members. For women in that area, surveillance and control marked their everyday life and were 'a constant pressure'. I listened to their advice on how to move into and around the area. In 2011, Maya told me:

It is a constant pressure because we don't feel secure, more than anything else because of the brutality with which they carry out the acts [of violence]. In that place that I mentioned they have been killing young people on one sports pitch in particular. They took a girl from the school and that they killed her. It was surprising. I think the whole community was upset. She was grabbed almost from the front door of the house. They took her in a white car and many people saw it. Her father works in the police and it's surprising that just because you have family in the police or in the army that

it's a latent danger for the family members.... These are things that have been happening that we have known about from a close distance and because they are so close, they cause insecurity. That is why we feel insecure (Maya, 2011).

Maya went into detail about the very brutal forms of torture that were done on to this young women's body. I have consciously omitted this detail from discussion here. This is not because I think we should sanitise the torture in some effort to avoid the accusations of 'thrill seeking' or 'pornography of violence' that are often thrown at violence researchers, but because the detail could focus our attention on this episode as somehow spectacular and outside the realm of the normal (see Nordstrom, 1997). Maya's point here is the opposite: women and girls' bodies are used to punish families and linked to wider violent dynamics. Violence against women and girls is part of a wider repertoire of everyday violence. In this sense, violence against women, including these extreme acts, are constitutive of a wider, latent danger for women. Albeit using a single act to make her point, Maya is speaking about violence that 'is *habitually* experienced... [the] sources of violence linked – not a matter of tracing route causes to one or another factor but recognising that multiple forms of violence act on one another and are experienced at once' (Menjivar, 2011:3). Writing on Guatemala, Carey and Torres (2010) have argued that violence against women has become a constitutive—rather than aberrant—feature of the social fabric because sexism and the civic exclusion, public denigration, and physical abuse of women have been socially and legally excused. At the same time, they highlight the 'overkill' or excessive torture carried out on women's bodies before murder.

Violence against women, in this sense, can be simultaneously normal and abnormal. Violence can unite spectacular brutality with acts that are so normalised that they are not even acknowledged as such. Fieldwork often occurs at this intersection between the normal and the abnormal and we need to listen out for the ways in which people give meaning, silence and succumb to the 'tight gag of place'. Our engagement with these 'localised vocabularies of violence' (Hume, 2009a) can both illuminate and shut down the connections between different types of violence, its dynamism and its ordinariness in everyday life.

In my own research, I have been consistently affected by what my research participants often dismiss as routinised and 'normal' social relations that on deeper probing reveal that these are underpinned by gendered cruelty and often extreme brutality. As a witness, it is often the apparent banality of some acts of violence that I find more traumatic than the spectacular. It is easy, especially during fieldwork when we are saturated by stories of violence, to be drawn to the spectacular and an important lesson I have learned is to listen out for the workings of the 'tight gag of place'.

Unresolved secrets and tensions

There are of course many secrets of fieldwork that remain elusive and lessons that I am yet to learn or put into practice. In this final section, I will reflect on my developing dialogue with my fieldwork as my own life circumstances have evolved and think about what I could tell my younger self.

One of the most significant changes in my own life is becoming a parent, which has quite profoundly altered my relationship with my research in both very practical and more substantive ways. For many female researchers, fieldwork and the choice to have children are held up as mutually exclusive. As far as I can make out, there has been very little written about the structural challenges of combining motherhood and research in and on conflict. While parents (mostly mothers) have written about taking their children to the 'field', this is often shown to be a positive factor, for example in building 'rapport' and facilitating 'motherhood capital' (Mose Brown and Masi de Casanova, 2009, Kerr and Stewart, 2019). As the mother of a young child, I cannot spend several months away from my family but neither can I presume to uproot my family from their own routines not least of all given the content of my research. For one, my partner, also an academic, has his own research demands that often take him in very different geographical directions. Perhaps more saliently, I am not sure I want to expose my daughter to the multiple insecurities that come with this type of research. My research is not her choice and while I can see that living in new contexts would be hugely enriching, this has to be weighed against exposure to risk and the curtailment of her freedom. To my mind, this is not my choice to make. Of course, what this exposes is the huge power differentials between my available choices as a parent and the people in the areas in which I do research. Much of my research has been with women and most of these women have been mothers. They do not have the same choices to shield their children from everyday threats. It also exposes the power differentials between me as someone in a permanent job who had a child later, and early career researchers who might already have caring responsibilities when embarking on fieldwork research. How this is resolved I don't know. Almost eight years into motherhood, I am still learning to be a researcher who is a mother and my dialogue with my fieldwork is evolving. So rather than offering advice, I am raising it here in the spirit of encouraging more open and frank discussion.

Then again recognising unsolved tension as integral to research is perhaps the advice that I would offer myself if I were starting out. Research is a fundamentally relational process and as our research sites and participants evolve and change, so do we as researchers. Now those moments when I do not seem to have questions worry me more than the familiar state of unresolved tensions and questions.

Time is a huge factor in fieldwork. As the years pass, I look back at my long periods of fieldwork with a certain nostalgia, which may seem quite ridiculous given the subject matter discussed in this paper. In my own head, I remember long days spent 'hanging out' in communities, a mind full of urgent questions and a keen desire to make a difference. I had time to think, to focus, to challenge myself. Of course, I didn't see it like that at the time when I was obsessing over making sure I was collecting 'enough' data, and feeling guilty at my privileged status. Thinking about

emotions and being self-consciously reflexive can paralyse the researcher. More than just acknowledging power relations and the emotional challenges of research, it is important to use these to forge safe spaces for researchers but also to push us to be as ethical and as socially just as we can in our research praxis.

As I have got older, I seem to have so many competing demands on my time that I recently checked myself feeling envious of a colleague who was getting to spend a few months in Colombia for a joint research project while I returned to the security of home. I would say to my younger self is to make the most of fieldwork. To be fair I have always valued the fieldwork element of research despite some of the difficulties I outline here. I love the energy of carrying out research and being in the privileged position of hearing people's stories. I have also shared some lovely, funny moments with women who never fail to inspire despite the circumstances of their lives. I would tell myself to avoid electricity cables, as a fried laptop and a hospital visit for electrocution have taught me. After years of sleepless nights in accommodation with flimsy doors, I would advise my younger self to always take rubber doorstops. These make it more difficult for doors to be opened from the outside and improve your night's sleep as a result. This might a very basic, cheap and potentially obvious piece of advice, but one that would never have crossed my mind and as I finish this chapter in Colombia, I realise that I have forgotten to bring a doorstop so I would definitely encourage my younger self to do as I say, not as I do. Listen out for these little nuggets and share them. I would tell my younger self to trust my instincts, to read Sara Ahmed (2017: 27) who reminds us that 'a gut feeling has its own intelligence. A feminist gut might sense something is amiss. You have to get closer to that feeling'.

In conclusion and without wishing to make easy analogies, I have argued here that it is important to remember that researchers are not immune silence and omission. Our 'tight gag of place' may be imposed by disciplinary boundaries and positivist logics that determine what we can and cannot talk about or indeed what is considered 'acceptable' to the rigours of a research culture that is often regulated by externally imposed frameworks for excellence. Mess, emotion and complexity, which often underpin research in conflict zones, don't necessarily 'fit' with externally imposed agendas for 'excellence'. These omissions not only foreclose honest debate about the challenges of fieldwork, but undermine our duty of care to newer generations of researchers who are denied access to fuller and perhaps more honest accounts before embarking on their own research journeys. The effects of this are to reinforce messages about researcher inadequacy, the myth of researcher objectivity and reinforce the many levels of secrecy of fieldwork. My plea to these newer generations would be to continue to uncover these secrets, trust your 'feminist gut' and breakdown some of the silences of fieldwork.

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