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## **“Is This Anthropological Enough?” Reflection on Ethnographic Fieldwork and Limitations of the Body**

### **Cover Page Footnote**

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# “Is This Anthropological Enough?” Reflection on Ethnographic Fieldwork and Limitations of the Body

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## **Abstract**

This article reflects on the troubling aspects of an ethnographic method that helps to maintain anthropology as a discipline of the privileged. The Covid-19 pandemic has changed how people interact socially. Although much ethnographic fieldwork is situated in settings that require face-to-face interactions, the pandemic has made the prospect of future fieldwork in the same manner uncertain. Learning from the current physical distancing, we discuss ethnographic methods that center on possibilities and limitations of the body as a tool of inquiry. We reflect on the possibilities of conducting ethnographic fieldwork when the body as a corporeal entity is undergoing physical and social isolation. In doing so, we reveal a limitation of “being there” in the “field,” based on how researchers’ material bodies are often perceived as fragile, vulnerable, or dangerous by interlocutors. We argue for the relevance of discussing limitations of the body as part of ongoing efforts to promote inclusion in anthropological knowledge production. In responding to the query of methodological dilemmas, this article follows feminist, postcolonial, and indigenous scholars who have long called into questions the universalizing type of ethnographic fieldwork characterized by the able, gendered (masculinist), always-available and up-for-anything body. In addition to ethnographies, this article uses books on methods as relevant resources to navigate the everyday practice of fieldwork that is sensitive to various forms of embodied limitations and possibilities.

**Keywords:** Ethnographic fieldwork, the body, limitations, COVID-19 pandemic, inclusive anthropology



## Introduction

“Ethnographic fieldwork is the hallmark of cultural anthropology. Whether in a jungle village in Peru or on the streets of New York, the anthropologist *goes* to where people live and ‘does fieldwork’” (Spradley 1980:3, emphasis added).

So reads the first sentence in Chapter One of James P. Spradley’s (1980) *Participant Observation*, one of the anthropology methods books that has been read by anthropologists in training and the curious amateur alike. We both learned Spradley’s notion of ethnographic fieldwork that requires spending a long time in a remote “Other” during our undergraduate training as anthropology students at Universitas Indonesia (hereafter, UI) in the early 2000s. We normalized the emphasis on “going” somewhere to conduct fieldwork. From about 2003 to 2010, we knew only a few fellow undergraduates who undertook online communities (such as gaming and hacking) as a topic of research. Some of them adopted a hybrid approach, using offline meetups in addition to their online research. Generally, however, doing fieldwork conventionally was about going to a place where the separation between “home” and “field” was clearly drawn. Even if some unconventional ethnographic research existed, as a few fellow students did with their projects, it was not at all mainstream.

Physical distancing requirements have made conventional fieldwork difficult (if not impossible). When the arrival of the Covid 19 pandemic affected people around the world, many anthropologists were forced to think about other types of fieldwork that would allow them (including the two of us) to achieve similar ends in their studies. In this article, we present our reflection on that matter. We believe that—as much as this pandemic has created disorder and familial constraints, such as those associated with parenting duties and the death of loved ones—it has become apparent that the physical distancing has pushed the ongoing debates about the problems of conventional fieldwork further.

During the first phase of the pandemic,<sup>1</sup> Ratri who was based in US was anxiously waiting for the announcement of a dissertation fieldwork grant.<sup>2</sup> Fellow graduate students at

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars generally suggest that the first phase of pandemic was between December 31, 2019, and April 2, 2020 (Holz and Mayerl 2021).

<sup>2</sup> In less than a week, the Wenner-Gren Foundation sent two email letters regarding dissertation fieldwork grant status following the unprecedented pandemic situation. On March 23, 2020, the first email to Stage Two applicants said “conventional fieldwork is the opposite of social distancing. We are unable to fund this kind of work at this time.” This letter created major fear and anxiety for many graduate students who had applied for a dissertation research grant from this institution. As a foundation that exclusively supports anthropological research, the Wenner-Gren has been a fruitful resource for many graduate students of anthropology worldwide. The decision would have been difficult for many cultural anthropologists whose research relies solely on conventional ethnographic fieldwork. Addressing the impacts that might have arisen for many graduate students, the second email, sent on March 28, 2020, provided further information on how applicants should consider revising their research plans. Funding remained unviable for in-person ethnographic fieldwork and the foundation would only fund research that could be safely and ethically done during the Covid-19



Ratri's campus shared similar anxieties about the impact of the pandemic on their academic careers. Once countries started to close their borders, some international students feared that it would be difficult to see their families. Nobody knew if international trips would be possible anytime soon. In this stressful and precarious moment, our personal struggles were related to being both graduate students and new parents.

After graduating from UI, we continued to learn ethnographic research through research jobs associated with the university, joining teams within and outside of the discipline of anthropology in which we were exposed to different types of research methods and approaches from interdisciplinary teams. Usually, after spending some time away, fellow anthropologists and other researchers would return to the university to attend meetings, often at the campus cafeteria, where exchanges about research experiences occurred during lunch or in other social events as well. These were typically the moments when undergraduate students heard about, and discovered, ethnographic research beyond their classes. Some of the researchers were alumni, and they shared their struggles in doing fieldwork in remote places, far from Jakarta, talking, for example, about challenges in getting "reliable" information from people in the forest of Kalimantan or the difficulty of obtaining acceptance from the leaders of Papuan groups. The two of us similarly thought that, even if it was hard, doing ethnographic fieldwork conventionally remained the ideal way of doing research.

Both from our classes at UI and these informal gatherings, we learned that the rule of thumb for conducting good ethnographic research was to seek "a deeper *immersion* in others' worlds in order to grasp what they experience as meaningful and important" (Emerson et al. 1995:2). In *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, Robert M. Emerson and his colleagues argue that *immersion* is crucial for the ethnographer to be able to see from insiders' perspectives. In this framework, these writers suggest that anthropologists are expected to actively participate in people's daily activities as "fully and humanly" as possible (Ibid.).

At first glance, nothing is wrong with this concept of *immersion*. Compared to surveys, ethnographic fieldwork is known for requiring a longer time, as ethnography "promises" a more holistic perspective. What makes the concept of *immersion* troublesome, however, especially in times like a pandemic, is that it helps to create the idea of "being there" as both the "typical" and "ideal" manner of doing anthropological work. Thus, the ideal researchers are able-bodied and willing to spend some time in the "field." Yet new graduates, early scholars, non-normative gender individuals, or researchers with mental health or other illnesses may find doing research in this way difficult. Admitting that in-person ethnographic fieldwork has limitations is not currently a norm in the discipline. Rather, instead of holding a space for inclusion, the discipline often blames people who "fail" to conduct in-person fieldwork as having "incapacities."

We too did not question the perceived "ideal" conception of fieldwork (and the researcher!) until one of us (Prahara) had only six months to conduct his ethnographic research in Manggarai, East Nusa Tenggara, Flores Island, Indonesia because of his scholarship regulation on research. We thought that it would be difficult to write a dissertation based "only"

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pandemic. Ratri successfully accepted the funding from the foundation for her on-line ethnographic research.



on half a year. “Historically ethnographers typically considered one year the norm, or even longer,” as Tom Boellstorff and colleagues (2012:88) discuss at length in their *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*. Not long after Prahara had to accept that his dissertation fieldwork was “not ideal,” Ratri had to agree that in-person research would not be an option for conducting face-to-face ethnographic fieldwork due to grant application requirements upon the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic. We both feared our projects would not be anthropological enough, as our minds were still struggling to unlearn the norm of conventional ethnographic fieldwork.

These two occasions show us how much the work of anthropologists is dependent on what bodies can and cannot do. In books on methods and our conversations with our fellow ethnographers and anthropologists, the emphasis has predominantly been on what bodies can do. But if anthropological work relies largely on both the possibilities and the limitations of the body as a tool in our research methods, why did we not learn more openly about the limits of the body as a tool of inquiry? What would it take to foster and approach anthropology that is receptive to both the potentialities and restrictions of the body?

Conventional ethnographic fieldwork had become problematic even before the pandemic. In this article, we embark on a journey similar to that of fellow anthropologists and ethnographers globally who have already exposed “the mythos of fieldwork”—to borrow a phrase from George Marcus—as a cover for the abuse of vulnerable others, a shameful heritage to overcome (Pandian 2019:18). More specifically, we contribute to such efforts by attending to our own complex and challenging ethnographic fieldwork as the two of us struggle to navigate inequalities, power structures, and violence in the everyday practice of fieldwork. We participate in the conversation about the existing forms and possibilities of “patchwork ethnography” (Günel, Varma, and Watanabe 2020) that, perhaps, we have been doing all along. In this article, we use the lens of medical anthropology, particularly regarding phenomenology. Medical anthropology’s tradition of engaging with issues of life and death, vulnerabilities, and marginalization has called us to engage with anthropology’s entanglements with colonial projects as well as the current power imbalance in anthropological knowledge production in academic spheres and in a broad range of epistemological, ethical, methodological, and practical questions related to ethnographic fieldwork.

In the first section, we bring in our experience in the last in-person fieldwork we did together as a married couple, in 2019. We offer methodological and practical reflections related to ethnographic fieldwork when interpersonal relations and the practices of intimacy (or lack thereof) inform how we, as anthropologists, understand the situation, the people, and the life we study. The second section discusses how our bodily and embodied proximities in conducting in-person ethnographic fieldwork has ethical, methodological, and practical limitations. These limitations show that long before physical distancing became the rule, face-to-face fieldwork had always been regulated by more or less invisible barriers of distance between researchers and informants. In the third section, we use our current personal situation to reflect on ongoing research about development interventions in Manggarai villages. We discuss the “field” and “home” dichotomy in the context of the “work from home” condition. We wonder what it means for us, as anthropologists, to conduct research from home? In the concluding section, we sum up and discuss what will be lost if anthropology fails to address the limitations of bodily and embodied practices of fieldwork.



## Doing Fieldwork: Personal and Empirical

This section addresses our ways of dealing with ethnographic fieldwork as a married couple who are also graduate students in two different Western countries. We argue that ethnographic fieldwork, at least in our case, is possible through our personal relations and sets of the pragmatic accounts on the realm of the mundane such as navigating long-distance marriage during graduate school. Our personal and intimate affairs crucially support the production of anthropological knowledge.

Scholars have brought many important analyses to the anthropology of the body. Whereas most of these accounts pay attention to the bodies of research participants, we argue for taking into account that of the researcher as a locus for reflective evaluation on how one conducts, understands, and redesigns research. Reflecting on the bodily limitation in our field's methods may help to demystifying anthropology and ethnography (Faria 2021) and, perhaps, promote a more inclusive and less masculine discipline. Researchers' bodies are relational and imbued with affective forces that reflect interaction between them and their interlocutors. We are interested in how emotions play a crucial role in understanding the research experience and professional training of anthropologists (Lo Bosco 2021). Our attempts to do so has affected our own ethnographic experiences, including aspects that might otherwise be inaccessible if we did not attend to the moment as a couple.

In 2019, we went from Jakarta to Manggarai Regency, East Nusa Tenggara to conduct fieldwork together<sup>3</sup>. After years of living separately (Prahara in Auckland, New Zealand and Ratri in Evanston, Illinois in the United States of America), we asked ourselves why wouldn't we do research in the same field site. Ratri has been doing research in Manggarai since 2015, and Prahara's doctoral advisor has also conducted research on development in this region. Back to our concern that Prahara might not having enough time to conduct his ethnography, Manggarai appeared to be the best place for him, as he would have the advantage of using existing networks that would be familiar to him in terms of both the research topic and physical proximity to Ratri's and his advisor's connections. Reflecting on how we chose our field site has made us think about aspects of fieldwork processes that are mundane and pragmatic but nevertheless crucial in the making of science—in this case, anthropology (Eijk 2018; Latour 1992). From previous research experience and personal connections, we decided that Manggarai was an ideal place to conduct our ethnographic fieldwork.

Our decision to choose Manggarai as research field site was based heavily on the practicality and personal preference of doing fieldwork as a married couple. Inês Faria's (2021) account of plans, changes, and improvisations during ethnographic fieldwork is a helpful resource, as she writes about junior anthropologists doing fieldwork for the first time. Emphasizing the pragmatic aspect of starting and doing fieldwork, Faria (2021:21) writes “[c]ontacts are also invaluable, and will surely help, directly or indirectly, with negotiating your place(s) in the field. More often than not, connections are the best path-openers both in

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<sup>3</sup> Prahara was in Manggarai doing his six-month dissertation research, while Ratri was there conducting three-month preliminary summer research.



pragmatic but also in thought-provoking ways.” Similarly, by relying on the existing connections that Ratri and Prahara’s advisor made during previous research, Prahara could gain access more easily to his interlocutors. More importantly, Prahara felt a little less anxious because he was accepted as a known individual in a place where many people feel worried that they are under constant scrutiny in the regime of an audit culture, in this case, that of Indonesian development.

As a former research consultant for many development projects outside of Flores Island, it did not take long for Prahara to build relationships with relevant actors in this new place. In addition, Prahara strategically mentioned to his interlocutors, while researching development and village governance, that his wife was doing research about maternal health in the same area. Exposing this fact helped him gain trust from his interlocutors. It also helped him to create and navigate his identity in a way that facilitated his starting fieldwork among the community Prahara was entering. Our interlocutors could easily identify us as a married couple doing research for doctoral degrees. We detached ourselves from any connection with development projects, especially since Ratri had previously been in Tengku Lese—a village where Ratri focused her work—as research consultant for a health project. People in the village could start to see us in a new sense of our identity—as graduate students—and in a new sense of corporeal entity—as husband and wife.

We have come to terms that a long-distance relationship is very difficult for us. When we decided to pursue doctoral degrees, our only option was to apply for scholarships. We began with the idea that we had to apply for the same ones, but, unfortunately, we were awarded different opportunities, tied to different countries and, in fact, distal continents. During several years of graduate study, Prahara used to characterize the feeling of having a long-distance marriage as suffering from a phantom limb sensation, reflecting Csordas’ (2011) and Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) use of the medical condition of phantom limbs to explain the body as constitutive for being-in-the-world (Boellstorff 2011:513). Phantom limb is the “perception of the body’s complete anatomical schemata in those who have suddenly experienced amputation” (Scheper-Hughes 2011:176). Fearing a continued feeling of the “lack of intactness” (Ibid.) because of continued geographic separation, we chose to be in the same (or, if not, at least a nearby) fieldwork location. We knew that we had to be strategic in choosing our field site if we wanted to maintain not only our work but also our mental health.

Thus, our emotional states influenced the decision to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in the same geographic location. Instead of treating ethnographers’ emotions as irrelevant, we acknowledge the methodological implications of emotions as a valid and powerful means for understanding others (Davies and Spencer 2010). Anthropologists have interpreted emotions as a form of embodied experience linked to relational life (Ramos-Zayas 2011; Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990). Since ethnographic encounter is a relational practice and is imbued with affective features, we suggest that it is important to include ethnographers’ emotions in methodological courses, reflecting what Maria Concetta Lo Bosco (2021) writes in her article on emotional labor of the ethnographer. For her, “[e]motions have an essential role in building our field relations, in shaping our knowledge of them, and in redesigning our research approach” (Lo Bosco 2021:9). When treated with intellectual rigor as part of empirical inquiry, as James Davies (2010) argues, emotions can assist more than impede ethnographers’ understanding of the world they study.





Although together in the field, we had different research focuses. To accommodate intellectual exploration within each of our topics, we chose two different villages. Prahara conducted his research in Dimpong Village and Ratri continued working in Tengku Lese. The two villages are located in the same sub-district (*Kecamatan*) to facilitate our mobility in and out of and between them. What surprised us was that we both gained valuable insights from moving between two fieldwork locations, supporting the notion that conducting our respective research separately could have been less effective. We still visited each of the villages separately at times, but if we could, we preferred to work together as doing so provided important fieldwork experiences that otherwise would have been inaccessible. This was the case especially after we attended a ritual (*teing hang*) at Ratri's fieldsite, one of the cases we explore in the next section.<sup>4</sup>

The following section looks at the constitution of subjectivity and intersubjectivity as bodily phenomena which may have affected how Ratri and Prahara connected with interlocutors. Our examples suggest that the ways in which anthropologists experience fieldwork depends on how interlocutors perceive the former's bodies. An important point is that by attending to ethnographic fieldwork as a married couple, we could access different treatments we received from our interlocutors that could tell something about the world we study. If the current pandemic has required many anthropologists to maintain a measurable distance, our experience suggests that existing barriers—of culture, economics, class, and power—also create a distance that rules interactions between researchers and their interlocutors.

### Fragile Body and Confused Mind

In this section, we would like to draw attention to the fact that when doing fieldwork, researchers' own bodies are involved in social interaction and are susceptible to others' (interlocutors') objectification. Some reactions on the part of interlocutors may be pleasant and support expected research outcomes, but others may be more problematic and even dangerous for the researchers' safety. We provide instances of how our interlocutors perceived us in our encounters during research. In our case, how people saw and treated us appeared to be related to their perceptions of vulnerability, uncertainty, and intimacy.

After the publication of *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), Bronislaw Malinowski, one of the anthropology's "personae," became the experiential authority on long-term fieldwork. However, the (in)capacity of the body to experience certain socio-cultural events in the field is, to some extent, a result of continuous negotiation between researchers and their informants. We argue that negotiation is an integral element in activities we call "rapport building" and which involves the researcher's body as both subject and object. Our engagement with our interlocutors' lives is the result of the often uneasy task of building rapport. Although engagement supposedly enables anthropologists to access ethnographic data,

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<sup>4</sup> *Teing hang* is a ritual that involves sacrificing livestock (usually chicken) as an offer to the ancestors. Usually, a family in Manggarai holds a *teng hang* ritual before they begin important milestones in their life, such as a family member's going to a different city for school the beginning of a series of marriage rituals.



in our experience our engagement with people in Manggarai could sometimes hamper us in getting the data we need.

In Tengku Lese, some of Ratri's interlocutors had heard about her status as a married woman even though they never saw her husband. Even though migration to different cities or provinces is common, leading many families in this village to live apart from their families, Ratri noticed that a lot of people had wondered why a married woman from Jakarta would spend months in a place where she knew no one, and away from her husband and family. When Prahara came to visit Tengku Lese Village, people were excited to meet him.

Sometime around July 2019, we attended a *teing hang* ritual held by the clan of Ratri's foster parent. It was not Ratri's first time of attending *teing hang*, but it was the first time that people in the village saw us as a married couple. Usually, Ratri had sat in the living room where the ritual was held, but this time she sat in the kitchen with all the women who prepared the food for the ritual. The male ritual leaders invited Prahara to the living room, where he sat among the leaders of the groups, smoked some cigarettes, and when the ritual was about to start, like other married men, delivered an introductory speech—in his broken Manggarai.

Attending the ritual as a married couple led us to think about the gendered space of fieldwork. Some of the women had asked Ratri to sit next to Prahara in the living room where the ritual was happening. But Ratri decided to sit with the other women in the kitchen. Below is a fragment from Ratri's note about the experience.

"I don't know why I prefer to sit next to *Ende* (Mama) Keris. Perhaps, I noticed her as the familiar face in this rather foreign place. Maybe I was just not in the mood to "hangout" with people? (Who are the people, by the way?) Maybe I just wanted to observe and not worry about explaining what I am doing here. Or I just feel uncomfortable sitting in that living room as I know all of them are men and I felt much more make sense if I sat in the kitchen, observing, listening, and laughing with the jokes they (the women) made back there" (August 11, 2019).

According to Ratri's note, the division between men's and women's space in that ritual informed the body about where a person should sit and what type of roles she must perform. As outsiders to this community, however, our bodies are governed by certain gender norms that we carry from our upbringing and socialization. Ratri might simply ignore the gender norms of the village and take the chance to sit next to Prahara. She used to sit in the living room watching the ritual when she conducted her research at Tengku Lese alone. But her decision to sit in the kitchen with the women when Prahara was sitting in the living room with the men also signifies her accepting the gender norms of behavior among the villagers. In this moment, we think, the subject-object dichotomy was irrelevant, and not just to how we, as the researchers, understand our interlocutors. More importantly, we believe, when doing our research, we were constantly negotiating the subject-object dichotomy inherent in our bodies. We might think that we were the conscious subject since we are the researchers, but more often than not, we were the object of observation for our interlocutors.

Some of our female colleagues have experienced sexism during their fieldwork, with many treated less seriously than their fellow male researchers and some (including Ratri) sexually harassed by their male interlocutors. In a recent essay, Diana T. Pakasi and Putri



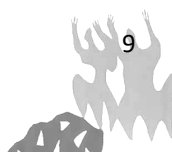
Rahmadhani (2022) describe how their experience conducting fieldwork on male sexuality and masculinity put them in a high-risk position. Pakasi and Rahmadhani have heard about, seen, and themselves experienced assault by their male research participants. This is an example of how researchers' gender and sexuality can complicate fieldwork experience. Similar to Pakasi and Rahmadhani's topic, other aspects of research also put the researchers in a potentially dangerous position during fieldwork. Many involve inquiries in which participants and researchers hold opposite political concerns (Shoshan 2016; Whutehad 2004; Ramadhan this volume; and Nadzir this volume), making it dilemmatic to be sympathetic with the interlocutors. We ask, further, what if the fieldwork is related to researchers' personal issues; it may then trigger, for example, concerns about one's health or sense of ethical self? This type of question, we believe, is not discussed and treated in the literature with intellectual rigor.

During our time at Tengku Lese, people in the village were very enthusiastic to get to know both of us. They asked if we had children and when they found out we had none (at that time), they pitied us as they thought to be childless is an unfortunate life. One day, an old woman whom people knew as a traditional healer in the village, came to Ratri's house in Tengku Lese early in the morning. Out of compassion, she offered Ratri a massage which she believed had helped many childless couples have children. Despite being uncomfortable (and skeptical), Ratri accepted the offer. The woman's motive came out of caring.

We used to imagine that successful ethnographic fieldwork is one in which researchers are able to meaningfully immerse in their informants' mundane activities and experience. For example, Catherine Allerton's (2013) ethnography discusses something extraordinary based on her experience of walking from a village in the highland to a new village near the provincial road in Manggarai. Nils Bubandt (2015) shares an experience with his informants in Halmahera Island as he hears a mysterious noise coming from his roof, a sign of the presence of the wicked witch. These stories are classic examples of how anthropologists unsettle the boundaries of self and others in their fieldwork by bodily-being there. The body in this regard becomes an important instrument for the anthropologist in mining meaningful experiences that inspire the construction of ethnographic narratives. In our research, however, we both faced refusals, despite our efforts to build good rapport with our interlocutors (see also Reginato 2022). No matter how close a researcher or an ethnographer may become with interlocutors, a certain refusal may still occur. Refusal, however, is rarely acknowledged or addressed as part of ethnographic practice and analysis.

Prahara was staying in Dimpong Village and expected he would join people in going to their lands. He got people to promise to get him in the morning, explaining that he wanted to learn about farming and land tenure in this village. Promise after promise was unkept, with no one coming to get him. Then he changed his strategy. He strolled around the village, hoping that he would meet someone and eventually start a conversation. Sometimes, some of the village head's closest friends, upon seeing him, immediately left their work and tried to catch up with him. At first, we thought this was just a nice coincidence. But after many occasions of his being followed by the village head's closest friends, we no longer thought that these were naïve occurrences. Instead, we consider these actions as deliberate efforts to monopolize the narrative by deciding what stories can be told and by whom (Trouillot 1995).

For example, one afternoon, we decided to stroll around the village together. Soon, two men came out of nowhere and decided to accompany us in our afternoon walk. We stopped at



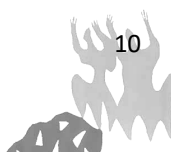
one house, a family invited us and the two men to come inside. Strangely, our two companions refused to enter. They insisted on waiting for us outside and also refused to join our conversation with the family. Although it was an awkward moment, we decided to carry on and stayed in the house for an hour or two. Because the family welcomed us very nicely, it would have been difficult and arrogant to refuse the family's offer of hospitality. The family served us coffee followed by a humble lunch.<sup>5</sup> Again, the host asked the two men to join us, and again the offer was refused. Ignoring the awkward feelings, we stayed and interviewed the host and his family.

Similar awkward moments and dilemmas have been part of Ratri's fieldwork. In 2015, she was part of a research team intended to conduct monitoring for a maternal and neonatal health program, namely, *Revolusi Kesehatan Ibu dan Anak* (Revolusi KIA) and she has been able to maintain connections from the primary care clinic, colloquially known as *Puskesmas* or *Pusat Kesehatan Masyarakat*. In 2015, she stayed at the village clinic or *Puskesmas Pembantu (Pustu)*, together with the village midwife and her family. When Ratri revisited the village for her summer research in 2017, she asked permission from the village head and told him that she would be spending some time in the village, possibly at villagers' houses. The village head welcomed her intention, but when Ratri mentioned the idea to staying at the villagers' houses to the midwife, she showed signs of disagreement. She mentioned that it would be a burden for the villagers to accept Ratri as their guest, as they were too poor to provide decent food or a place to sleep. On different occasions, she discouraged Ratri from drinking coffee served at the villagers' houses, as the coffee might contain black magic that would be harmful. Instead, she reminded Ratri that it was very important for Ratri to ask for plain water during a visit. When the midwife learned that Ratri had drunk and ate at villagers' houses, she could not believe it and continued to remind Ratri to be careful and not to repeat the same "mistake" again. Although the midwife no longer stays at the village clinic, she told Ratri to stay at the clinic all by herself rather than sleep at villagers' houses.

The constant and ordinary refusal that we face in research may actually come from sympathetic views. In Manggarai, we spent our time talking with older people. We often heard people say the word *beslaing* or *kasihan* in Bahasa Indonesia (poor thing in English) after we told them the reason that we were in their village. Our bodies were perceived as too fragile to experience the hardship of "village life." The midwife at Ratri's fieldsite was pointing out the perceived danger of eating and drinking at the villagers' houses. Similarly, when a fight broke out at a party in Dimpong, the village head tried to make sure that Prahara was safe by ordering three people to take him home. His fairer skin, compared to Manggarai men, continuously reminded the people that he is not from the village and was perhaps ill-equipped for going to the field and working under the sun. People's perception of researchers' vulnerable bodies may in fact come from an intimacy based on mutual engagement. In trying to assure successful fieldwork, we were literally at the mercy of our interlocutors. Despite trying to immerse ourselves in other people's daily lives, our proximity to the field may also present a limit to what we can do in the field.

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<sup>5</sup> Allerton (2013) eloquently describes how people in Manggarai treat their guests in their house with coffee and food.



Our point concerns the ultimate fieldwork objective of “being there” as the “royal” way to collect data that has been discussed and advanced in many ethnographic method publications. In contrast, we are trying to retrieve questions about the limitation of bodily being from the methodological margins of fieldwork. In a *Familiar Strange* podcast (April 6, 2020), Robert Borofsky discusses the idea of longevity and reciprocity in fieldwork—that is, building a long and sustainable relationship with interlocutors beyond the research timeline. Even if anthropologists push themselves to attain (bodily) being there, refusal will nonetheless make ethnographic field work patchy.

Maintaining long term social relationship with interlocutors outside of fieldwork may help find opportunities to ask about and hear other patchy yet useful stories. That connection has proved helpful for Ratri’s fieldwork which was interrupted by the pandemic. What kind of possibilities can be explored when we do not pursue the methodological “urge” of bodily being there? The following section aims to discuss this question as a global pandemic still interrupts most ongoing in-person fieldwork-based research, including ours.

### ***(Patch)Working from Home: Doing “Research” During a Global Pandemic***

With the outbreak of COVID-19, the primary public health measure implemented by governments around the world focused on regulating mobility and proximity of human bodies. In addition to frequent hand washing and wearing masks, we were instructed to stay at home and keep a distance from one another while accessing public facilities. Some might find the stay-at-home instruction less complicated, as they might have a house be surrounded by family as an important support system in time of distress. Others might not have such privileges.

When the first wave of COVID-19 hit most of the globe, Prahara was in Auckland and Ratri was in Evanston while our important family members (e.g., parents, siblings, nieces, and nephews) were all in Indonesia. The distance contributed significantly to intensifying the anxiety dealing with many sudden and uncertain changes caused by the pandemic. With news of mounting cases and deaths as well as countries, including New Zealand, closing borders to all foreign travelers, we knew that the plans we had arranged were no longer feasible. At some point, we came to realize that we had to prioritize our well-being, among other things. With all of the uncertainty of the moment, Prahara made a quick decision to postponing his study in Auckland and reunite with Ratri, in Evanston.

As we postponed and redesigned our academic plans, our relatives and old friends started to reach out to us, asking about our well-being as they knew we both were away from home. And our interlocutors did, too. They asked us about what was going on with the pandemic, hoping we could explain it to them. Of course, we could not find answers for them as we, too, were struggling to comprehend the world we lived in. Every day we saw the pandemic create social panic and sharpen racial sentiments in the United States, while we also watched how people in Indonesia held onto social solidarity amid the state disfunction in its ability to protect its citizens.

About May 2020, Ratri heard that health personnel at the *puskesmas* in Manggarai did not have sufficient essential materials to treat patients with the virus. For us, it was very depressing for a health center to not have medical masks, thermo-guns, and personal protective equipment during a crisis. Revisiting Borofsky’s podcast interview emphasizing longevity and



reciprocity in fieldwork relationships, we were struggling in a time of a global pandemic “to find ways to reach beyond the discipline and ensure that the work anthropology does matters” (Dolan 2020). We decided that the least we could do—act of care, wanting them to be safe—was to raise some funds to help health care personnel in Manggarai buy equipment. At the same time, we were grappling with the question of whether anthropology matters at all in a time of chaos.

Although changing our thinking was hard, the manifesto for patchwork ethnography from Gökçe Günel, Saiba Varma, and Chika Watanabe (2020) was helpful to our accepting the reality that our changing living condition may influence the type of work we do. At least for some time, to make anthropology matter, we had to distance ourselves from our interlocutors. We were aware that we must find other strategies to continue our work. In times of distress, we revisited some books that we had thought were irrelevant to our research. We came to appreciate that virtual, digital, online ethnographies are common in anthropology (Rahm-Skågeby 2011; Boellstorff 2012; Pink et al. 2015; Kaur-Gill and Dutta 2017). Archival work too, has served an important role in knowledge production (Stoler 2002; Rutherford 2018). We started to have video calls with our interlocutors, exchanging stories and strategies for coping with pandemic stress.

As new parents, it was (and still is) hard for us to work from home, as childcare can be complicated. We reevaluated many commitments because we found working at home challenging, but when possible, we reconnected and stayed connected with our interlocutors through social media. We have been able to collect some important information from their postings. When we have a chance to make a phone call, we usually ask about their postings and listen to how they explain what they were thinking about the posts. Despite the challenge of balancing work with our domestic lives, Prahara is trying to engage with his interlocutors by finishing a documentary movie for them. To date, we are still learning how to deal with a new notion of productivity.

Reflecting on the “work from home” culture, Suchismita Chattopadhyay (2021) problematizes the notion of working and productivity. Her article aptly points to the struggle of maintaining a home and the work people are doing from the confines of home. Chattopadhyay’s descriptions resemble our own struggle of how to conduct fieldwork and write a dissertation from home with insufficient childcare support. We are constantly derailed by our “low” productivity as we must attend to and prioritize our familial and personal commitments over our academic responsibilities.

Despite joy related to the idea of working from home and not needing to leave our one-year-old child, in practice we have only a small amount of time for our academic work. This reality makes us both nervous, as our scholarships both have exact termination dates. We are aware that the small amount of time we can dedicate to researching and writing may not suffice to accomplish our academic duties. All the chores we share at home sometimes make us think that we are not doing enough for our work (hence “the low” productivity term), adding to our sense of precarity. Keeping our family happy and nourished require both emotional and physical labor, but as graduate students who receive funding from others, we have to be able to showcase the tangible outcome of productivity—how many interviews, how much social media observation, how many words added to the dissertation, etc.



For Ratri, who is still conducting research, the boundary between field and home barely exists. Ratri's research on stunting issues have made the two of us conscious of our child's growth and development. As Ratri shares with Prahara her social media observations on women's struggles to make their babies eat more, we are both constantly nervous about our own child's eating behavior. We nervously evaluate and criticize our parenting styles as our child struggles to keep up with suggested growth marks. When Ratri chose to change her research question from maternal and neonatal mortality to child stunting, she did so because of the shift in the national priority development program. We never thought that Ratri would struggle personally with precisely the thing she thought she would be studying as a distanced scholar. As our child's growth and development become our main concern, Ratri's research has come to have urgently pressing personal relevance.

In the beginning of this section, we shared some of how we have comprehended the pandemic and our lives as we reside apart from our families. As we watched supermarkets in the United States and elsewhere run out of toilet paper and hand sanitizer, our informants in Manggarai faced insufficient healthcare essentials. We asked if anthropology matters in times when people are challenged to survive during crises. As we arrived back in Indonesia, in April 2021, we were hopeful we could be more productive as we would be surrounded by family for childcare and emotional support. In fact, however, we were occupied with domestic labor which makes fulfilling our academic responsibilities difficult. The long-lasting impacts of Covid-19 have made our lives uncertain and altered our understanding of in-person fieldwork to ethically problematic research. We do not see this article as an end point of discussion, but rather as an opening for further dialogue between scholars and researchers about the intricate challenges of ethnographic fieldwork confronted by many anthropologists facing a variety of power and economic struggles.

## Reprise

Anthropologists should discuss the limitations of physically being in the field sites as openly as we do the potentials. This call taps into discussions of decolonizing anthropology. Some works have started by acknowledging anthropological research as intrusion into others' lives (Reginato 2021; Smith 1999). We used to think that conventional ethnography offered the privilege to explore and spend time in a place and among a community for good data that no other approach can do better. Our article has tried to address our lives during this crisis and how it affects our fieldwork. This opportunity gives us a chance to rethink of ways of doing fieldwork that are more sensitive to the researchers' personal struggles. By foregrounding our challenges, personal and professional, we try to engage the implications of a traditional masculine type of anthropology and ethnographic practice. It is by no means promoting unlimited flexibility to what we can call as ethnographic research. Rather, through this article, we emphasize the need for ethnographic enterprise that rests on ethical concern and deep interest to both informants' and our own well beings. We encourage ethnographic fieldwork that is done in the principle of care and respect for the people we study and for our personal limitations.

We understand that the body bears multiple identities. For example, Ratri used to be a smoker, but she never smokes in front of her interlocutors. Her reason was not for acceptance



by her interlocutors, but because she feels uncomfortable smoking in an environment where it is unacceptable due to health or gender issues. Our bodies have long been governed by norms and rules that affect how we act in the world, including how we are doing our research. Sometimes the norms and rules prohibit us from doing something, other times they enable us to behave in certain way. We invite readers to think about other alternative research methods that may be added to an anthropology that is sensitive to many forms of bodily limitations, and to start to rethink implications of both in-person and long-term fieldwork. We also think that it is the time to normalize anxiety surrounding fieldwork and research and to humbly accept that this discipline deserves continuous reshaping and rethinking.

Work-life balance may turn out to be impossible. While working from home can be empowering for some people, it is also an example of the expansion of work into domestic lives. Academic solidarity and collaborative research with other disciplines, however, may help us to navigate challenges for research in this new world. The new world that we mean is not only the world that we are living in after Covid-19 pandemic. More importantly, the new world is a place where to anthropology and the people inside the discipline would be more sensitive and inclusive regarding the range of bodily limitations that make conventional in-person fieldwork difficult.





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