Epistolary Fragments for an Anthropology of Loneliness

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So you go
And you stand on your own
And you leave on your own
- The Smiths, 'How Soon is Now?'

A theoretical question: what is an anthropology of loneliness? An ethnographic attuning: how to write loneliness? How to turn disconnection-isolation-despair into neatly wrought words? If loneliness is defined by lack – of sociality, of intersubjectivity – then it is not the stuff of thickly described fieldnotes, nor the heft of a detailed monograph. Loneliness fragments. Affect. Words. Silence. We anthropologists can never fully know another's loneliness. Yet we, anthropologists, know loneliness all too well.

We first spoke of an anthropology of loneliness in the cold contexts of our own lives: the one, a year after moving abroad for research, still adrift in a too-small town that felt day-draggingly drab; the other, recalling her childhood adjusting to being an immigrant, the years of re-made identity, the years of un-made friends. Our lives of migrant mobility and academic aspiration saw us regularly distanced from close friends. Each of us wrote to the friends we had left behind. Each of us imagined new friends we had not made. Dear Friend.

In what follows we touch towards loneliness in ways that we leave as fragments / to fragment. We do so in epistolary form. Old friends now in opposite timezones, we decided to work with the lag – itself a lonely wait – writing to each other daily (almost) as we tugged at the question of an anthropology of loneliness. There was no prompt; one of us simply started one morning. We built upon each other, in a word processing file passed back and forth by email, never quite sure where the next awaited 'letter' would lead, never quite planning what we poured back. We moved with the experiment.

* * *

Dear Mythily,

I sometimes think of Charlotte Brontë writing to Mary Taylor, from one island across the world to another. I imagine the letter travelling from a Yorkshire hilltop (wuthering) to colonial Wellington (windy). I imagine the post boys and the horses and the trains, the large freight ships with tiny written words aboard. We only think of the time it took – weeks? months? – as a great, hanging drag because we've learnt to speed up. Just as we only think of Charlotte in a lonely Pennine parsonage because romance is immune to the mobile infrastructures of industry, empire, book distribution. I write articles about this. I argue, hard, for connectivity. Except … except. Here I am writing to you from this small Welsh town I've come to work in, and when I go out later the streets will seem all the emptier because you are not here.

I used to teach students preparing for exchange. Don't call home, I told them. Don't find your refuge in familiar voices, or you won't be able to hear new sounds. But now I juggle the timezones of the people I love, watching my phone when our waking hours intersect.

Bleep bleep.

Good morning Sydney.

Bleep bleep.

Gute Nacht Wien.

I remember years ago reading something scathing about anthropologists and our fieldwork 'friends' – how our earnest belief that we are adopted-brother-sister-kin is about our lonely desperation, not their love. The loneliness of the long-distance anthropologist. Won't somebody please give us friendship-betelnut-*cariad*-care?

Bleep bleep.

An automated message about my mobile phone bill.

I need to go out now, past where the seagulls rip open the binbags, to make conversation in shops about weather and the lambing and why the Polish deli closed. I didn't start this letter thinking I would write myself maudlin. I didn't want to write this letter about me, reprising my lonely anthropologist like a trademark. I wanted to ask you what loneliness is, ethnographically speaking. But here we are – or *there*, you are.

Dear Mythily. (Dear Mary.) Write back.

* * *

Friendship must be one of anthropology's major methodological pre-occupations. We largely leave our anxieties unvoiced, but those of us anthropologists who embark on projects not 'at home' can quickly transform into gangling Malinowskis, confronted in the field by deserted beaches that, for all they might look like bustling streets, still contain the fear of being stranded alone. Michael Jackson (1998: 104) writes that what anthropologists extol as 'friendship' in the field really connotes 'a deep sense of gratitude that the ethnographer feels towards his [*sic*] community for having saved his or her sense of dignity'. Perhaps the true horror haunting these far-afield forms of participant-observation is not too much participation (that 'going native' of another era's racial dread) but *too little*. After all, as a social modality, observation is the recourse for those left out.

If there is an existing anthropology of loneliness, then, it is often about us: anthropologists as melancholic observers living in the cold, hard hope of participation. Yet, other people feel lonely, too. The trouble is, how could we know? Our own angst is ever within existential reach, but the intersubjectivity needed to know that of another requires a depth of connection that actually negates loneliness. Like an archaeological excavation destroying a site, to work to know another's loneliness is to – at least temporarily – wipe the very object of inquiry. For Kathleen Stewart (2011, 2017: 197), we might 'attune' to an affective atmosphere, and yet '[t]he ethnography of such things has to be both nimble and patient … The ethnographic reals it approaches are not flat and incontrovertible, but alchemical'. Knowing loneliness is not an analytic endeavour that is neatly tape-recordable.

* * *

Dear Bryonny.

You asked me what loneliness *is* to ethnography. As if the answer could be so easily conjured, I call up multiple documents on my screen – many fieldnotes, some diaries – by word-searching 'lonel'.

A handful of hits:

2011: a man, a volunteer who spends time with a nursing home's elderly, expresses lyrical sympathy to the how the home's services are centralized and the residents' needs are neutralized, their loneliness looming and often unmet.

2013: another man, exiled from elsewhere, on a limbo visa in Melbourne, is lonely with his ideas; he has so many and so few peers to discuss them with (a hole I, as volunteer, fill for moments here and there).

2015: people who have moved as you have, alone, their loved ones at work in other time-zones for the hours they are loneliest.

Many entries, over many years, on me: folding quietly inwards when living with unloving men; or suddenly taken by the feeling, wrapped in dread, sipping tea in the backyard one bright winter morning; or besting the time-zone problem with longing-induced insomnia, waiting, waiting, for loved ones' names to get a green dot in Google chat, treasuring those few hours of 4am chit-chat when they woke up in Auckland, regretting nothing when I headed off, sleepless, into fieldwork, those days in 2011 to also spend time with the nursing home's elderly.

Sometimes fieldwork is where lonelinesses meet. We monograph the social stuff well enough, but maybe we need to turn our attentiveness to what that sociality might be laced with, and attend, if just with our imaginations, to the moments past sociality's edges.

* * *

Loneliness poses more than a methodological challenge for anthropology. Defined as *individual* exclusion or disconnection, loneliness is inherently marginal to anthropology's classic focus on social, cultural phenomena. (Though our ethnographic extrapolations may muffle the truth that the loneliest of subjects are often most enticed by listening strangers.) Structuralism, so insistent on the neat coherence of social order, could not ken loneliness – at least not among 'the other,' whose close-knit *gemeinschaft* (Tönnies 2002 [1912]) presented the imagined obverse to 'our' fragmented modern society. The nostalgic sepia of community-sans-loneliness was cherished into the 1980s, when Anthony Cohen could enthuse that belonging 'suggests that one is an integral piece of the marvellously complicated fabric which constitutes the community' (1982: 21). The same decade introduced Marilyn Strathern's (1988) Melanesian 'dividuals' – a concept that resonated for anthropologists of South Asia, too (Marriott 1989; Dumont 1992). Theorising the seeming inextricability of South Asian selves from family continues to echo in the strongly felt sense in South Asian cities that modernising, globalising forces are diminishing family bonds, rendering young folk solitary, selfish and dispersed, and old folk adrift and lonely (L. Cohen 1998). But if we can hit play on another eighties hit here, it must be Bronski Beat's 'Smalltown Boy' – the young gay man so painfully unstitched from community's 'marvellously complicated fabric'. Run away. Turn away.

* * *

Dear Mythily,

I woke up this morning – the seagulls shrieked, *shr-i-e-k-ed* – to look for your letter, and remembered that I had failed to write another: Dear Mr and Mrs McGinty. (Not their real names, but the personas they live in my ethnographic texts; their identifying features a little crinkled, their characters a little composite.)

Bryonny, you don't write to us enough, they tell me sometimes. And, they add, we don't get out so much anymore. Not with his chest. Not since the chapel closed.

I can see them sat at home in the pastel pink front room, every ornament spick and dustless, watching out the window for whosoever walks on the lane. They knew the postman was sweet on the woman at number 3 because they'd timed his rounds. Stopping in for a cup of tea, was it? They loved my yellow umbrella; loved phoning in triumph: you went down the hill at one-forty-six-p-m! When I rang from across the world in what I imagined as a happy surprise, she wept down the line: he was taken to the hospital at two-fifteen-in-the-morning.

Mythily, I – the cursor blinks anxiously while I flail for the next word – don't know how to write about losing a husband. For most of the women I worked with, out in those Yorkshire hills, the lost husband was an absent present accoutrement of a long life. Author Janet Frame writes her Violet Pansy Proudlock as a woman who practices the words: I have buried two husbands. The feel in the mouth. The skitter in company. I. Have. Buried. Except earth never covers.

I could tell how many years gone Izzy's husband was by the remembrance poppies on the photograph in his sister's kitchen. I could turn tritely anthropological, declaring the burial a rite of passage for the phase of widowhood. Stop. Hush.

Piling into cars for the Women's Institute outings, the widowed had not a worry for his dinner; the women who had not buried husbands insisted on driving for the practice … 'for when he's not here' hanging unvoiced. Perhaps I could claim that the raucous sociality

[Girls!
        Girls!
                Let's have a shandy!]

wasn't loneliness. Oh, I could pull out all the tropes of close-knit rural community. But, Mythily, you are right to wonder what lies beyond sociality's edges. And edges are sharp. Who am I to content myself with the social fizz in the shandy glass, convinced of my own knowingness? I have not buried two husbands.

* * *

Contemporary anthropology may have moved on from *gemeinschaft*, yet modernity's *gesellschaft* tropes can still prove tempting. Marc Augé's (2008) urban critique *Non-Places* could be an Ur-text for an anthropology of loneliness … yet as the book's genericized (read: white middle-class male) subject

sadly strolls the supermarket, Augé's reliance on 'ethnographic fiction' leaves us with the distinct impression that he is simply serving readers a pre-determined dystopia. This insistence that loneliness is made manifest by certain spaces, certain epochs, certain societies (namely, 'ours') smacks more of modern melancholic (Fritzsche 2004) grievance than subtly observed intersubjectivity. If spaces are to be *a priori* lonely, whose narrative names them? One of us reminisces elsewhere (Meher, under review) on the intimate warmth of mall-wandering for a migrant family, locating themselves in the comforting fluorescence – becoming *someplace*.

* * *

Bryonny, dearest.

How beautifully you write of the loss.   I leave space now to gesture to how I quietly sat with what you summoned before I felt ready to speak.   (Does that echo what you say? – all the long spells of quiet sitting-with that don't make it to the monograph?)   (Maybe, but maybe I'm just playing now, the way we do when we talk, the way stuff comes up to fill the space –

        funnily,
        charmingly,
        profoundly,
        convivially

              – in ways it wouldn't if I were alone, and maybe too if you were alone.)
(Like this.)   (But….   Huh. This doesn't feel like staving off some empty. There is a force here that feels formed of itself to its own ends. The force good friendship is made of: banter, bandying about ideas, bandying about … shandy?)

        (Like this the quiet-sit-with spell is broken.)

What you so poignantly reminded me is how often loneliness is a symptom of loss. Loss after the fact, certainly. (Loss in a temporal frame that moves forward like ageing, that imagines time as always, irrefutably, compellingly forward.) But loss before the fact, too. (Same frame, but pre-emptive loss can be lonely too. Can't it? Like: I knew the unloving man would leave me, and not by death. Lol.) Are there distinctions in all this I can't quite put my finger on? Or is it simply, merely (anthropological A HA moment) that you and I don't feel these things the same?

* * *

Loneliness has no distinct materiality, no clear spatiality – and by definition it lacks sociality. Yet it is regarded as a big ticket issue. Loners (see: young, male, radicalized) are framed as a danger to be noticed and addressed, and, in more benign urgencies, loneliness is the substance of ever-multiplying government and thinktank reports, a problem that vaguely defined 'thems' and 'theys' are increasingly urged to do more to tackle. In 2018 the UK Lottery Fund floated a 'Campaign to End Loneliness', while the BBC 'Loneliness Experiment' surveyed over 55,000 people online. The latter might methodologically suggest that loneliness is a topic for the SurveyMonkey social sciences: How often do you feel lonely? Click.

If we are to be doggedly determined that loneliness *can* dwell in anthropological knowledge, we also insist that to do so requires a shift from the familiar comforts of classic ethnographic practice. The

ethnographic pursuit of loneliness might instead take from the sensory and imaginative attunement-to objects that Eve Sedgwick (1997) called 'weak theory', and that Kathleen Stewart realises in *Ordinary Affects* (2007). It is a way of theory that abandons theorizing's ontological conceits with analytical coherence and reforming life's mess into something modellable, and goes in pursuit of illuminations that are provisional and probable. We do not propose this because loneliness as an affective force is impossible to understand coherently, but rather that to feel lonely can mean feeling apart from some imagined, or remembered, or longed-for social coherence. An anthropology of loneliness calls for theoretical, methodological practices that court capture, but artfully elude it.

* * *

Dear Mythily.

Your letter had taken longer to arrive than I had wanted it to.
	Today! Today!
I thought, sitting yesterday letter-less at the kitchen table. Now I see that in the silence I had insistently wanted filled, you were spinning syntax, making space.
	I find my breath again.

You are right that I dwell on (in?) a certain temporality; the push of the past into the present ever a snare to my … analytic consciousness? Maudlin heart? I was born at six-thirty-a-m in an old folks' home (from the farm, the nearest doctor) in a colonized country wont to dream itself without history (at least, not such a very long history) so that the past need not be marked. You are right. Time intrigues me.

You ask me to imagine loss in the future tense – and I know, *I know*. I haven't the years of a woman who has buried two husbands, but I wear the greying of a woman who has waited to be left.

	Tragicomedy:
	The day when 		finds a letter from an old lover and thinks it time to write back.
	The night when 		does not come home; a woman – not yet grey – trying to dull the chilled shaking in her body by piling every blanket in the house onto the bed.
	The week when the woman – not yet grey – says nothing. Just waits.
Hell, it's visceral. Other waitings I prefer to keep still and small as the child signed away in lawyers' offices. The threat lingering: this will not be your home anymore. Shh. Not a word. Shh. Muffled in blankets.

Yesterday, when the timezones aligned, I fought in phone-tapping form with an absent friend. Fought because a still, small child / greying woman was waiting to be left. Fought in the intimacy of knowing how to goad. Hours later, I walked alone to the end of the pier to tap out an apology. *Don't leave*, against the waves and the sky and the godforsaken screaming bloody seagulls.

I did not intend to write these things. Let me retreat awhile to the kitchen table.

* * *

Writing home must be an anthropological modality. But while the diary has had its days of disciplinary notoriety, letters have largely remained in the archives. Yet there is an intriguing substance to the epistle form. Even when digitally mediated, letters are never quite coeval, their dialogue never quite dialogic. Such characteristics allow epistolary novels to unfold through the slow spool of revelation. Letters tell only so much. Ethnographically, we would suggest that letters write a narrative shape that resists telling the whole story and that, more so, skirts both careful analytic sense-making and the complete confession of diarized privacy. And, while letters speak into the ready-made intimacies of a narrowly selective audience, they do so from a place of disconnection – distance produces the need to write. Might letters offer an appropriately fragmentary form for an anthropology of loneliness?

* * *

Dear Bryonny.

I have made you wait again. In the wait, we come full circle: I find myself fighting not to tap out into the small up-cast oblong glare in my palm *don't leave*.

It is night. My iPhone, my tea, my table, and I. Kitchen table, you said. How apt: the site of so much domestic solitude, not necessarily lonely, but when it is, oh boy. How much can be pondered over; how many newer, better selves can be plotted; how many reach-outs can be imagined, begun, halted – half-enacted – and ultimately withheld over a cup of tea at a table.

I think of the wisdom of Roxana Moroşanu's (2016) ethnographic method of inviting her interlocutors to note for her their activities just before, and just after, a cup of tea; a way to map the solitary moments of action, time and technology at home. I think of Haim Hazan (1987) noticing how cups of tea act as temporal markers in a rest-home, without which time drags by, too open, too spacious. (The ma-tea-reality of loneliness? Soft, spacious temporali-tea?) We questioned the materiality of loneliness, and the answers were diffuse, but I think we can agree it has an aesthetic and a tone. We are writing in it now. Something tentative. Wavering. Yet stubborn. Resolute. But small.

> A dark figure against a darkened sky.
> A darkened room just so a-glow by the cool, blue blush of a smartphone.
> A light day, those squawking gulls and bloody nobody you care to know for miles.
> A bright mall you wander hungry to know somebody like you.
> An almost-sociality…

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