

ESSAY

Special Section: Fieldwork Confessionals

“I’m telling you this because I love you”

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This essay follows the parenthetical opening of the fieldwork confessional into the parenthetical spaces within our fieldwork archives, in order to consider the nature of those parentheses and of their complex claims on our writing and relating. Noticing an echo of address across several field-sites and their material traces, this essay follows a thread I find winding through an archive of narratives I’ve made with Uitoto interlocutors over 15 years of being folded into the ambivalent relations of adoptive kinship that have framed my fieldwork with migrant and displaced Uitoto families in Colombia. That archive includes recordings and images, notes and transcriptions—the recognizable traces of field research—that assemble narratives of migration and childbirth, illness and displacement, and curing. It contains traces of pages and images that are stowed in numbered boxes on shelves in Iquitos and London, these differently potent bundles that constitute the historical record of the colonization of Uitoto worlds by rubber traders, narcotraffickers, and armed counter/insurgents over the past century. It also contains traces that are only legible, like the embossed verso of a text on an apparently blank page, to an oblique gaze (Desjarlais and Habrih, 2021).

Within the space of adoptive kin-making that has been the container of my engagement with that history, and in the terms of the Uitoto people who have made me kin, the shared archive we have made also includes tenacious memory and tenuous ties, and the substantial traces of those ties in my person, in our entanglement as persons. In Uitoto kin-making praxis, substances (including ancestral plant foods and medicines, tears, sweat, smoke, etc.) shared over time are needed to make people kin, and processes of gradually coming to matter together have been an essential part of our capacity to build archives of shared memory with and in each other. Not only a factual record, the building up of an archive of colonization, displacement, and world-curing work has meant learning to carry stories that can hold together a world or undo it. It has meant learning to be addressed in particular ways. It has also raised a perpetual question of the conditions and consequences of those forms of address, and of one particular form of address that is as recurrent as it is insoluble. The thread this essay follows is the tangle of ties named by the address of love.

“I’M TELLING YOU THIS BECAUSE I LOVE YOU”

This parenthetical hailing is a form of address by which I have found myself called in by my Uitoto interlocutors as a witness and a carrier of stories that were precious (because potent or curative), dangerous (because traumatic or volatile), or fragile, because they were being told in the context of a world in which they were hard to keep present or lively. This form of address is recognizable as the opening of a fieldwork confessional because of the way it both compels and conditions fieldwork intimacies—the way it both enables a scene of ethnographic knowledge-making and exceeds our habitual ethical gestures in the face of ethnographic disclosure. This form of address—as the parenthetical opening of a fieldwork confessional—both tells us we’re on the inside of something, and gives us something that exceeds the inscriptive powers of ethnographic representation as containment.

Being addressed in this way implied being called in to carry something that was not mine, that might be hurtful to touch, for both the person who was sharing it and the person who might hold it for them. The stories that followed this address were sometimes kin-curing ones, the kind that are told to help someone find their way back into the right fold of sociality, back into the right world. Those were stories that belong to Uitoto people and that travel along kin lines. They are about the beginning of human life and illness and curing—the beginnings that are revisited with every life and every illness and every cure. Uitoto curing practices are both perpetual and punctuated; they take the form of continuous labor to make and remake distributed bodies whose shared substance resonates with shared susceptibility, as well as punctuated narrative and ceremonial practices to make

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and mark sudden transformations in relations or capacities. The people who offered to share those stories with me turned me into kin in order to make me able to carry them; they turned me into kin by making me into the kind of person that *could* carry them. Living in occupied borderland reserves in the Colombian Amazon or in settlements of the displaced on the edges of Bogotá, my interlocutors were people who had lost kin to the violence of narco-economies and armed conflict, to displacement and disappearance, and to the dehumanizing illnesses of posttraumatic haunting. Living under conditions that made kin ties hard to substantiate, and in a world where those ties depend on continuous making lest they slip into the spaces of the inhuman, the kin-making labor of telling had become an essential one.

But among the stories that opened through this door—through the address of love—are others, also curing, also dangerous, that are about the *edges* of kinship. These are stories of what happens when your kin slip across the line of the human and you find them looking back at you as something else altogether. These are stories that have to be shared with those that you can trust to hold them in a *human* heart, and they require proof—along with their holding—that they won't be let out of your sight, where they might slip shapes again and find you at the edges of where your attention wanders. These were love stories, in that they were stories about the teeth inside of love, about the kinds of undoings that can follow one through the open door of love. Offered to me in the form of warnings, confidences, and complicated complicities, these were stories shared between women about the animals that lived inside men they had loved, about the inhuman forms by which the lives and bodies of their partners had been possessed—things they had carried and things they chose only sometimes to name.

Te cuento esto porque te quiero. "I'm telling you this because I love you." I'm telling you this because you are a daughter to me. Because you are a granddaughter to me. Because you are my sister. *Porque tu sí entiendes de esto, ¿cierto?* Because you understand about this, right?

In this collection reflecting on the ambivalent spaces into which we find ourselves called by the parenthetical opening of the fieldwork confessional, the ambivalence to which I keep returning has to do with the one that organizes our most central attachments—as kin, as subjects, as fieldworkers, and maybe as a discipline: the ambivalence of love as grounds for an ethics of holding for the other.

The address of love takes the form of this discursive gesture that threads through my archive, marking affinities between fieldwork moments and relationships with radically different affective contours and consequences. But it appears as the opening into starkly divergent kinds of exchanges, from an invitation into proprietary clan knowledge to painful disclosures of intrafamilial violence, from memories of illness and healing to anxious intimations of uncanny spirit encounters lingering in partial resolution. The stories that followed this opening moved in wildly different genre modes, and did wildly different kinds of work—as narratives do (Wortham, 2001). They called for something we might recognize as witnessing: as carrying something difficult for another, if all they were asking was to be seen. But unlike an appeal to witness, to hold a truth in separate and separable sympathy, they also called forth forms of complicity, entanglement, and ethical difficulty that are the other (inseparable) faces of kinship. The fact that their telling was conditioned on love, that is, on being prefaced with an address of love, marks a kinship between them, and an opening for reflection, I think, on what that kinship entails (Figure 1).

Indeed, these stories turned on kinship.

Like axes that turn on a point of contact, they found centers of gravity in the spinning disorder of displacement and occupation and drew us into them to show us the arc of a world in movement. The ability to tell the string of ruptures that have added up to a life gives a center to what is otherwise catastrophic contingency (Berlant, 2001; Van Alphen, 1999). A world turning, a world being gathered in its telling, is part of an accretion that becomes a place to live. Stories spun on the axis of love in Uitoto kinwork¹ were tools for world-making.

These stories also *turned* on kinship, depending self-evidently on the resonance of kin to keep safe the teller—safe from the consequences of telling, safe from untellable consequences. Indeed, in Uitoto accounts, they could not be or do what they were meant to if they moved along channels that weren't also bodily ones (the kind that can be made resonant, through time and care, but not immediately or permanently). And they turned *on* kinship: they activated ties that were already there, waiting. They called us into spaces of recognition for the ways we were already of a kind. *Tu sí entiendes de esto, ¿cierto?* You know about this, right? We know.

"I'm telling you this because I love you." How could we hear it with anything other than love? How could we *not* hear this address as a map of the turns a story has taken, the bends in a life, the wrinkles in a world so constantly undone? How could we sit with these stories and *not* let them call us in? Let them call us by names we didn't know were ours but recognize when we hear them? Let the names tell us of the places we've been, too, the places we've wandered without knowing what to call them, and the places that have felt like home when the people who compose them recompose us as kindred.

But these stories also *turned* on kinship like hunting dogs, when provoked, remind their human almost-kin that *almost* can be a long way. They can cut the ties that have bound us into the threat of the almost and unwind the ties that hold a kinworld together.

"TE CUENTO ESTO PORQUE TE QUIERO"

We are on the river in a bricoleur's boat, rounding a bend where no family's path touches the steep banks. The mud is so saturated with rain that one step will swallow you up to the hip, drawing you in so much deeper than you would have guessed.

He is steering, the little engine on low, loud enough to cover a conversation that has become, suddenly, a confession.

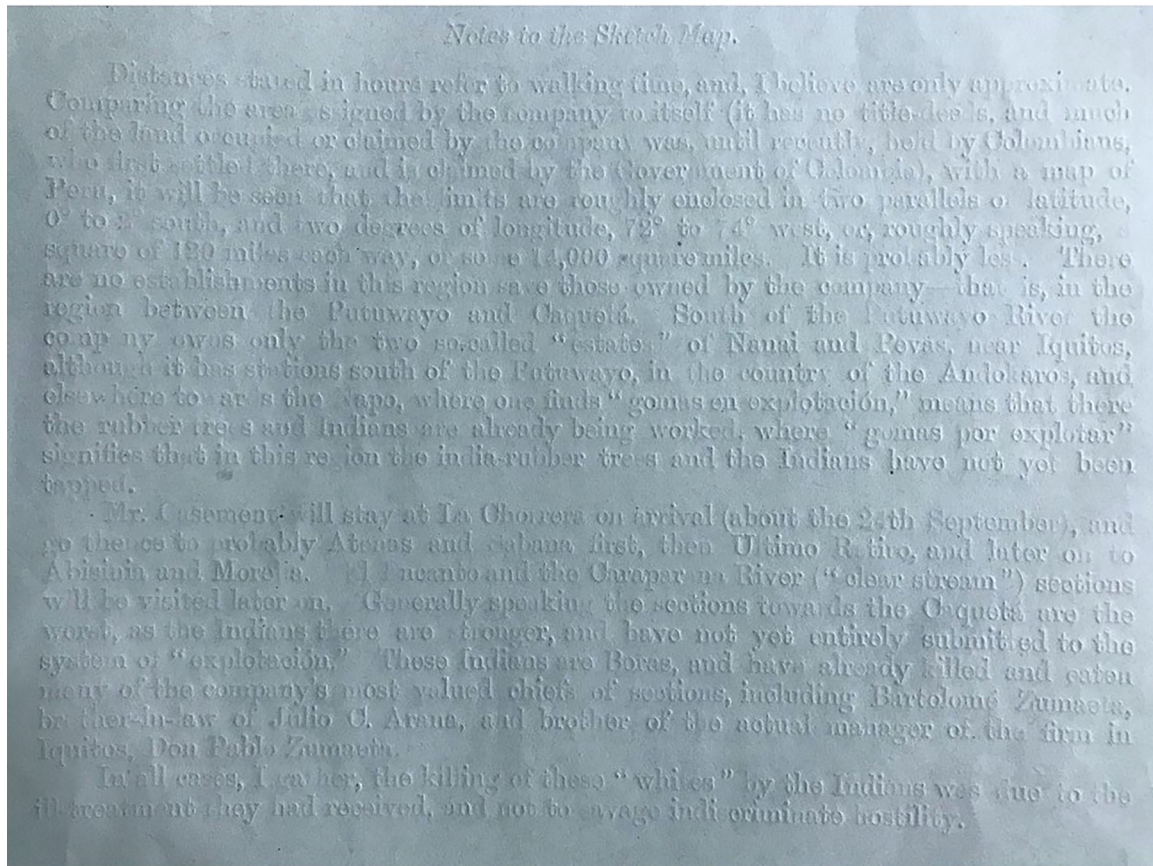


FIGURE 1 “Notes to the Sketch Map,” inverted verso of a page from Roger Casement’s report on atrocities in Putumayo, 1912. National Archives, London. (Photograph by author, 2020) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

What he tells me is part of the story of that river, part of the war and the illness of that place. It isn’t recorded; it’s a stream of speech amid the stream of milky water that connects this curve of Heron River² to the Putumayo to the Amazonas to the Atlantic. It could disappear as quickly as it is spoken. But it’s lodged in me then like a stone; it sinks deep. It’s a story that connects that moment in a leaky wooden boat to the living and recorded memory of colonization, of occupation, of drug trade and counterinsurgency, of loss and loss and loss and loss and loss. His confession is part of an archive as engraved as the landscape, as evanescent as the skim of foam frothing on the current outward.

It is a story that starts in the scars on his face and traces a line of violence backward from the guerrilla killing field where he buried a five-day corpse under the cocal, backward to the ground below his house where he lay unconscious from his father’s furious blows. Backward, through the blank spaces of unconsciousness—the blackout drunk in a ditch deaths of his youth, through the fugitive rages of his adulthood, through the hiding in the forest from soldiers hunting guerrilleros, and the hiding from the guerrilleros hunting him. His story spills forward on the current of suspended attention in this bend in the river, but the more it pours forth, the further back the ties go. His father’s violence was a way of telling the archive of cauchero terror through the body of his son. His telling is a way of lodging this archive of violence in my body, too. His telling, this uninvited bond of confessional intimacy, has become another line in a story of violence that he will also inscribe on me.

“I’m telling you this because I love you.” This is a story that answers the questions that are my reason for being there. It is a gift of knowledge, though whether it can be shared (whose archive should hold it?) is something impossible to resolve. He has given me this untellable story about himself. But it will have come with an untellable story about myself. The ties that are enacted or further inscribed in this moment of confessional disclosure make me kin, complexly. They tie me into a line of intimacies that are made of violence. They also form the shifting ground of kinship with the other women who live in relation to these histories, in relation to whom I am then living, and in relation to whom the currents of telling will only pull more deeply.

Disclosures are magical speech. They remake, in the most Austinian sense, the terms of our relationships, the centers and edges of our worlds (Austin, [1955] 1975; Butler, 1993, 2005). They change the names we (can) call each other. They precipitate archives in our resonant selves; they participate us in the archives of those who choose to make us intimate, to make or recognize us as kin, by shifting the terrain of telling.

Uitoto stories are magical action. (All stories can be magical action. But Uitoto people know this and hone it.) Animating and animated by shared substances,³ stories are what make kinship, what make kin of inhuman and alien things (like fieldworkers). Those stories are also dangerous because they can call back past illness, unhappiness, or death, by speaking their names.

Confessions, disclosures, the opening of fraught archives—these both make and are made by the intimacies of our fieldwork relationships. There are stories that can only be told in the space of an existing intimacy, and there are stories that are told in order to make those intimacies (even to make them seem they've been there all along). Confessional disclosures of violence (be it the guilt of enacting, of the shame of surviving) do more than make and unmake ties of intimacy, though. They are stories that also unmake us, that tie us, and that tell of our being tied to others *through* the fact of our being unmade. Stories don't only make us or make our relations. They also take us apart. Uitoto people know this, too: the right story can take apart the world.

This question is waiting for me around the parts of the archive of stories I've carried with me that share this grounding in an address of love, this question of which stories belong in which spaces, what they can or have or cannot or should not be allowed to precipitate. Which stories were given to me because a woman I felt close to decided she could trust me with them, or that letting me hold them would make them lighter for her? Or even that letting me know them would make something lighter for me?

During so much of my early fieldwork (starting when I was 25, naïve, well-intentioned, and ill-equipped), I was allowed into spaces of intimate exchange between Uitoto women and offered disclosures that I had no idea what to do with. "Fieldwork" was an alibi for never having to wonder whether I should be hearing something, what it might mean to carry a story forever, to have to make decisions about how to share it, years later, even obliquely, as part of a ground of intelligibility for anything I would narrate explicitly.

The longer I have spent in Uitoto spaces, and the more my own life has become scored and folded, reoriented by grief and attachments and trauma in the spaces I share with those women, the more delicate and heavy and generous the contents of that archive have appeared, and the less obvious its boundaries. *Does my archive contain a story of my friend's tears sliding down her round cheeks into the dust of her garden, mourning her son, because my memory does? Does my adoptive cousin's disclosure, from a hospital bed and fog of medications, of a suicide attempt two years before we met belong to that collection? To whom does it belong? Who can be allowed to participate in it?*

And who must not? What of the disclosures that are not vicarious, that do not convert to the currency of authority or realism?⁴ What of the disclosures that remain our own to make, about what negotiating intimacies "in the field" has meant for our lives beyond it? Of what it has made and unmade, what it has done to us or undone in us? The disclosures that sometimes seem demanded, especially when their tellers are masculine and the telling makes them more so. The disclosures from which we are more often demanded to abstain. This parallel side of the parenthetical opening is the gesture that marks the limits of disclosure. Our fieldwork archives, our archival fieldworker selves, are composed of these twin traces—the records we translate for our field, and the verso marks of all that must remain unsaid.

Ethnographic ethics habitually locate our key dilemma in the question of what we are holding (in translation, in anonymized or redacted form, or in secret) for our interlocutors. By holding in suspension a habitual ethics of containment, attention to the forms of address that constitute fieldwork confessionals lets us consider a broader ethical field.⁵ What labor of carrying are we doing *for our discipline* by carrying stories in silence that are constitutive of our collective field of practice, that are the determining conditions of our work for many of us, while yet remaining *formally unknowable* for our field? The formally unknowable story is also a definition of the symptom—the coded kernel of trauma at the heart of those things that demand to be known and are refused knowing. The tempo of that code is one that calls for endless repetition, that makes endless appeals, appearing in ever-new forms of silence, including the kinds that are silence out loud: jokes, rumors, gaps, performative shock at every reappearance. What are the *formally unknowable* stories around which our discipline continues to organize itself by compulsively reenacting—compelling us to reenact—while disavowing them?

"I'm telling you this because I love you." What might it take to tell each other about the attachments—the bonds and bindings of love and ambivalent resonance—that shape our relationships *in the field* and *to our field*, not only as a condition of ethical engagement in the field or transparency in our writing about it, but as an opening to a field of practice that *loved us better*? Where fewer among us would come home carrying untellable stories, for the sake of the ones we know all too well?

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ENDNOTES

¹ I draw on Di Leonardo's (1987, 443) concept of "kin work," which makes visible the gendered work required for "the creation and maintenance of kin and quasi-kin networks in advanced industrial societies." My use is expanded to include the labor of making kin as reflected across the literature on Indigenous Amazonian kinship practices (making persons as well as relations, making bodies and shared embodiments, making forms of address and reckoning that [un]make kin relations) (see McLachlan, 2022).

² This place name is pseudonymous.

³ See, for example, Candre and Echeverri (1996), Londoño Sulkin (2012), and McLachlan (2011, 2022).

⁴ See Moreno (1995), following Freedman (1986), on the refusal to turn trauma into the currency of ethnographic authority: "In her contribution to the groundbreaking anthology *Women in the Field*, Diane Freedman writes about how she returned to the field soon after the death of her husband, and how she was overwhelmed with information on death and mourning, as her informants tried to comfort her. She could take no notes and made no professional use of all this. *It was real life, aimed at her, not coins for the anthropological market*" (Moreno, 1995, 221n3; emphasis added).

⁵ And to hold this open as also a question of labor conditions and politics of knowledge production that unequally impact us as fieldworkers.

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How to cite this article: McLachlan, Amy Leia. 2023. "'I'm telling you this because I love you'." *American Anthropologist* 1–5.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13889>