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Antihero Care: On Fieldwork and Anthropology

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SUMMARY *“Antihero care” offers an approach to anthropology that emphasizes the importance of fallibility over mastery and social connections over individually acquired knowledge. I draw together Le Guin’s Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction and Mol, Pols, and Moser’s Care in Practice to analyze the challenge of carrying out fieldwork with my children in highland Guatemala. I describe how an everyday accident led me to refuse the “killer story” of the hero and to instead embrace a script that emphasized dependency and incompleteness. In my case, antihero care has changed the way I engage with holism and biomedicine in my research and writing. More broadly, reframing limitations on knowledge as a strength—not a drawback—of the discipline usefully unsettles the boundaries between fieldwork and care work. [anthropological method, care theory, fieldwork, parenting, Ursula Le Guin]*

It wasn’t the meat that made the difference, it was the story.

—Ursula Le Guin



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In a classic essay titled *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, Ursula K. Le Guin takes issue with the figure of the Hero (1989). She writes of a time in the ancient past where those human ancestors of ours who did not have babies in their lives would slump off to hunt. They did not really need the meat, but killing—the pointed spears, the crimson torrents of blood—provided narrative events that would make for gripping tales. His-stories:

That story not only has Action, it has a Hero. Heroes are powerful. Before you know it, the men and women in the wild-oat patch and their kids and the skills of the makers and the thoughts of the thoughtful and the songs of the singers are all part of it, have all been pressed into service in the tale of the Hero. But it isn't their story. It's his (1989:150).

The Hero is a powerful figure in anthropology, a discipline that has long celebrated the “lone fieldworker”—presumably male, presumably unencumbered by kinship—who would venture into the unknown to return with captivating stories, that is, stories that capture (Gottlieb 1995; El Kotni et al. 2020). In the essay that follows I will provide an account of trying to be heroic, trying to fit into anthropology's mold. It is a story about failing, and failing hard in the Hero's terms, a story where I had no path but failure because the figure of the Hero was not meant to be me.

Le Guin suggests we remake the hero. For inspiration she turns her attention to seed containers, which are round, soft, and capable of holding many different kinds of things. These sacks, used to collect food, do not command attention. Unlike the quick pointed arrows of the Hero's story, audiences do not typically gather around to watch or listen to the slow work of filling them up. Seed containers are capable of taking objects in the world into them, folding or expanding as they respond to the weight of sustenance, but their appearance is often drab and unremarkable. In contrast to the single hunter's perfectionistic bravado, filling seed containers often requires that people work together, through work that can be difficult or boring but also often gentle and full of quiet pleasure (brown 2019). One can be skillful with a seed container—seed collecting is not easy—but the labor that goes into filling them occurs without relentless competition to win or be the best.

The seed container offers a lesson for the field of anthropology. Le Guin suggests we might turn our attention away from the “killer” story of the Hero, instead retelling our stories around these unheroic seed sacks that have, to little fanfare, been keeping us alive. Drawing from Le Guin, I propose a pathway of “antihero care”: care that does not seek adventure, that does not take it all upon its shoulders. This is care that rests, making space for an individual's fallibility, and care that stops listening to the story of the Hero.

I use the word “care” as it is used by Mol et al. (2010). The care practices they detail are not always compassionate or loving; what makes actions *care* is that they are shaped by the often-mundane specificities of the problem at hand and not by foundational or universal principles. “Good care,” they write, “is not something to pass a judgement on, in general terms and from the outside, but something to *do*, in practice, as care goes on” (2010:13). They note that whereas many might see ambiguity as a failure, the capacity to carry

ambiguity is a desirable technique of their approach. Note the etymological resonance: to carry, to care.¹ Caring thus conceived implies a commitment to attending to problems as they materialize and transform. It allows for different goods to coexist—one good need not be triumphant over another. In fact, there is no ultimate triumph to seek, because care is ongoing and does not end.

I use the word *antihero* care to signal a refusal of the heroism that still drives some kinds of anthropological writing and analysis. *Anti*-heroism, following Simpson's analysis of refusal, takes the apparent limits of fieldwork as a site for rebuilding the conditions that structure conventional anthropological writing and analysis (2007:78). I note at the outset that I hesitate somewhat to use the prefix "anti-." Le Guin is critical of narratives driven by conflict, and it would be nice to not have to frame the article as a battle—to simply call this care, saying "yes" to what I want to do without first disagreeing with what is in the way. But as tiring as it is to emphasize "no," it is also necessary—at least now, following years where audiences have been conditioned by the stories of Heroes to listen and watch for a fight.

Antihero care is necessarily unsettled and unsettling, implying both a temporal ongoingness of relations (cf. Cook and Trundle, this issue) and a commitment to troubling presumptions, questioning origins, and exploring alternatives *in and of* anthropology (Bonilla 2017; Murphy 2015). I turn next to a story about where heroism led me, with a suggestion of what *antihero care* might help to rebuild in its place.



It was almost 9 a.m. on Monday morning and I was racing to get out the door, late as usual. I had just returned from a week of international travel. My time in Guatemala was almost up, and I still had so much to do.

I had planned to be in Guatemala for three months, but a last-minute job interview had delayed my arrival by two weeks. The committee had said there was no flexibility in the date, which they had set exactly one week after my family and I were due in Guatemala. The job was in an unknown city and far from my networks of kin and social support. I wanted to decline. But I was in my fifth year of temporary contracts. "No" did not feel like an option—not even for a job I did not want in a place I did not want to live—and so I had changed everyone's tickets, and we arrived in Guatemala two weeks later than we had planned.

Then, another interview opportunity arose shortly after we had arrived. Pay your own way, they said. They wanted me to teach a class for them, overviews of the contributions made by four white male historical figures in anthropology while the four white men on the hiring committee sat in the back of the room. They asked during a break that I tell them about my personal life, information I had kept guarded so as to not be seen as unprofessional. "We're probing you," one of the committee members said while smiling, as if this was friendly. Before it was over, they asked me not to mind when they became drunk over the pizza dinner before driving me back to my hotel. I had not wanted to take time away from fieldwork for this interview, but this job was close to family and, again, I had to say "Yes."

This period of fieldwork—which should have been three months and now was just over two—was the first time I had been to Guatemala with my kids. A few anthropologists back at home had told me I would love doing fieldwork with them underfoot. On my previous trip I had left my firstborn, who was still a baby, at home. I had been actively nursing him then, and my swollen body physically ached for his absence my entire time away. Now I had two beautiful boys and would not have to leave them behind. I was eager to introduce my sons to my friends in Guatemala and my friends in Guatemala to my sons. It *was* going to be nice to be there with family.

Except I was also there for work, and my work entails a lot of cross-country travel, and my partner works full time too. Most anthropologists who talked up the wonder of fieldwork with kids with me were men whose wives had done a majority of the in-country care taking.

I wanted a wife.

I did not have a wife but I did have a terrific child minder, Saida Retz, who had traveled with us from Amsterdam—a cost not covered by institutional funding structures, which typically ignore our children (a departmental administrator just laughed when I said that funding my children's travel would help with the gender equity matters that the university claimed to care about).

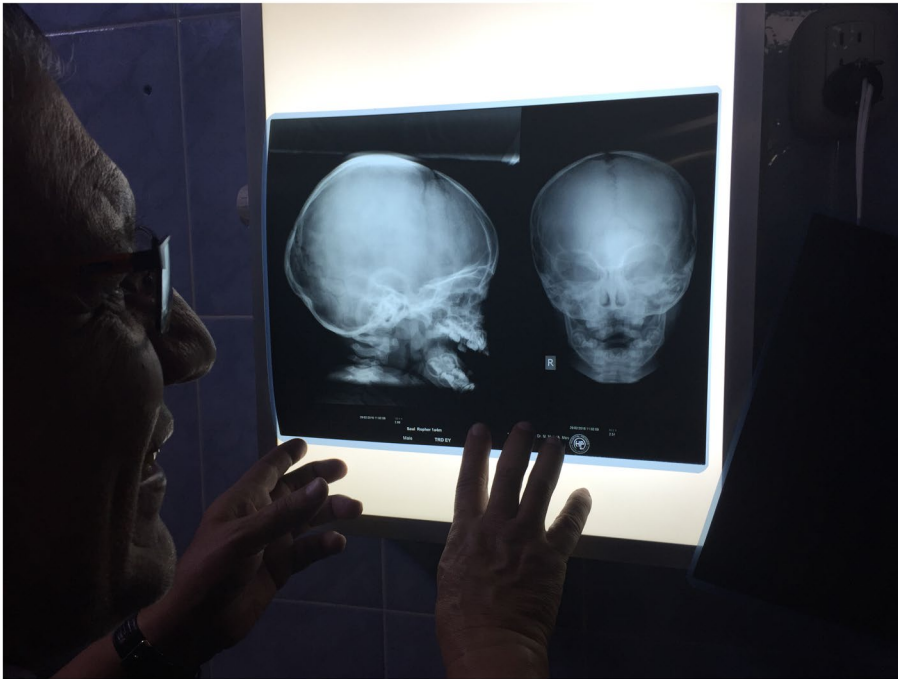
On the day I am going to tell you about, Saida arrived to our apartment at 8:30 a.m. She was on time and I should not have been running late—except my sixteen-month-old clung to me as if his heart would break at my departure, and my four-year-old was acting over tired even though the day had just begun. I was back from this second job interview, reunited with my children for less than a full day, and I could not easily walk away from them. I almost decided

to bring the baby with me on my community visits that day. I had done this a few times. But I never got much done with him, and the trip to get where I was going took me through black exhaustion along winding, slippery roads where busses drove too quickly. So instead, I left later than I had planned and to the familiar sound of sobbing.

By 9 a.m. I was on my way. My apartment and my kids receded as the crisp March sun of Guatemala's highlands began warming up the streets. I felt the rush of having a whole day in front of me to work. Fieldwork days like the one I planned that day make the weeks filled with computer screens and administrative meetings during the rest of the year tolerable. There were conversations to have, photographs to make, things to learn that I could not even yet imagine. If I ran fast enough, I thought, I might even get to the bus on time.

Then, some kind of instinct—or maybe it was just anxiety—caused me to look at my phone mid-stride. What I saw was a string of messages, the last one from my partner:

TURN AROUND, COME BACK.



My baby had fallen down the stairs. His mouth was crushed. His only teeth—the four on the bottom—were now in a position not meant for teeth. His sweatshirt was stained with blood. No one knew how badly he had hit his head. When I got there, everyone was standing outside the apartment, waiting for me. I grabbed him. He looked up at me, confused, and put his face against my chest. He did not cry. He wanted to sleep.

I called a friend as I ran in a terrified panic to the closest city hospital, a few blocks away. It turned out her child had fallen hard against the edge of a table

the week before and she was familiar with the routine. She told me there was a better hospital than the one I was at and to wait for her as she would bring me there. A few minutes later we were in her car and then through the line at the emergency entrance. She promised me that the pediatrician assigned to our case was one of Guatemala's best.

Indeed, he was an expert doctor with a practiced balance of compassion and professionalism. My sense of panic lessened in his presence as he helped me feel less alone. He scanned my baby's head under a large, old-looking x-ray, and told me, after a few moments of studying the picture quietly, that there was no damage to the brain. He spoke kindly about the universality of the accident. "Stairs, kitchens, bathrooms; country does not especially matter," he reassured me, the subtext of his message: *do not blame yourself because you are here*. He went on to describe this as an everyday accident: "It is in familiar spaces in the home where almost all childhood injuries occur."



My son needed surgery. Each one of his four perfect milk teeth had been our shared victory, hard-fought and accomplished through long nights of rocking and nursing. They were all now dangling from the edge of his mouth and would have to be removed. The image that stayed with me as they wheeled him away was that the oral surgeon who would cut into his jaw had gold teeth. This is beautiful in Guatemala's highlands, but I did not want this for my son.

It took three hours longer than the doctors expected it would take for him to wake up from anesthesia. The lines on the heart rate monitor hooked up to him kept dipping low, sounding an alarm. "Don't worry about that. It doesn't work correctly," the nurses said, although they did not turn off the machine.

The room outside the ICU was surrounded by families and prayer. I talked to everyone I could, because I was scared out of my mind and did not know what else to do. Our surgery was a simple surgery, and many of the patients there were gravely ill. Still, my son's small unconscious body leveled out some of the distance between me and others in the room.

But as we came together, so much still held us apart. A day in intensive care; an overnight in the hospital; a private room where I slept with my boy as he nursed with a broken mouth and kind hospital nurses spoon fed me while I held him: it all cost just over \$1000, which our Dutch health insurance would eventually reimburse (see also Yates-Doerr 2019).

Even when—or maybe, *especially when*—your baby is lying unconscious in a foreign country, there is a lot of privilege at work if you are an academic, if you hold a US passport, if you are white. This is one thing about these early years of anthropology mothering: tremendous precarity and tremendous power are wrapped up together in messy ways.



The day after the accident, while still in the hospital, I exchanged texts with a friend in Europe. Her own mother had been an anthropologist, and now she was an anthropology mother as well. She reminded me that in *The Naked Man* Levi Strauss pointed to the intermediary function of teeth. He writes that we understand them to be integral to the self—a part of us—even though we will eventually lose our teeth as we age (1981).

I looked at my son's sleeping face, his bruised lips parted, his gums showing through. He would spend his childhood without his front bottom teeth; they would never be integral. My friend urged me to see fortune in this space. This was not the gap of a missing mother but a reminder of how beings and bodies live outside the script.

My family was shattered, and we decided to go home. I could not imagine being away from my small, sweet son in these weeks, not even for something simple like a cross-town interview. At that moment, work was impossible. It did not take long to outgrow this feeling—academia does not allow much room for mourning—but the difficulty of the previous months had caught up with me. It was time to give up, time to return. The airlines waved our change-of-ticket fees, and in less than a week we were on our way to Amsterdam. For the first time I was glad that I had not been able to solve that incredibly uninteresting but time-consuming headache of finding someone to sublet our apartment while we were gone.

The same friend who drove me to the hospital drove us to catch the bus that would take us to the plane. I told her of my failure; there was so much more to be done, so much more out there to learn. My analysis. My research. My eventual book—it would all be so incomplete.

"Don't you think this is true to life?" she asked me, kindly. "That it is never finished until it is?"

She is right. There is much to learn from giving up mastery, embracing anti-heroism. Indeed, while the hunters craft their killer stories, another version of anthropology has been working to emphasize the meaning in those mundane, unfinished, life-sustaining details that hunters all but overlook. It is, after all, no coincidence that the anthropological facts of relationality (Strathern 1988), reciprocity (Deloria 1944), and "keeping while giving" (Weiner 1983) that form the intellectual core of our field are also ideas born from doing fieldwork and undervalued care work at once.

Indeed, the "lone fieldworker" may be strong, but so too are those who have been working together around him to make it possible to tell other, often quietly told stories (Hurston 2018; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981). Isabelle Stengers calls these *herstories* (Stengers and De Cauter 2017). Herstories are not an aggressive "taking back" of individualism from the hero but "a healing" that departs from this individualism altogether. As Stengers says, "Retelling the past, telling herstories, implies we alter the myth that wants us to believe we should be so lucky to no longer live together" (Stengers and De Cauter 2017). Herstorying, to make this an active verb, is a mode of caring for the stories we tell. It does not tell final-word narratives but narratives that make openings for new kinds of stories to tell.

I wouldn't call antihero care humility—not when mothers have been commanded by hunters to be humble and beaten, sometimes killed, when they are not (Gumbs et al. 2016). Humility would also minimize how the ideas born from vulnerability and interdependence are some of the most powerful in the field. No, the goal is not to be humble but, as my friend had put this, to learn how to work outside the script.

The hero's story turns upon a quest to know and do it all, which is not just impossible but harmful—and selectively so. Consider the field of anthropology:

it is hard to parent when the goal is an individual hunter's success (i.e. the ethnographer's knowledge of, and with this mastery over, the other), yet parenting in/as fieldwork can also help reframe this kind of success, showing it to be a misplaced goal (Brown and De Casanova 2009). Antihero care works toward an anthropology capable of listening to these quieter stories; the stories that take the shape of unnoticed round, ugly, containers; the stories that hold us together, however, imperfectly so. After all, having our ideas corrected or adjusted—another way of saying *learning from others*—is so much easier if you are not aspiring to be a hero.

Let me give two examples of concrete ways that antihero care has informed my thinking, reshaping my fieldwork orientation and analysis in a way that brought them into closer alignment with the people around me, from whom I wanted to learn.

First, the field of anthropology tends to embrace holism, frequently defining itself as a holistic field. This might be because holism sounds kind—perhaps softer and more welcoming than its alternatives. But holism also carries with it the worrisome vision of a *whole*, promising aspiring anthropologists that it is possible to draw connections until we have mapped it all. Meanwhile, in antihero care, there are no closed totalities. The goal is not to master belonging elsewhere but to learn how to attend to how differences matter. Touching affects the worlds that are touched; no one stands outside of space and time, protected. If protection is possible, it will be found alongside the limitations and the mess (“It is never finished until it is,” as my friend had said).

Antihero care mobilizes instead of laments this inevitability of “partial knowledge,” in Strathern's (2004) sense of knowledge that is both interested and incomplete. It operates with an adjusted goal of seeking to make good connections. This message of “enough, you have enough” might be a difficult lesson for those raised in a tradition that has hoisted its heroes up on pedestals, asking that they show off their spears and gather more meat. But its difficulty is matched by its ethnographic value. The skill of holding things in “particular, powerful relation to one another”—of honoring, even cherishing, our limits—is a skill that can bring us into better relations with those with whom we hope to interact (Le Guin 1989:153; see also Weiner 1983; Chin 2016; Todd 2020).

Second is a lesson that pertains to my relationship and analytic approach to biomedical technologies. Wary about the linkage between capitalist exploitation and technoscience, I have been plenty critical of biomedicine in previous writings (e.g. Yates-Doerr 2015). But there is no way not to face this: when my baby fell, I ran with him in my arms to the hospital. I wanted the wisdom and protection of mothers. *And*, I also wanted x-rays, anesthesia, and surgery—as do Guatemalan mothers with whom I work, who also face these moments of accident as their children grow.

I have used the conjunction “and” here, because my child's fall and the support I was surrounded by afterward helped me understand how wanting care and wanting technology are not inherent contradictions. They can go together. Mothering *and* doctoring. To be clear: I am not advocating for magic bullet fixes to problems asking for structural-level responses (see Cueto 2013) nor am I leaving biomedicine unchallenged. I am, rather, engaging with science and technology's multitudes. The problem arises when we look at those technologies that

are the loudest—those in the shape of arrows that draw the biggest crowd or attract the most attention—failing to recognize that the dull old sacks that hold us together are care technologies too (Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018). Technology may feed the appetite of capitalism, undermining parental and maternal confidence, with devastating effects upon communities (Ceron 2018). *And* technology can be otherwise. Doctors can likewise be thoughtful and attentive, and good medical care can keep families from being torn apart. Learning to hold open space for these possibilities makes for analysis that is both more sensitive and more true than analysis that demands that truth be shaped like a sharp and deadly arrow.



The seed gatherers around me have reminded me that we are better off as academics for the care work that we do. Listening to them has made me aware of the quieter and kinder knowledges—and knowledge producers—that are erased in the field's continued prioritization of the killer story. They've additionally taught me to see how care work is not an obstacle to our analyses, but a virtue of anthropology, which has, in fact, been with us, under noticed, dating to the origins of the field (Visweswaran 1994; see also Candea et al. 2015).

In the midst of working and research conditions that continue to valorize and prioritize the stories of princely heroes who have command over the trajectory of their lives, it can be challenging to keep sight of the power of being ever incomplete. But for a gentle wrinkle in logic: we cannot fail at the project of living with failure. Failure is a crucial part of the process of being with others, making failure itself an impossibility. In anti-hero care our shortcomings bring us together with others; even they—especially they—are alright.

In this article I have hoped to articulate the analytic of antihero care to *herstory* anthropology's methods, to use Stenger's "term" as a verb. Antihero care, as I have outlined it, implies a commitment to not knowing, to listening to others, to co-theorizing with our collaborators—not needing to know it all ourselves—and to surrounding ourselves with communities of scholars, including those who often carry out their scholarship far away from the stages of the university. Sometimes antihero care requires saying "yes." Alternatively, and depending on the situation at hand, it requires saying, "no, this is enough." Its story is *done* but never complete.

Le Guin writes that telling a gripping story of the seed container is not easy. Neither is collecting and sorting out the seeds that will feed our communities with babies on our back. But these are nonetheless necessary world-building, story-building activities. This work of antihero care affords us so many insights that we would not otherwise have. These insights have already helped generations of unsung anthropologists to write better, truer anthropology. These are the insights that will help the generations that come after us grow up into better, truer, worlds.

Note

1. I have mobilized this etymological comparison here, but, following Morita and Mohácsi (2015) and Pols (2018), I would caution readers that English wordplays may not travel well to other languages and that etymology is a practice that must be cared for as well. [Correction added on 21st December, after first online publication: In Note 1, "Morita and Gergely" was changed to "Morita and Mohácsi".]

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