Collective Research in Anthropology

CORA Journal
Fall 2026 (4) | Form - Failure - Flourishing

Conference Proceedings

Towards a Failure-First Methodological Ethics: A *Perimeters* Roundtable

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Abstract Anthropological investigations into the nature of failure have been limited, pointing to a discomfort with acknowledging that failure is a necessary and regular part of any research experience. Ethnographic fieldwork is a messy research method primarily molded by the relations and dialogic interactions between an ethnographer and interlocutors and is, inevitably, a process wrought with failures of all kinds. This article stems from the proceedings of a roundtable session at the *Perimeters* graduate student conference at McGill University in March 2026 that explored what happens to our understanding of failure when we defy the tempting, negative connotations of failure and instead choose to define it as the broken relationship between expectation and outcome. By centering moments of "failure" in the process of conducting ethnographic study—whether methodological, material, practical, social, or otherwise—this roundtable sought to remain in the discomfort of grappling with our own failures to shed light on the fact that failure is an often unavoidable and, in fact, necessary step for research, in anthropology and beyond. Reflecting on this roundtable six months after its conclusion, this article also explores the ethical imperatives that come with centering and reckoning with failure in the ethnographic process.

Résumé Les études anthropologiques sur l'échec sont limitées, ce qui semble refléter une réticence à reconnaître que l'échec est une composante nécessaire et courante de toute expérience de recherche. Le travail de terrain ethnographique est une méthode de recherche complexe, façonnée avant tout par les relations et les interactions dialogiques entre l'ethnographe et ses interlocuteurs. Il s'agit inévitablement d'un processus jalonné d'échecs de toutes sortes. Cet article s'inspire des actes d'une table ronde organisée dans le cadre de la conférence aux cycles supérieurs en anthropologie, *Perimeters*, qui s'est tenue à l'Université McGill en mars 2026. Cette table ronde a examiné comment notre compréhension de l'échec évolue lorsque nous résistons aux connotations négatives qui lui sont souvent associées et choisissons plutôt de le définir comme l'écart entre les attentes et les résultats. En mettant l'accent sur les moments d'échec en ethnographie—qu'ils soient méthodologiques, matériels, pratiques ou sociaux—cette table ronde a cherché à aborder nos propres échecs et les désagréments qu'ils occasionnent, afin de mettre en lumière le fait que l'échec est une étape souvent inévitable et nécessaire à la recherche, en anthropologie comme dans d'autres domaines. Six mois après la clôture de cette table ronde, cet article revient sur ses réflexions et explore les impératifs éthiques liés à la prise en compte de l'échec et son impact sur les processus ethnographiques.

Keywords Failure; ethnographic methodology; fieldwork; ethics.

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> "The word failure is imperfect. Once we begin to transform it, it ceases to be that any longer. The term is always slipping off the edges of our vision, not simply because it's hard to see without wincing, but because once we are ready to talk about it, we often call the event something else—a learning experience, a trial, a reinvention—no longer the static concept of failure." (Lewis 2014, 18).

Anthropological investigations into failure have been limited, pointing to a discomfort with acknowledging that failure is a necessary and regular part of any research experience. Ethnographic fieldwork, the main form of data collection for anthropological work, is a messy research method primarily molded by the dialogic interactions of an ethnographer and interlocutors. It is, inevitably, a process wrought with different kinds of failures, ranging from the small daily social faux pas of a researcher who is new to a cultural experience, to the dissolution of relationships with key interlocutors, to the complete collapse of an entire ethnographic project.

On one hand, Western academic research is a practice grounded in experimentation through trial and error, something that by its very nature *necessitates* the acceptance of failure as a key aspect of methodological practice. On the other hand, the social forces of reputation in academic institutions often compel us to move past the moment of perceived failure quickly, quietly, and diligently, leaving little time to consider what it means to have failed something (Contreras 2019; Yates-Doerr 2020; Augustin-Jean and Larchet 2024). Consequently, Western approaches to research tend to center failure as an avoidable, if nonetheless productive, singular moment where a limit is reached and a diversion must be made. Ironically, while anthropology privileges affective presence and immediate experience as cornerstones of its ethnographic project, the experiential quality of failure is rarely considered, and even more rarely made an explicit focus of the outputs of a research project. As Louis Augustin-Jean (2024) remarks, "what is missing in [ethnographic] literature is the full process of experiences, from the selection of the fieldwork (based on the chosen thematic), the combination of theoretical and empirical resources—which influence the research questions and the findings immensely—and the existence of problems and setbacks as well as unexpected issues, and so forth" (6).

Every failure is a moment in a string of events: there is no instant when failure becomes a totalizing reality, when a failure quintessentially begins or ends. Failure is a relationship between expectation and outcome—when the outcome does not meet the expectations that were set out at the beginning of a research project, something has failed. But this failure need not have the negative moralistic undertones that are so often semantically associated with the word "failure" when it is understood solely as the antithetical opposite of "success". As graduate students and early-career researchers, we are susceptible to feeling that we failed to meet the expectations of our original fieldwork intentions that are so clearly laid out in department research proposal defenses and grant applications to fund our work. But failure is almost always inevitable in some way when you are working

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alone, as many anthropology graduate students are, with an unfamiliar group of people. Isolation from our own communities, although deemed a necessity for ideal fieldwork in the anthropological imagination, also means extricating ourselves from networks of people on whom we may otherwise rely for advice or sensemaking in challenging moments. In such a scenario, unexpected events will naturally arise that shift the course of the research as we learn to relate with and rely on interlocutors and relations in new ways during fieldwork. Emily Yates-Doerr (2020) explores how she chose to accept the "failure" of her research project when her child was hospitalized while she was on a fieldwork trip. It was her key interlocutor who reminded her that the perception of this moment as a failure was a perspective shaped by her position as a researcher, asking Yates-Doerr: "don't you think this is true to life…that it is never finished until it is?" (Yates-Doerr 2020, 240).

Choosing to ignore the presence of failure in our fieldwork experiences also obscures how other people's labor helps shape the ethnographic project, as well as the relationships of power that are facilitated and re-entrenched by academic institutions and normative research practice. There are other kinds of care that are obscured when we prove that we are lone fieldworkers who have mastery over our environment and chosen cultural context, who never failed in our undertaking of research—or, at least, if we did fail, then we managed to "correct" these failures into a successful project. Such is the expectation we are given by the ethnographic canon, or by our examiners at the end of the PhD qualifying processes. But when we inevitably fail at something during fieldwork, it is those around us—both in the field and at home (if those are two different places)—on whom we rely for help. Prior to fieldwork, a more senior anthropologist advised one of the authors to depend in some way on interlocutors while in the field, because dependence necessitated spending time together and would ultimately achieve a better ethnography. While one could read this interaction generously to assert that they were advising for a reciprocal arrangement between two humans, it cannot be extricated from the vision of an anthropologist who walks into a stranger's town and demands to be accommodated, in return for which they will make observations and generate knowledge that is, in many cases, already well-known to those who are being researched (Deloria 1988, Trouillot 2003, Rajan 2021). Their "authority" to do so emerges from their title as "researcher."

On the other hand, an ethnographer can choose to deny relationships of extraction and seek the inverse: to respond to interlocutors who may rely on us in ways that ask us to step outside of our research, to fail to be a good ethnographer but choose instead to be a good friend or neighbor, who will not hawk every significant detail for later consumption by other academics. Following Audra Simpson (2014), ethnographic refusal, too, is a kind of failure; a failure to capture the information and realities that we are exposed to in the field by those who trust us as people, on behalf of the academic institution. Conversely, as junior academics, we are equally imbricated in fields of power that also forge us as subjects of failure—whether this refers to the increasing policing and censorship of academic research in North America (Deeb and Winegar 2015, Monahan 2026), the evanescence of academic funding and stable jobs across the social sciences

that further tethers precarious early-career graduate students to the whims and caprices of academic supervisors (Kawa et al. 2019), or experiences of marginalization, discrimination, and even violence when we enter our fields as racialized, sexualized subjects (see, for example, Mahmood 2008, Clancy et al 2014, Muwwakkil 2023). How can we avoid failure when everything around us is burning (Jobson 2019)? Yet, each one of these processes of failure, however they are colored by their contexts, are important to acknowledge. As Contreras (2019) surmises: "students can learn just as much from complete ethnographic meltdowns and breakdowns—from the unglamorous and belittling disappointments that can make a researcher appear unsuitable for work in the field." (175).

As editorial members of the CORA collective, Bobi Steel and Wahid Al Mamun were involved in brainstorming new keywords for the new issue. Notably, failure was the first one the collective landed on decisively. It was something that everyone in our collective could say they had experienced: whether it was failing to win a grant, missing a deadline, or feeling that they had somehow failed an aspect of the fieldwork they had undertaken. Learning is a process of trial and error, and error is always a kind of failure. True learning means admitting and understanding these errors, taking accountability for them, and moving forwards with the aim of not repeating them. But the conversation also extended beyond the logistical aspects of research: how have our institutions failed their students? Some recent examples from McGill include: the undermining of student-teacher protests by coercing faculty members into scabbing the 2024 teaching assistants' union strike (TSUM 2024); the failure to create meaningful support strategies for professors and teaching assistants who are dealing with the ethical complexity of AI use in classrooms and assessments; the failure to divest from funding military operations that facilitate the genocide in Palestine; the violent dismantling of the 2024 encampment protesting in favor of this divestment; the continued refusal to verbally acknowledge the genocide in Palestine as genocide; ongoing resistance to working with the Kahnistensera of Kahnawà:ke to uncover potential sites of unmarked graves from MKUltra mind-control experiments conducted on the university campus; the immediate removal of a Great White Pine peace tree sapling gifted by women from Kanehsatà:ke[1] as an olive branch despite the fraught relationship caused by their hesitancy to aid with the search.

Each of these moments, which took place within our overlapping four-year tenure at McGill, demonstrates the institution's unwillingness to risk error or public failure in the name of learning and improvement. If failure names a relation between expectation and outcome, these moments beg the questions: whose expectations are being met by these (in)actions? What can we, as students, expect from McGill in 2026? The Red Martlet, a proud McGill University mascot, is a bird with no feet. Unable to land, the martlet is constantly in flight; a symbol perfectly apt for an institution that refuses to meaningfully dedicate itself to the unceded territory which it occupies. And yet all of these moments are lessons to be learned for those who are attentive to the nascent possibilities that are

[1] Ironically, the White Pine was planted just across the lawn from the Sri Chinmoy Peace Tree, which is dedicated to peace "as a permanent, inspiring reminder that we are one world family." See https://www.mcgill.ca/morsl/connect/spiritual-landmarks-around-mcgill/landmark-sri-chinmoy-peace-tree.

exposed during failures. Failure can be a moment to imagine a different outcome, to imagine a university otherwise.

While CORA was deciding the keywords for the fourth issue, graduate students at McGill's Department of Anthropology addressed another moment of institutional failure by resurrecting its annual graduate student conference following a seven-year hiatus. An opportunity arose for a collaboration between CORA and the newly-named Perimeters conference for a plenary session on failure in ethnographic fieldwork. This roundtable session explored what happens to our understanding of failure when we defy the tempting, moralistically negative, connotations of failure and instead choose to define it as the broken relationship between expectation and outcome. By centering moments of "failure" in the process of conducting ethnographic study—whether methodological, material, practical, social, or otherwise—this roundtable sought to remain in the discomfort of grappling with our own failures to shed some light on the fact that failure is an often unavoidable and, in fact, necessary step for research, in anthropology and beyond.

The following conference proceedings outline the contours of the aforementioned plenary session, entitled "What Happens when Ethnography Fails?", which took place on March 21, 2026, at McGill University's Thomson House Graduate Hall. Convened by Bobi Steel, the plenary session was chaired by Ala Jamal Zareini, visiting Ph.D. candidate from the University of Copenhagen, Denmark, and saw presentations given by Abigail Francis, Kit Mitchell, and Tuyaa Montgomery, all graduate students at McGill University.[2] As one of the organizers of the conference, Wahid wishes to emphasize the frictions of putting such an event together with a team of graduate peers, all while managing full graduate school workloads. The organizing committee applied to numerous funding sources to knit together a workable budget for an appropriately-sized room, lunch, and coffee. We didn't know who would show up, or who would care; we didn't even know for sure whether we could use the chosen space for our conference until three weeks before the event began. Some of our funding sources simply did not reply to our applications. Moreover, Bobi had a swift fieldwork development that necessitated their presence elsewhere on the week of the conference, meaning that we had to scramble to recruit Ala as a handy alternate chair for the plenary discussion. On the day of the event, we discovered that the batteries of one of our four wireless mics had melted into the battery contact point, rendering it useless. One might dismiss such moments by arguing that such a close-run brush with failure is perhaps to be expected when convening any academic event, but we assert that this is precisely the point. Failure is baked into the very form of producing knowledge within academia: both the content of the discussion at hand, and the conditions that threaten to unravel these discussions.

[2] This article refers to some of its authors by their surname, and some by their first name, owing to a split in preference for formal naming conventions.



(L-R): Tuyaa Montgomery, Kit Mitchell, Abigail Francis, and Ala Jamal Zareini presenting at the CORA and Perimeters roundtable. Picture Credits: Nicolas McGee.

Writing Failure, Failing Others

At the roundtable, Kit Mitchell, Abigail Francis, and Tuyaa Montgomery all shared individual anecdotes from the field that highlighted a tension or friction laden into the image of fieldwork. For Mitchell, fieldwork was "a beautiful fiction that inevitably unravels upon arrival in the field." Mitchell recounted an experience they had while doing their fieldwork on HIV prevention medication (PrEP) access in Dublin where they learned that they would not be able to conduct participant-observation at a site where they had initially proposed to carry out research. The nonprofit organization that Mitchell had reached out to had been blocked from granting Mitchell access, on the basis that an ethnographic study of staff concerns with how the current PrEP access program did or did not meet people's needs, was not going to contribute the kind of data that would support this organization in making evidence-based arguments needed to garner funding and support from the Irish government (Adams 2016). Failure to carry out participant observation at the intended partner organization allowed Mitchell to attune instead to how

the matrix of political and medical institutions arrange themselves so as to be impermeable to structural critique. In their words, "Being kept at arms' length gave me space to observe historical patterns and see that these institutional failures were not new, they were iterative, which then led me to ask why that was, why nothing really changed." "This isn't working," started as a refrain about their efforts to carry out research according to their initial proposal and ultimately became a refrain about the broader infrastructural failures of queer healthcare provision in Ireland.

Speaking about her Master's thesis fieldwork studying reforestation bordering a national park in eastern Tanzania, Francis enumerated the many enfolded failures she encountered in the field. Only a last-minute grant award prevented Francis from financing her own fieldwork—an increasing threat in the larger North American university model (Andreatta and Brondo 2025), and a present reality for anthropologists working in institutions in the Global South (Mehmood 2026). Francis also had to navigate a lengthy, multi-national ethics board review process that included McGill's internal review, as well as approval from the Tanzania Forestry Research Institute and Tanzania Commission for Science and Technology. Once in the field, Francis was bedridden with flu, learned of a family tragedy, and found herself unable to communicate this grief with her interlocutors due to her limitations in Kiswahili. And yet, much like Mitchell, Francis notes how these setbacks often opened up new, unexpected ways of moving her research forward. She worked closely with her host grandfather to learn Kiswahili and Kidoe in the field every morning, which not only bettered her understanding of Kiswahili, but, more importantly, allowed her to more deeply connect with interlocutors through the regional language of Kidoe. Elsewhere, Francis notes how her arcane experiences with the ethics board review through McGill was useful in helping other people in her graduate school cohort to navigate their own ethics applications. In her words, "failure must be discussed but not be dwelled upon…it should be embraced and used to push forward rather than to hold yourself back."

Discussing her work in harm reduction in so-called[3] Vancouver's Downtown Eastside neighborhood, Tuyaa offered a different valence of disciplinary failure that emerges from fieldwork. Even the legible claims of failure over the anthropological history of ethnography, Tuyaa noted, were able to achieve precisely what they set out to do: "to slot the Other into knowable, memorizable, containable forms. To serve as ideological buttress for projects of control, domination, and dispossession." She reflected on a fieldwork experience which best illuminated the inherent tension of failure, where she was hanging out with friends and community members from the drinkers' community with whom she was working. Tuyaa noted how one of her friends expressed a story that they wanted to tell about their life, to which Tuyaa asked if they would be willing to be interviewed for her project. Tuyaa's friend balked at this, noting how they had told this

[3] Tuyaa uses "so-called" here to underscore that Vancouver is a colonial toponym applied to the unceded and occupied lands of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) peoples. In Sḵwx̱wú7mesh sníchim, the Squamish language, so-called Vancouver was and remains known as K'emk'emeláy̓, the place of many maple trees. See also Tuyaa's solo-authored article in this issue.

story several times. Tuyaa apologized, and eventually, her friend shared the story with her anyway. However, as Tuyaa reflected:

> Most anthropologists would consider this a success, because I got the interview in the end. A nice, neatly wrapped-up vignette. But I do not see it that way. I still see this as a failure. A failure on my part to uphold what is most important to me as a Buryat first, anthropologist second—to engage in mutual, respectful exchange with the communities alongside whom I work, to [in Audra Simpson's words] craft cultural analysis wherein "difference is not the unit of analysis", and where the people we speak of speak for themselves. (See also Simpson 2014).

Indeed, anthropological knowledge-making is perpetually a project of failure; a failure to uphold obligations to kin and relations that emerge from our interlocutors' stories. Instead, anthropologists working within academia are often invested with authority that privileges their voice not as a promissory source of care or resistance, but one that precipitates silence. An over-emphasis on methodological failure, she contended, may often invite failure on our part to listen to our interlocutors, and to show up for them.

As the roundtable's facilitator, Zareini noted how everyone's experiences of failure in the field elucidated certain structural failures, but also provoked new ideas of what a field is supposed to constitute. Zareini's comment echoes the criticisms James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta (1997) leverage against a monolithic disciplinary view of the "field" as a site of epistemological transformation. As Ferguson and Gupta (1997) note, the "field" of fieldwork is inextricable from the disciplinary field of anthropology; consequently, an insistence on the field's concrete, displaced materiality, polices the forms of knowledge that anthropologists are permitted to produce. In this way, a method that acknowledges and privileges failure holds the possibility to generate creative, undisciplined pieces of scholarship that render the frictions and presences of the ethnographer all the more visible. Perhaps the vision Zareini began to outline may constitute a form of what Günel, Varma and Watanabe (2020) term a "patchwork ethnography," one that is attuned to how the broad, unruly demands of researchers' personal lives necessarily inform their academic output.

What are the forms that such dynamic, patchwork ethnographies may take, in practice? During the discussion, all three presenters talked about their varied, dynamic relationships with writing—or not writing—about failure. For Francis, failure is a generative presence that nevertheless stays off the page, mirroring Augustin-Jean (2025) and Contreras's (2019) assertions that conversations around methodological failures are often left out of anthropological writings unless they can be reconstituted into a narrative that ultimately demonstrates success on the part of the ingenious solo ethnographer. Relatedly, Mitchell recounted how they carried out interviews with over two dozen people, and, upon reading the dissertation of a former student in the department and learning she had carried out 72 interviews for her thesis, immediately worried that they were not doing enough. "We often try to talk around failures and to obfuscate our failures: 'pay attention to what I did do, not what I failed to do,'" they remarked. During the audience

discussion section, McGill professor Sandra Hyde noted how such a chilling effect was not new: "[o]ne of the failures of my generation of anthropology," she observed, "was the need to hide our own failures from the page." Hyde opined that newer generations of anthropologists should move beyond this sense of embarrassment, and instead openly embrace failure's generative key to present a fuller account of their research on the page.

Put this way, writing about failure may come across as an exciting, giddying practice of creative subversion, much in the vein of queer theorist Jack Halberstam, who notes how failure can be a generative holding station within which one can critique the toxic positivity—and positivism—of everyday life (2011). Tuyaa, however, was quick to cast caution on romanticizing the relation between failure and writing. On the contrary, failure is baked into anthropology's engagement with the "cold contours of academic writing." Such writing, she contended, is a "neat, knowable, dull, varnished trap" that risks blinding the anthropologist to the political and moral urgency of their work. Recounting a beautiful, fleeting moment of friendship with the same friend from her original anecdote as they walked down the street holding hands while surrounded by roving police cars in the middle of the Downtown Eastside, Tuyaa notes that "making an account of failure in ethnography means accepting that there are some things anthropology will never be able to fully capture or explain." There is magic, Tuyaa insisted, on letting a story simply be, to exceed any attempt to confine experience into representation. "My job," she concluded, "is to provide the scaffolding and context, but without over-explanation." Tuyaa's commitment to turn away from ethnographic capture echoes the legacy of many anthropologists who have worked on and with ethnographic refusal as an anticolonial tactic against the capture of the Other.

Moreover, failure in the academy comes with manifold textures of structural precarity that weigh heavy on the graduate researcher. As Mitchell expressed, visa regulations mean running out of time in the program is synonymous with losing legal status. This is particularly troublesome for students in anthropology programs, with completion times that often run long. Visa renewal processes can be complex, especially when your fieldwork may require a second visa in a different country from which you study, and regulations are subject to change on an election's notice. During the open discussion, graduate student (and CORA collective member) Irene Svoronos also noted how institutions of higher education demand that you complete a project against a funding clock. Indeed, as many as 80% of graduate students feel time pressure during their degrees that, combined with funding pressures, low status in the academic industry and unrealistic workloads lead many graduate students to drop out altogether (Glorieux et al. 2025). Although specific data on dropout rates is hard to track, some studies suggest the average is close to 50% in some universities (Lovitts 2002; Golde 2005; Council of Graduate Schools 2008; Bowen and Rudenstine 2014; Glorieux et al. 2025). Augustin-Jean and Larchet's (2025) arguments add to this, highlighting that the grant-based funding system for graduate student support—particularly relevant for students at Canadian public institutions where university-provided funding is limited—is designed primarily for experimental sciences such as biology or physics. It is not well suited to ethnographic research where the research questions "progressively emerge from

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fieldwork findings through trials and errors" (Augustin-Jean and Larchet 2025, 199), and the chronological pattern of research is often reversed. In our own department, grant applications are often more successful in the later stages of the program, especially when researchers are applying for funding from the field. Consequently, many students, like Francis, embark on fieldwork with uncertain funding for their fieldwork.

The senior, tenured professors attending the roundtable were sympathetic of the manifold experiences of failure that their graduate advisees face. Concordia University Professor Kregg Hetherington, who gave the *Perimeters* keynote address later that afternoon, observed how ethnographic research has always been, and continues to be, a series of "bumbling, continuous failures." Failure, for Prof. Hetherington, represents the universal point where the limits of the researcher's preconceptions brush against situated experience in the field. Drawing from her fieldwork in China, Prof. Hyde likewise noted how the Mandarin word for crisis comprises the characters for danger and opportunity.[4] The exigent moments of crisis that may seem like failure, she argued, are precisely the risky, destabilizing conditions for opportunity and breakthrough that constitutes ethnographic fieldwork—all the more reason, Hyde argued, that future generations of anthropologists should be upfront about their failures. While these perspectives were welcomed and doubtlessly reassuring, we nonetheless assert that current graduate students find themselves mired in a unique historical moment of heightened academic precarity, with very little room for too many bumbling, continuous failures. Graduate students are entering an increasingly competitive, increasingly adjunctified academic job market that has rapidly eliminated any material safety net for those who intend to pursue academic careers for the rest of their lives (Rajan 2021, Glorieux et al. 2025). These material conditions also shape and ultimately over-determine the sort of academic writing that becomes circulated as anthropological knowledge: writing that privileges dissension and individualism over collaboration and solidarity, writing that nudges students towards a neat, frictionless form of professionalization, writing that always seeks to subsume and hegemonize creative, subversive forms of knowledge production (see Jobson 2019). Thus, while failure is a serious, generative object of ethnographic possibility, we must simultaneously engage with how failure's productive capacity can derail our critical projects and commitments to interlocutors.

Conclusion: Can Our Ethics Anticipate Failure?

The moral and ethical challenge of theorizing method in the wake of failure has to be capacious enough to accommodate both failure's generative potential, as well as its diagnosis of the broader structural collapse of knowledge production within the academy. But, as we hope to have demonstrated by now, failure has to go even beyond that. Fieldwork can never be a neutral, objectively distant project. As Nancy Scheper-Hughes writes (1993), the historic formulation of the ethnographer as "an invisible or

[4] It should be noted here the double irony that the association of the mandarin word for "crisis" with "danger" and "opportunity" is in itself a translation failure, widely popularized by US political figures such as John F. Kennedy and Condoleezza Rice in public speeches. See Zimmer 2007.

permeable screen through which pure data…could be objectively filtered and represented" is a fiction that breaks down in social worlds mired in death, cruelty, and injustice (23). Consequently, there is a moral and ethical imperative to treat fieldwork as a serious, durational, intimate, and intersubjective practice based on a foundation of reciprocity.

Reflecting on the roundtable in an email sent to Bobi and Wahid several months after the Perimeters conference, Zareini wrote how the primary role of the ethnographer in the field lies in being useful to the people around us. Like any other durational, intimate practice, fieldwork will inevitably come with moments of failure where we let our interlocutors down (think here, for instance, of Tuyaa's experience with collecting her friend's story). However, by privileging the social relations that come with fieldwork, one begins to push back against the demands of epistemological holism that academic knowledge-production demands of graduate research projects (Yates-Doerr 2020). Seen anew, failure becomes a point of pedagogic reflection for us to better understand the needs and wants of our interlocutors, whose worlds we are inhabiting (TallBear 2014). Also reflecting belatedly on the roundtable, Mitchell argues:

> …making space for emotional divestment from the project you thought you would do allows you to stop trying to rescue that project. By not trying to rescue a failed project, we stop clinging to the fiction of what could be and start paying attention to what is already around us: relationships, obligations, entanglements, possibilities. A better set of questions is just over the horizon.

Beyond the need to ask a "better set of questions", a methodological ethics of failure can allow us to imagine and rehearse better worlds. Here, we can take insight from Kaushik Sunder Rajan's concept of *seeing* Otherwise to think about what *doing* Otherwise might feel like. Seeing otherwise, Rajan (2021) argues, ""is a question of attention and attunement and also of sensorial, bodily presence that includes yet also exceeds and decenters sight" (113). Following this logic, the question of *doing* Otherwise is a question of learning a different form of attunement that does not shy away from the moment when failure is instinctively recognized. We must learn how to feel and sit with failure, to decenter the focus on success as the only plausible outcome of engaging in ethnographic fieldwork. Mitchell reflected on how their contributions to the roundtable sometimes felt defensive in their resistance to redeeming their fieldwork through a reorientation towards a 'learning opportunity', or a pivot, as they instead choose to sit with the failure as what it was: something that did not go the way it was planned. To continue to do so, they remarked, is to push back against the erasure of these moments, both from our memories and from the ethnographic page, where, as Prof. Hyde alluded, past generations of anthropologists have been encouraged to cache these failures within an illusion of productivity. As Tuyaa also contends, to be accountable to our relations is to recognize when we have failed them, for in recognizing our failures we may find the motivation to do Otherwise next time, to show up as a better researcher/person, and to know how to cross the divide between those two positions when it is asked of us. Rajan (2021) suggests that this kind of ethnographic attention cannot be taught in the

classroom with theory as the "intellectual labor" and method as the "doing" of research. Instead, the researcher must develop a project that begins with an accountability towards those who will be involved. Kim TallBear (2014) gives us some questions to think about when attending to this: "whose lives, lands, and bodies are inquired into and what do they get out of it?" (2).

Consequently, our ethnographic practice must anticipate, accept, and metabolize failure in its moral vision for a better world. By emphasizing engagement and attunement as modes of being with our interlocutors, our ethnographic practice has to embrace the fullest possible heft of what James Clifford would call a "partial truth" (1986)—not merely a partial textual presence that reflects the failure of textual representation, as Clifford may argue, but the partiality of moral and ethical co-presence which acknowledges the outer limits of our understanding of the social worlds we enter, and which consequently also necessitates dialogic engagement and attunement with our interlocutors. As Rajan (2021) notes, "[it] is not possible to be dialogic and just observe" (141). At the same time, it is also not possible to be dialogic *without* observing. In investing ourselves in a failure-forward methodology, we must also not veer too far the other way and submerge ourselves in the representational vortex of presenting the moral worlds of our interlocutors as some perfect construction of an absolute, radical alterity. To do so—to borrow a metaphor from anthropologist Alpa Shah (2017)—would be akin to "simply producing a collection of pretty butterflies" (54). This is an important and necessary caveat that clues us to a sharper, more precise political vision of what a morally-grounded praxis of ethnography ought to center.

Addressing this very concern at the end of our roundtable, Tuyaa drew on the life and writing of the 19th-century Buryat intellectual and activist Mikhail Bogdanov, who conducted extensive ethnographic land surveys of the Khakas peoples. While he was a relative outsider to the Khakas community that he served, Bogdanov used his writing and his position in a resettlement office in Krasnoyarsk province to defend the Khakas against Russian internal settler encroachment in the 1910s (Montgomery 2018). In many conventional retellings of this story, this ethnographic project was doomed for failure—indeed, Bogdanov was captured and executed by the Russian White movement. Nevertheless, Tuyaa draws on the traces of Bogdanov's activist commitment to underscore the inspiration that ethnographic writing can continue to animate more than a century after its publication. If nothing else, Bogdanov's life offers a model of the engaged anthropologist who fails in his lifetime, but whose work and writing continue to resonate to this present day.

Acknowledgements Thanks to all the participants of this panel for their generous insights, to our dear friend Ala Jamal Zareini for stepping in at the last minute to steer this roundtable, and to everyone else who attended the *Perimeters* roundtable for their invaluable insights. Thanks to Ari Javidi, and Emily Draicchio for rounding out the conference's steering committee (which also included Wahid and Tuyaa), and for their tireless work behind the scenes to make the conference tick along. The

Perimeters conference was also supported by McGill's Arts Opportunity Fund and the Post-Graduate Student Society (PGSS) Grant. Thanks to Victoria Platzer for her careful, consummate copyediting on this piece. Finally, a huge, huge thank you to our peers, mentors, interlocutors, families, friends, forebears, and ancestors, all of whom make research possible, and all of whom point us toward the righteous path of justice, solidarity, and liberation.

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