In Ted Chiang’s science-fiction short story, *The Truth of Fact, the Truth of Feeling*, two parallel plotlines explore the destabilizing impact that the introduction of new recording technologies can have on personal relations. One plotline traces the introduction of writing into an oral culture, while the other presents a near-future scenario where neural implants enable the video-like recording of all human memories. In both instances, the category of ‘truth’ begins to come undone as the protagonists are confronted with new technologies for extending and preserving human memory.

This story resonates deeply with the ambivalent legacy of recording technologies in the ethnographic disciplines—especially considering their historical implication in colonialist and nationalist projects. For whom is it advantageous to remember exactly and unchangingly, and who decides which memories are to be preserved in this way? What can be forgotten under these regimes of recall? These issues were also relevant to my first research project as an ethnomusicologist, where I undertook fieldwork in ‘underground’ electronic music scenes. These were scenes where observation and recording were often met with suspicion and hostility—and for very good reasons, considering their prior experiences with surveillance, oppression, and exploitation. In this sort of fieldwork context, deploying the ethnographer’s trusty camera and microphone was obviously out of the question.

This article reports on the methods and strategies that I developed to deal with conducting fieldwork in a context where the conventional recording technologies of ethnography—including even handwritten notes—were inappropriate and often impractical. On the one hand, this involved training my own memory to function as a temporary recording device, collecting experiences until they could be transcribed in more stable form at home. On the other hand, this involved transforming these written notes into a mixture of narrative and analysis that was then posted on a public blog that served simultaneously as archive, sketchbook, and conduit of communication back to the communities I was studying. In both cases, ethnographic memories went through a process of withering, as some details receded and others became more salient. In the process of moving from the relative
privacy of the nightclub to the relative openness of the blogosphere, details were carefully redacted or altered. Through this process, my field notes took on the sheen of realist fiction rather than ‘objective’ fieldnotes.

This article is a post-mortem on something that continues to die: my fieldwork blog, Luis in Paris.\(^1\) It provides analysis and reflection on the role of memory in my process of ethnographic writing, including the surprising afterlife of these withered memories in the backwaters of the Internet. Ultimately, this article considers how the withering of memory can play a role in the production of ethnographic “truth”, and what ramifications it may have for both the ethics and practice of modern-day fieldwork.

Hidden Fields

I went out into the field in an effort to make sense of intimacy on the dancefloor. My doctoral dissertation, completed in 2011 with the title ‘“Can You Feel It, Too?”: Intimacy and Affect at Electronic Dance Music Events in Paris, Chicago, and Berlin’, was a multi-sited ethnographic study of music, intimacy, and crowds at “techno” and “house” nightclubs in three cities. Working from interviews, sound recordings, and participant observation, it focused on how music, bodies, and space play a role in engendering and intensifying a sense of intimacy between strangers at music events. It examined scenes of surprising intimacy among mostly anonymous crowds that gathered on the dancefloors of nightclubs and other dance venues. As such, it was concerned with phenomena that have been elsewhere studied under the rubrics of stranger sociality, collective musicking, affect, intimacy, crowd psychology, and solidarity. Among the chief outcomes from this research project were: an account of the affective relay between music, sonic experience, collective dancing, and a tactile sense of togetherness; a reconceptualization of intimacy and solidarity in the context of crowds (i.e., beyond the couple-form); and a critical analysis of the social processes, both personal and institutional, that help sustain this sense of fluid, collective intimacy.

As a graduate student at the University of Chicago, I had been trained in a strain of cultural anthropology that placed a great deal of emphasis on field notes. We were taught that, whereas historians delve into archives, anthropologists build their own archives by constant self-documentation. During the fieldwork stay, these notes should then sediment into an “archive of experience” (Garcia 2013, 8) as it accumulates, progressively taking on the weight of “data” for analysis. Similarly, my training as an ethnomusicologist promoted sound and video recordings as indispensable elements of data-collection in the field. For most ethnographic disciplines, photos, audio recordings and videos have almost talismanic value as proof that what we are doing is “serious” and “scientific” fieldwork. And yet, the circumstances of my own fieldwork project greatly complicated this documentation process.

As a multi-sited ethnography, my doctoral research project built upon fieldwork conducted between 2006 and 2010 in a cluster of style-oriented dance music scenes (minimal techno, minimal house, deep house) in three large cities: Paris, Berlin, and Chicago. All three of these sites posed challenges to conventional fieldwork methods, due to the clandestine, hidden-but-findable nature of “underground” club scenes at the time.\(^2\) Well before the EDM-festival “boom” of the 2010s, the music scenes that I studied prized low and localized levels of visibility, which enabled them to offer a zone of escape from everyday control through an atmosphere of relaxed rules, suspended responsibilities, expanded possibilities, and pleasures unburdened by guilt or sanction. Previous experience—from disco through rave and its aftermath—taught actors in these scenes that increased visibility brought the risk of media sensationalism, moral panics, mainstream invasion, and intensified police interference. And, since these musical events often served as occasions for sexual and pharmacological experimentation, individual privacy remained paramount for most partygoers.

Considering the strongly felt necessity of protective...
concealment in all of my fieldwork sites, it was clear that hauling in a video camera, tripod, and high-quality microphone was out of the question. Such equipment not only violated the sense of protective hiddenness valued in nightlife contexts, but it was also highly impractical for spaces saturated with extremely loud and percussive music, flashing lights, and moving bodies in close proximity. Furthermore, such recording instruments were conspicuous and intrusive, thus interfering with the fun that is—lest we forget—the objective to which partygoers dedicate a great deal of their resources.

At first, my concession to the ethnographic imperative was to take a few discreet photos and video clips of nightclub events with a small, point-and-shoot digital camera—but with several self-imposed restrictions. I permitted myself only to take photos / video of performing artists or massed crowds; I deliberately avoided taking photos of individual partygoers, and I deleted any images where a partygoer’s face was centred and clearly visible. I also did not bring out my camera until I had seen at least a few other participants taking pictures of each other, which served as an informal indicator for local attitudes towards photography in general. A clipboard or a notebook also seemed both impractical and intrusive, and so in its place I occasionally sent SMS messages to my own mobile phone as a form of ad hoc note-taking (note that my first year of fieldwork was in a pre-iPhone world, before smartphones with built-in note-taking apps were widely available).

As my research progressed, however, these images and videos turned out to be the least interesting element of my ethnographic archive. At the same time, as smartphones became increasingly ubiquitous, dance venues increasingly discouraged and outright banned recording of any sort. Instead, I found myself focusing more and more on a memory-based form of the field note.

Luis in Paris: Archiving Experience

In the summer of 2006, as I prepared to leave Chicago to spend a year conducting fieldwork in Paris, I decided to launch a blog (unimaginatively) entitled Luis in Paris. Looking back, the blog was unbearably ugly in its colour scheme and layout—not to mention far from “mobile friendly”—and I can only partially blame the awkward Web 2.0 templates that Google’s “Blogspot” platform offered at the time. I had various plans for the blog at the outset, but over time it turned into a queer mix of public-facing project website, an open archive of field notes, an ongoing and messy “report from the field,” dispatches addressed to several places I called ‘home’, and a daily diary.

With Luis in Paris I aimed to work through a set of issues related both to the practicalities and to the theoretical aspects of my doctoral thesis project. I had already chosen to study ‘underground’ electronic dance music scenes and, inspired by a graduate seminar I had taken with Lauren Berlant on the ‘intimate public sphere’, I narrowed my focus to stranger-intimacy at these music events. But this object of study posed several methodological and ethical challenges to ethnography. How does one study stranger-intimacy in situ, especially in nightclubs and raves? Certainly classic methods of observation and interviewing would not be sufficient. It was clear that I would need to seek out situations where strangers encounter each other and allow myself to also be that stranger, from time to time. Thus, I felt that my fieldwork needed to be self-reflexive from the very beginning—that is, that I should be visible as a character in any story I tell about my time in...
the field. And there was also the very thorny question of privacy, which was becoming an increasingly complex matter in the online world at the time of my fieldwork.

I thus saw Luis in Paris as a sort of experiment in public intimacy, an effort to enact some of the conceptual keywords that were central to my project. I also saw it as a way to explore and cross some of the boundaries between the “backstage” and “frontstage” realms of fieldwork. Furthermore, I thought that, in comparison to the conventional ethnographic field note, the blog post was a genre of writing that held much potential to explore the vague terrain between ethnographic description, journalistic reportage, and literary narrative. And finally, through my commitment to write at least one blog post per day, I aimed to better explore the continuities between the affective worlds of everyday life and nightlife. And so, I thought that a sort of semi-public journal intime would be useful for exploring the boundaries between private and public, intimacy and anonymity: what do I cut out and what do I leave in? What must I change to protect others’ identities, and how might that impact the accuracy of the stories I tell? Should my entries be interesting or thorough? Who is really reading these, anyways?

In addition to the methodological reflections brought on by these questions, the format, technological affordances (e.g., using Google’s Blogger and later Wordpress) and genre-expectations of contemporary blogging soon shaped my writing towards a sort of idiosyncratic formalism. Most of my daily entries took the form of a diary entry recounting the day’s events in chronological order and in narrative form, sometimes illustrated with images or videos that I took along the way. Since I devoted most weekends to attending local electronic music events, my “night out” posts soon developed into their own genre, with a specific structure and ordering. These nocturnal chronicles were always bookended with narratives of arrival and departure, detailing my travel to, into, and out of the music venue, along with any interesting observations or interactions I had along the way. Between these elements, the majority of each “night out” post was structured by the times of the DJ’s sets; under the heading of each DJ and her/his running time, I included: a musical description and/or analysis of the DJ’s performance (sometimes accompanied by photo of the DJ taken by me), followed by my observations of the crowd and its activities (possibly with a short video excerpt), which included specific anecdotes that sometimes involved me as an actor. Over time, these posts took on the status and function of field notes.

This emergent genre of ‘night out’ field note is best observed in a post from late in the lifespan of Luis in Paris, when I had become comfortable with its form and underlying workflow. Dated Sunday, May 31 2009, this blog post recounts one of my last nights out in the Parisian electronic music scene before returning to Chicago. Already the title of the blog, “Peruvian Food (and Richie Hawtin, Magda, Gaiser, Barem)” is illustrative, in that it includes a list of the DJs featured that night; at this point, I was already thinking in terms of rudimentary Search Engine Optimization—both for potential readers as well as for my own archival uses. In this case, I was also playing with terms of my own blog-genres, placing the DJ’s names in parentheses next to “Peruvian food” as a reference to my restaurant-review and recipe posts while also jokingly implying that the evening’s culinary activities took priority over musical ones.

True to form, the blog entry begins with a narrative of arrival and entry to the music event, prefaced by a brief description of the dinner party I had hosted with friends beforehand. Also following established form, my post-arrival account is organized according to the timing of DJ sets, leading in each case with a musical description/analysis followed by more general observations and individual anecdotes. The blog entry closes with a very brief account of my return home, narrating the ride home on public transit with friends as well as some extended post-party socializing.

One can see in this post how my long-term immersion in fieldwork had instilled in me a
selective focus on phenomena relevant to my research. The section covering Magda’s DJ-set provides an apt example, where I devote an extended passage to a fleeting encounter I had with a stranger on the dancefloor, closely following the nuances of body language and conversation:

At some point, a guy dancing energetically next to me noticed me at a point when Magda had dropped something exciting into the mix and I was dancing with renewed enthusiasm. He turned toward me with a long, drawn-out “Ouais!” (“Yeah!”), and then we proceeded through a complex, rapid, and improvised pas-de-deux of momentary togetherness. First we exchanged smiles and pumped our fists in the air towards the DJ. Then, he approached me and we danced “with” each other in the sense that we danced closely side-by-side and adapted our dancing to each other in a way that was sometimes mimetic and sometimes contrapuntal.

A friend of mine approached and said, “Oh, do you two already know each other?” … This guy throws his arm over my shoulder and says, ”Well, we do now!” And then we keep dancing together, his arm over my shoulders and mine around his waist, for a few minutes before drifting apart. I never really talked to him or got his name or anything, but for that moment we knew each other in some way, as if that moment of glancing contact was enough for some sort of relationship to emerge. Or maybe it was that we were referencing some timeless relationship, acting as if we were just continuing an already-established relationship. It was interesting, too, that the first moment of substantial touch (arm over shoulders) happened just as this guy was claiming that we now knew each other. There’s something interesting in how temporality is collapsed and twisted in instances like these; it’s as if we don’t have time to begin and end a relationship when we’re colliding into each other on the dancefloor, and so we all improvise—relationship without relation, friendship without familiarity.

This anecdote is complemented with an extended reflection on stranger-intimacy, tactility, temporality and social improvisation, thus providing a “first draft” analysis of the encounter (already foreseeing its use in future publications) while also picking up the threads of ideas I had been developing in earlier blog entries.

Memory Work

I often characterize the methods I used to prepare these ethnographic materials as ‘memory work’, although this process also involved a withering or deterioration of memory around (at least) two points in the workflow. During the musical event itself, I focused on being present and attentive to the event as it unfolded, taking (mental) note of factors such as venue layout, sound, bodily movements, and social interactions. Eschewing the use of recording devices also helped me remain open to participate in the event and to interact with other participants. Upon returning home, I would immediately write down as much as I could recall from the event, including details such as observed gestures, specific musical selections, verbatim quotations, dress, décor, and so on. Notably, this ‘brain-dump’ was made into a word-processing file on an encrypted hard drive; no thought was given yet to salience, editing, or organization beyond chronological order. In the ensuing days, I would work on crafting a coherent narrative out of these point-form notes, which would in turn serve as the initial draft for my blog posts on Luis in Paris. All of these materials—the point-form notes, the narrative drafts, the “finished” blog posts—served together as a detailed archive of ethnographic field notes from which I could draw when writing up my dissertation. The blog posts were especially handy in this regard, in that they provided ready-to-use narrative fragments that I could deploy in my writing, condensing or expanding as necessary.

At first, this memory work was difficult and time-consuming: a ‘night out’ could last anywhere from six to twelve hours of intense observation, and I struggled to retain and recall all of this in detail. But, as I repeated the exercise of attending music events and writing notes from memory, I found that the precision and scope of my recall increased greatly. Over time, I developed the ability to recall...
entire conversations and lengthy successions of events. However, this hard-earned capacity for detailed recall was fragile and short-lived. Two or three days after the event, my memory of it quickly became hazy, jumbled, and disjointed; the small details of gesture, expression, utterance, and soundscape that make for compelling ethnography soon disappeared over the event-horizon of oblivion.

This was thus the first point at which memory work ran up against the withering of its primary materials. The post-event ‘brain-dump’ was geared towards recording as much detail as can be remembered, but doubtlessly much was lost from the hours-long stream of intense sensory experience that is a night out. As much as I made a concerted effort to cast my perceptual net as broadly as possible, many unremarkable (but possibly revelatory) details went unnoticed; despite my efforts, salience remained a deciding factor in the persistence of sensory impressions beyond the moment. In using my body as a fleshy recording device, I also limited the range of collected data to the bandwidth of my sensory inputs. Furthermore, the time-sensitive volatility of my detailed memory indicated that my written notes were only a partial snapshot of an ongoing process of deterioration.

The second point at which memories withered was in the translation from one mode of inscription to another. In my fieldwork methodology, this occurred during the drafting of online blog posts, where my “raw” point-form field-notes were re-worked into diary-like vignettes. The first difference introduced through this process was sanitization: names were changed, potentially compromising details redacted or changed, the stuttering syntax of speech smoothed into coherent sentences, and so on. In other words, certain changes were made to my memories in order to make them safe to circulate in a discursive field that was at least potentially open to anyone with internet access. The second difference emerged out of narrativization, in which I selected certain entries from my private field notes as more interesting or meaningful; pieced together events and observations into a linear structure that implied necessary succession; removed “extraneous” details in the interest of coherence; pared down or extended the text for “readability” and dramatic pacing. In this sense, memory withered as it came to be repackaged for a specific genre of writing, with all of its expectations for form, style, topos and aesthetics. With this mnemonic decay comes a subtle metamorphosis of the event as it is recalled in the present—a process that is patently understood by promoters of modern-day mega-events like Tomorrowland, with their ‘aftermovies’ that not only extend the ‘festival experience’ and festive sociality beyond the event itself, but also transforms its memory into effective advertising (Holt, 2015).

Finally, a third difference arose through reflection, where the streamlining of detail necessitated by narrative left space for gloss, exegesis, commentary, and analysis: a brief gesture can be an occasion for dilation on embodied affect; an elliptical utterance contextualized extensively; a surprising interaction mined for hidden meanings; or a specific situation held up as exemplary of larger patterns. Although this is a case where material was added rather than removed, these memories continued to turn away from their initial form, since these reflections introduced distortions that were both limiting and productive, selective and elaborative.

In all of these instances, the differences introduced by transcription need not be seen as a loss per se. My use of the term “withering” here is significant in that it implies a process where an object (e.g., a flower) undergoes a transformative process where some of its qualities diminish and/or change, but the object itself does not disappear. More importantly, this process may result in a loss of integrity in the object in relation to its original state, but its withering may also offer results that are generative, protective, transformative, or even necessary. In this sense, the withering of memory at the heart of memory work can be seen as ‘not a bug, but a feature’, in that it renders the archive of experience digestible, shaped and lubricated for circulation beyond the purview of the subject of ethnography. Such transformative work through mnemonic decay is also very often a pragmatically necessary element of ethnographic method, but it
is rarely discussed openly; disciplinary prestige is still at stake in maintaining the appearance of a transparent flow from fieldwork to written page.

Residue

In the end, Luis in Paris turned out to be a condensation of methodological quandaries, a self-made recording of the process of coming to terms with a series of practical, ethical, and conceptual issues that arose when I chose a messy, impractical—but nevertheless engaging—topic for my research. It represents an attempt to both render visible certain aspects of the fieldwork process and performatively enact concepts relevant to the research project. As I was confronted with the task of adapting my fieldnotes to the contemporary world of online publishing and social media, the blog served as an ongoing exploration of the narrative and aesthetic boundaries of ethnography. The transformation of ethnographic material from private notes to public blog post became a daily exercise in navigating the boundaries of confidentiality, hiddenness, and ‘context collapse’.

What is Luis in Paris now, nearly ten years after its launch? In today’s online world of rapid meme turnover, fleeting virality, and carefully crafted multi-platform personae, this blog is digital detritus, trash abandoned on the side of the ‘information superhighway’. From its simplistic design to its lack of integration into social media networks, it serves as a lonely outpost of an obsolete Web 2.0 publishing platform, like Geocities and MySpace for previous internet generations. But Luis in Paris can also be seen as a trove of lost letters: missives sent to distant friends, local collaborators, myself, and an intimate public of strangers. In the tradition of sketch studies, it serves as a repository of intermediary materials, including notes, sketches, and working drafts that feed forward into future publications (or not). This corpus of diary-like texts can certainly be taken as a subjective record of a particular time and place; perhaps in the distant future, the remains of Luis in Paris will return as a ‘primary source’ for history, a chronicle of early twenty-first century music scenes. Since its inception, the blog has continued to serve as a sort of lieu de mémoire, providing myself as well as many of my erstwhile companions with mnemonic prompts that revitalize old memories.

Ultimately, Luis in Paris has become residue: encrusted traces of past activities that can be examined, followed, interpreted, collected—but also overlooked, forgotten, misrecognized, removed, and rediscovered. Internet search engines and social media have played a role in lending a “second life” to some components of this ethnographic blog. In particular, my ‘night out’ posts occasionally re-entered circulation when users curious about specific performers, promoters, venues, or music events ran keyword searches that returned links to my blog among its results. Over the long term, perhaps the post on Luis in Paris with the most enduring popularity was, ‘Snax Club, Berghain, Picnics and Fisting’, a slightly salacious account of a yearly fetish club night held in Berlin. Due to Google’s page-ranking algorithms, this post regularly appears high on the list of results for searches on keywords that combine terms such as ‘Snax’, ‘Berghain’, ‘fisting’, ‘sex’, ‘orgy’ and ‘darkroom’. Every year around the date of the event (i.e., Easter weekend), the pageview statistics on that post spike upwards for a few days. Based on what I can glean from the visitor statistics provided by Google, the same phenomenon seems to occur every year: a handful of potential Snax attendees stumble upon my review of the event and then share it via social media with fellow kinky partygoers in their networks, who in turn read the original blog post and sometimes disseminate the URL further.

The internet is a strange sort of ecosystem where everything is supposedly stored somewhere ‘in the cloud’ but can disappear at any moment. ‘Forever’ on the internet can mean both ‘longer than you would like’ or ‘shorter than you expected’, based on a complex set of factors and chance. And internet archiving is by no means complete or egalitarian; for example, individuals who draw the attention of powerful states now find their every move meticulously archived for future use against them. With the rise of the ‘big data’ paradigm in security and intelligence, some organizations (states, multinational corporations) now employ a
‘dragnet’ approach to surveillance and wiretapping, as a result of which entire populations’ online activities are being dumped into repositories for analysis—or neglect. It has also become very difficult to completely ‘delete’ one’s online persona, especially on social media platforms like Facebook, where the retention of user data coincides with commercial interests. And yet, some websites disappear suddenly and without trace, succumbing to server malfunctions, legal injunctions, inattention, lapsed ISP accounts, or more obscure causes. One can turn to internet archiving services such as The Wayback Machine or Google Cache, but these cached sites are withered memories, stripped of high-density content (e.g., images, video) and devoid of the dynamically-generated, responsive, customized content that has become a significant part of most modern websites. On media-hosting websites, files and user accounts can sometimes disappear when user-uploaded content is deemed unseemly or legally risky. When a net-based start-up company fails or when a media conglomerate shuts down one of its online services, users are often left scrambling to find a way to archive offline the ‘content’ they had spent years contributing and curating.

The internet is still a physical thing, stored on servers that can go offline, malfunction, lose data, and so on; both human memory and machine memory are subject to the limitations, vulnerabilities, and maintenance requirements of its material medium, whether it is soft flesh or a hard drive. Everything fails, sooner or later. And, as foreseen in even the earliest of cyberpunk literature, machine memory is not inherently more truthful—as modern examples such as ‘Googlebombing’, Wikipedia edit-wars, or dubious ‘search engine optimization’ tricks demonstrate—it may be more precise, dense, and enduring in its recall of stored information, but the quality of that data is uncertain from the outset and subject to tampering and corruption.

But perhaps there is a virtue to withered memories and corrupted data. In Ted Chiang’s short story, the fluidity of weakened memory enabled a certain elastic robustness; it gave discursive space to individual actors and groups to adjust to changing circumstances. In both of the short story’s parallel plot-lines, it was the introduction of technologies of (seemingly) exact recording and recall that threatened to crystallize social relations: transparent but brittle, people seemed to fall apart as memory stabilized. Evergreen memory became a crisis for the protagonists to face. For Luis in Paris, the withering of memory that resulted from memory-work seems to address similar concerns arising from the ethnography of hidden things. For ‘underground’ music scenes and their participants, total transparency risks being a crisis, too, and so small revisions and redactions accumulate protectively around ethnographic vignettes. Through narrativization, sanitization, and reflection, fieldwork memories are rendered safe(er) for circulation in public networks, where the risks and consequences of exposure can never be fully foreseen. But, as Chiang’s short story also illustrates, withering memories also serve to smooth over ‘inconvenient’ dissonances and disjunctures; past injuries and unsettled disputes slip into oblivion, leaving faded traumas and lingering resentment. Does the withering of memory cover over problems we can’t bear to face? In one of Chiang’s plot-lines, it is the arrival of ethnographic writing that threatens the stability of an oral culture and opens up epistemic fault-lines. For ethnography, withered memories seem to be both lubricant and residue of an ambivalent bargain between hidden things and those who seek them out.

Bibliography


REFERENCES


[3] Luis in Paris eventually came to include posts about my fieldwork in Berlin and Chicago, although my pace of publishing flagged during the final Chicago phase of fieldwork.

[4] Several other genres emerged over the lifetime of the blog, although not all of them were research-related. For example, I wrote detailed reviews of restaurants I visited in Paris—especially when friends or family were visiting— and occasionally posted photos and recipes of my own cooking. Judging from commenting activity by readers, it seems that the gastronomic posts drew as much response as the nightlife-related ones.

[5] This approach to post-hoc note-taking was modelled on the methods described by Fiona Buckland in her book, Impossible Dance (2002), which was an ethnographic study of queer club cultures in New York City.