



Le dernier jour d'un condamné: My auto-condemnation

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Abstract

The following piece is a monologue unfolding in a fictional setting, as a plea to denounce research methodologies that tend to perpetuate violence. In this piece, the attorney positions the problem within academia and the academic community (thus having a strong bond with the reader through gossiping—echoing gossiping as a research methodology).

At the end of the plea, the attorney, who is revealed to be the anthropologist, the other characters in the courtroom, the reader, and hence the research community, leads this denunciation and proposes ways to rethink research methodologies to better consider ethics—acknowledging one's vulnerability and fear in the field. This plea denounces systematic training and mentorship of ethnography, calls for collaborative research, acknowledges marginalized forms of knowledge, and refuses a voyeuristic researcher approach to the informants. The plea calls for flexible research methods over the fixation on gathering data and thinking ethics beyond pseudonyms. This piece attempts to make sense of the absurdity of research methodology, specifically analyzing the field of academia in which violence is generated and normalized under the name of fieldwork as a slice of life.

N.B. Metaphors in the plea are based on true stories.

Keywords: plea, ethnography, collaborative work, colonial methodologies, Systemic violence, flexible methodologies.

Le Dernier Jour d'un Condamné

My Auto-Condemnation

The action unfolds at a specific time and space in a courtroom.

In this text, Attorney is pleading. They are in the courtroom with prominent figures: Ms. President, The Condemnor, and The Condemned.

Attorney occupies the time with their monologue. Meanwhile, the others remain distinctly present in Ms. President's realm, the courtroom.

In this text, we won't refer to The Condemner and The Condemned by their rhetorical name, as it doesn't matter.

The Condemned, being the person causing the harm, and the Condemnor, the one receiving it, we reject the idea that harm is inevitable and that its root is the existence of bad humans.

By harm, we refer to acts, inherited knowledge, and conditions that cause pain and negative mental, emotional, and physical impact. While some pain is momentarily resolved, others are life altering and long-lasting.

To Honorable Reader,

Before leading the plea, I shall ask you, 'Honorable Reader, when did you last cry? Then how do I tell you that you deserved care and safety all along?

Silence invades the courtroom. A creaking door heralds the beginning of the session.

The entrance is announced as the doors swing ajar. Ms. President, The Judge, gracefully strides in. She's wearing mundane attire. One expected her to be dressed more formally. She seems unfazed by the massive presence of people in the courtroom. Despite the imposing assembly within the courtroom, she exudes an air of nonchalance and proceeds by sitting on her throne.

Attorney, the Legal Representatives, the Custodians of Justice, and the Orators in the room stand up.

No one knows the exact positioning of The Condemned and The Condemnor in the room, but it is firmly believed that they were in attendance.

To Honorable Reader,

As Representative Attorney, I will now assume the role of leading the formal plea.

I shall begin.

Before proceeding, kindly take a moment to admire this historical picture. Does Freddie look like a researcher?



Freddie in Crown and Robes by Peter Hince. Peter Hince's Studio. January 1987. London.

IN THE CIRCUIT COURT OF DECOLONIAL LAND
FOR THE COUNTRY OF XXxX

The Condemnor, an individual, perhaps more
Plaintiff,

V.

Case no. Xx. XXX

Pleading Title: My Auto-Condemnation

The Condemned, an individual, perhaps more,
Defendant

1. The indictment in this case charges The Condemned with violation of the law of care.

To Ms. President and the courtroom,

Esteemed Court, Legal Representatives, Custodians of Justice, and Orators present in this room,

I am pleading for both The Condemned and The Condemnor.

For centuries, condemnation has resonated on earth as it is in heaven.

Dear reader, you may wonder about the rationale behind pleading for both the condemner and the condemned, but I shall guide you and assure you that it is unproductive in this specific courtroom case. يحق للشاعر ما لا يحق لغيره (For the writer is allowed what it is not to others). But bear attention to the italics close in the text; they will guide you through the Anatomy of this fall.

Thus, it is with complete humility that I address to you my auto-condemnation.

On November X,XX, my client—the researcher and the condemnor—underwent a traumatic incident in the field of their research, which is believed to be caused by the condemned.

I will narrate...

My client, the researcher, exhibited negligence in their keen assessment of risks during fieldwork.

I will explain...

The researcher prepared a well-structured research proposal, the development of which evolved around research tools rather than the genuine interests and emotions that pushed them to undertake fieldwork, as they were taught.

On D-Day, the researcher presented their plan.

The scholars responded by looking, scrutinizing the content, nodding, and humming.

The scholars' appearances in mundane attire closely resemble that of Ms. President.

In the end, the scholars approved the proposal, highlighting that it would be challenging since it was a political topic.

As if it seemed imparted from what the researcher, thus my client, was taught, who now stands in this courtroom as the condemned.

Nevertheless, my client carried on. They began the research. However, they failed at one point. They absorbed the field; they immersed themselves so much that they became the field itself. This led to them failing to ensure an ethical approach to their fieldwork, as constructing data was, to some extent, the most essential task to achieve, according to them. Perhaps, as they were taught?

Ms. President, I condemn this approach as I consider it a legacy of colonial methodologies.

As my client describes it, this incident or catastrophe is a clear delinquency to the respected field of dance anthropology.

So far, we [dance anthropologists] have contributed to expanding the world's ritualistic, corporeal, dance knowledge and intangible heritage.
Did we?

We try so hard to talk about how emotions, affects, or concepts surface on the body to analyze corporeal knowledge and its cultural, social, and political emerging threads.
Do we?

So far, we have conducted research, allowed practices to revive themselves, and allowed for community-building processes.
Have we?

So far, we have brought diversity onto a common platform.
Have we?

I will pursue...

My client was conducting their job in the field in the most disciplined manner.

They addressed people's concerns as they were taught (never go to the field with lenses or biases).

They were nodding, showing affirmation as they were taught.

They prioritized the informants' body language and answers (what's the problem?).

They conducted fixed structured interviews to discuss fluid corporeal experiences as they were taught.

They were highly focused on the codified sequences of the movement they researched, as they were taught.

They ensured that they stayed “inclusive” by asking all sorts of questions to all dancers, as they were taught. The quota was addressed.

However,

They had to break from what they were taught, improvise, and change their ways.

The incident occurred at a specific time in a particular place. Knowing the exact time and space doesn't matter.

What matters is my clients' entanglement amidst the frustration; within them, a maelstrom of thoughts—intimidation, fear, and humiliation—asserted dominion, rendering them captive to their potent sway.

In the throes of shock, the ability to alter the course of events eluded their grasp. A disquieting tension traced the contours of their scapula and seized control, ensnaring their articulations and making them immobile.

They thus modify this specific time and specific space and leave.

Leave.

Leaving...

Leaving... proved to be a challenging choice. My clients had to outsource themselves to re-learn what they were taught and proceed. Does the end justify the mean? Not. Never.

Honorable Courtroom,

As the leading attorney of this plea, I condemn the institutionalized discriminatory notion of care and research with integrity.

Before addressing ethics, risks, and safety in the field, let me ask you: When was the last time you were aware that you had experienced violence?

Ms. President, did you cry when "it" happened to you in the far land of Niagara? You understand the allusion ... Niagara is just a metaphor, and so is Armadou.

Have you acknowledged the violence you endured? The violence that your body conserved? Then how do I tell you that you deserved care and safety at that moment?

Ms. President, did you think it was scandalous when Armadou disappeared? Armadou was also trained to nod as a sign of affirmation in the field.

His colleagues were scandalized. They improvised in a specific time and space and looked for him.

Ms. President, does he ever cross your mind? Armadou was the most prominent anthropologist among the researchers.

Did you feel distant from him as a human? Was it his physiognomy, his weird pronunciation, or his dissidence?

The incident happened at the court.

Esteemed Speakers of Justice in this assembly, what if I told you that you deserved care all along and that we have the opportunity to revisit and amend what has been deeply engraved in us?

Respected Courtroom, I condemn myself: the Condemnor, the Condemned, the Researcher, the Anthropologist, The Great Pretender.

I forgot I was human and that it is human to have instincts. I was taught to observe, write, and dance like "them."

Distinguished Court, Custodians of Justice, and Orators present,

I invite you to watch When the Cat Comes. I invite you to enjoy the color. I invite you to sit with your queer child. I invite you to try these

heels. I invite you to investigate protests in the oppressors' field. I invite you to question the objectivity of archives. I invite you to try this cafe you have always wanted to. I invite you to dance. I invite you to like the ice cream and learn a language (to communicate, not colonize).

I invite you to identify violence.

I invite you to be mundane.

I invite you to stop pretending.

I invite you to stop pretending because you're not Rudolf Nureyev or Rudolf von Laban. I invite you to stop pretending to be Freddie Mercury or a cat in the field. I invite you to stop pretending that yellow is your favorite color and that you feel okay in the field.

I propose a decolonial facet of research. I propose decolonizing the body first.

I propose that this happens in the field of research.

Dear Ms. President, I propose considering the importance of narratives.

In doing so, people's stories are heard, and stories amplify nuances.

Nuances counterforce generalizations.

Nuances are localization

Localization happens through culture, and culture is soft power.

Ms. President, have you ever thought about selling a mojito in Saudi Arabia? Or planting that tree in your small bedroom of gardenia in Armenia? How would you implement it?

The way people choose to build communities and dance...that, Ms. President, is a human act that renders justice to your identity, your legitimacy, and your humanity.

Ms. President, I am not a politician, a social worker, or an Attorney. I am an anthropologist, and so are you.

So are you.

Here is the proposed plan approved by my peers in court to reclaim reparations. It compromises articles that both revisit and challenge conventional theories and methodologies in the field of research.

There you go. Those are the documents to Ms. President. Thank you.

I will read it. I quote:

Article 1. All Human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and consciousness and should act towards one another in a spirit of sisterhood/transhood/brotherhood.

Article 2. Everyone's right to life shall be protected by inclusive care. This article calls explicitly colored dissidents, Ms. President.

Article 3. No one shall be subjected to the erasure of their historical memory in archives. This article calls explicitly queer beings, Ms. President.

Article 4. Everyone is entitled to a fair and public hearing.

Article 5. Everyone has the right to equal support before, during, and after fieldwork.

Article 6. Semi-structured interviews are preferable to structured interviews. Flexibility and adaptation are a must.

Article 7. Flexible methodologies centered around inclusive care are a priority.

Article 8. If you die in a car accident during your fieldwork in the Middle East, you are granted the right of return. You will be either reincarnated as an Egyptian cat or as an anthropologist.

Article 9. You learn a language not to colonize but to empathize with others' realities.

Article 10. You should watch Hindi movies as they teach you patience and respect.

Article 11. Lenses...

Oh, Mr. President, we spoke about these so much.

Lenses. Acknowledge your bias, as it is less painful and violent. You are not a neutral subject in the field. This approach often exoticizes, fetishizes, and romanticizes.

Article 12. I do not wish for any work not to be collaborative. As such, collaborative work tends to be less colonial.

End of quotation

Esteemed Court, Legal Representatives, Custodians of Justice, and Orators present,

With that, I conclude my pleading in favor of my client, Anthropologist who celebrates 430 years today.

Anthropologist contends that it was abused, manipulated, and maltreated without consent, constituting a violation of more avaricious motives, specifically imperialistic and ethnocide ones.

Today, Anthropology finds itself to be the Condemnor and the Condemned.

It finds itself to be the Esteemed Court, Legal Representatives, Custodians of Justice, and Orators present in this room.

It is you, Ms. President, who becomes me, Representative Attorney.

It finds itself to be you, Honorable Reader.

We all are Anthropologist.

Thank you.

Silence invades the room.

Author Biography

Marita Matar (she/her) is a Lebanese researcher and pole dancer. Her work intersects at the body as a site of resistance and borders crossing, forms of resistance and politics. This stems from her work with refugees, fieldwork with activists in Bogotá, and her journey as a pole dancer. Marita graduated with a License in Modern Languages and Translation and a Master's degree in Dance Knowledge, Practice and Heritage with the International Erasmus Mundus Master Degree, Choreomundus.