Colloquy

FAILING AT FAILING

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Soundscape. ***Failing at Failing*****, 9:05. By Emiko Stock.**
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What happens to the feminist imperatives of homework when, as scholar-teachers, ethnographers, and world-inhabiters, we fail? We fail as academics, unable to keep up with unsteady yet always demanding institutional expectations, teaching evaluations, and contract renewals. We fail at truly being in presence to our long-distance (or all-too-close) relationships, family check-ins and checkups in the afar, and attunements to "fieldwork" relations. We fail even at making new homes out of some seemingly impossible-to-learn

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new languages and hard-to-navigate new cities. And then we fail at catching the bus, picking the right groceries, and getting home before we run out of power.

In my "soundwork" (Sundar 2023) and this essay,[1] I am arguing that academia, in its current orientations and practice, is, for most, defined by constant movement, emplacement, displacement, and relocation. In both my sonic approach and conceptual framing, I suggest that this represents not just the exceptional shaping of singular personal experiences but increasingly, the normative and normalized condition of academic labor today—shaped by job precarity, extractive academic systems, and unstable immigration policies. "Home," in this context, and when approached both from the personal lived experience and from the anthropological lens, becomes a site of connection (like the comfort of new coffee routines and encounters) as well as of unease (the constant paralyzing state of out-of-controlness). For better or worse, more than ever, this home is always multi-sited—which requires us to dislocate even further the notions of "homework" and "fieldwork."[2]

Taking the call for self-reflexivity between homework and fieldwork initiated by Kamala Visweswaran (1994), Sara Ahmed (2017), and the collective Patchwork Ethnography (Günel and Watanabe 2024)—in conversation with generative notions of failure within ethnography (Visweswaran 1994) and outside of it (Halberstam 2011)—my soundwork, *Failing At Failing*, attempts to open up an alternative space for reflection: the home/work embedded in relocations to unexpected parts of the world that one undertakes in pursuit of an academic career, opening up to the idea that yet another job could also become yet another home.

In this piece, I take the example of my personal and professional life, currently set between Cambodia, place of my home and "fieldsite," and Egypt, a country I knew nearly nothing about before the fluidity demanded by the academic job market randomly brought me there two years ago. How does one make a home yet again, away from the one-too-many homes one already inhabits, despite, through, around—or thanks—to workplaces that promise nothing but the uncertain temporalities of pending contracts? What forms of excitement, promises, disappointments, and feelings of inadequacy do we take on with new fields "on the side": fields of inquiry and endless curiosity that beg the attention of the exhausted ethnographer, and fields inhabiting the aspirational imagination of the newcomer? Can we ever get "un-lost" in translation when life and work require us to think in a new language and make a new living, while the very space to actually attend to either goes into unstoppable shrinking?

In my soundwork, I explore the constant feeling of failure embedded in such displacements, following vocal messages and sounds of daily life from Cairo and Phnom Penh. I wasn't born in Phnom Penh, but this is the place I have come to call home for most of my life. It remained home while other homes were also imprinting themselves on my body, my daily, my imaginary: home at some point was also upstate New York, just as Paris-at-large had been early in my life and for many years. What makes Phnom

Penh home for me is the lack of romance I attach to it: this is the only place that feels normal amid all abnormality, the place that I return to when I am unable to think about where to go next, the place where the combination of languages that roll between the ears do so without having to spell themselves out. That too, truly, makes a home a home. However, following Visweswaran (1994) and Ahmed (2017), I also take home to be not a stable place, but a site of power and complicity both methodological (through self-reflexivity) and literal (working within one's own community). I also take home to be a site of discomfort shaped by exclusion, understanding that being at home often means doing the labor of critiquing those very exclusions (Ahmed 2017).

The notion of homework common to both Visweswaran and Ahmed constantly buzzes in my head: on one hand, it's a self-reflexive feminist methodology that turns the ethnographic gaze inward (Visweswaran 1994); on the other hand, it supports the labor of exposing how power works within institutions to challenge structures of oppression (Ahmed 2017). I hear that buzz and find resonance in Pavitra Sundar's (2023, 7) suggestion to "listen with a feminist ear" as a way "to be keyed into . . . alternative listening formations and practices." To listen with a feminist ear, argues Sundar (2023, 7), "is to amplify voices and sounds that are otherwise devalued, denigrated, or dismissed . . . so to sound out alternative temporal, spatial, and relational possibilities."

In short, to listen with a feminist ear is "an invitation to listen—and to listen again and to listen anew" (Sundar 2023, 192). Taking "soundwork" as "not only an ethical listening practice but an expansive one . . . shifts the intellectual terrain just enough to help . . . listen better—more deeply, more widely, more critically . . . and help theorize . . . in more nuanced ways" (Sundar 2023, 8). Through feminist praxis and ethnographic "attunement" (Kanngieser and Todd 2023), I take soundwork to be both the listening through and beyond what can be heard, as well as the recording that results from this immersive listening. Working through those ideas from Cairo, I have been particularly inspired by the transdisciplinary scholarship on sound done in Egypt (Hirschkind 2009; Ibraheem 2015; Malmström 2018, 2019; Battesti and Puig 2020; Fahmy 2020) to pursue, in a new city that I was beginning to call home, this attention to how one can listen to the "quiet quotidian" (Campt 2017).

Soundwork and homework together bring me back home: all homes are defined by the traces left by loved ones we engage with and report to (as one can hear in the soundworks of (Kumar, this issue; Mihai, this issue; Zarrad 2023); the languages we swear by and in (Nesvaderani, this issue; Mihai, this issue; Zarrad 2023); the media, ideas, and humor we consume or reject (Menchaca Ruiz, this issue; Nesvaderani, this issue). What I find particularly generative is how homes can be sonically layered, as if tracks were overlapping in my head: I can be listening to/answering vocals from Phnom Penh kin while walking the streets of Cairo thinking about significant others around Paris and New York, while still attuning myself to the specific sociality of the pathways (or lack thereof) of the urban space I am currently walking through. It is that constant displacement, or

maybe that constant *emplacement*, in multiples that my sound piece aims to convey; our bodies doing their thing, living their lives always attuned to other senses, but always no more than a step away from dislocation: may it be threats of immigration expulsions, looming contract endings, a housing crisis, an alternative dis/ability to walk the streets.[3]

This constant state of dislocation-to-be, an anxious uncertainty for everything, materializes in the non-permanence of "home." Such anxious uncertainty, the soundwork argues, shouldn't be taken as the exception but the norm—a failure that isn't a flaw in the matrix, but the very matrix itself. In this multilayered, long-term, poly-located relationship to sounding home, "home" is never completely situated or sorted out, for all the best and all the worst. As one relocates, the workplace becomes yet another home (it starts with hallway coffees and meeting habits, then commitments and friends, new tastes and aspirational routines, maybe even a plant or two). Work itself demands to be carried back home (the pile of books packed for the break that never quite get read; the daily bundle of notebooks in the backpack to scribble publication drafts that never quite get written).

The result is a heightened sense that things are never quite good enough, a looming failure: I fail to learn the language and know-hows of my new world; I fail to do well enough in my job to entrust myself to yet another yearly renewal; I fail to be present for my loved ones in times of crisis; and I fail to fully comprehend next-door wars lived for generations on. This failure contains a bit of hyperanxious me, but also a lot of the academic culture in its most extractive pressure. With time—and indeed with homework—I learned to think of failure as a place where the good-enough-for-now might serve a balancing act in which doing yet more work threatens to undo us. Following Jack Halberstam (2011, 3) I want to explore the opportunity for failure to "poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life." I am taking Halberstam (2011, 3) (along with a herbal anxiety balm and a tiny plush toy in my hand) as a mantra: "Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world." Thinking with Halberstam's notion of failure might open up, on a clear day, to the potential of thinking counter everything and standing. I therefore suggest failure as an invitation rather than a form of estrangement.

But what does failure sound like? The *Failing at Failing* soundwork takes a "normal" evening of failure as its starting point. After a long day and commute, the academic comes home late, but power cuts have already taken over. They walk toward the nearby café to wait and sit down. In their mind, phone conversations and vocals are playing: they try, in their very limited Arabic, to ask Mahmood, the *bawab* (a Cairene building manager), to call and let them know when the power will be back, but fail at explaining even just that. A vocal from "back home" in Cambodia—which is also "the field"—invites them to a wedding they can absolutely not miss, but which they know they won't be able to attend. They are half asleep when they send their not-RSVPing: the tongue

stuck in language, heavy with the remoteness of time zones, words failing them in efforts to not be out of touch. From Phnom Penh, the partner sends a series of updates on the medical situation of the Auntie: she isn't perfectly, absolutely, totally recovering from the amputation surgery that was somehow diagnosed by all to be the ultimate solution. Numbers go through the mind, comparing a pricing list of sorts between yet another leg cutting or an only-beyond-the-border artery unclogging. The mind drifts to Nintendo sales they really don't want to miss out on, and a long list of Netflix-binging aspirations. A faculty meeting they forgot about tries to snap them out of it. And then, back to grading, which is not happening. And then deadlines that they are definitely not making. And then, the future nowhere close to . . . clarifying. And no, I won't YouTube the gameplay to get unstuck at this level; *that* would be the ultimate failure.

Those are some of the things that can be heard from the audio piece if one does attend to the sounds in a way that also includes the "quiet" as "a modality that surrounds and infuses sound with impact and affect, [one which] creates the possibility for it to register as meaningful" (Campt 2017, 4). But there is more, something that the "feminist listening ear" might need to attend to: "To hear snap, one must slow down," Ahmed (2017, 200) cautions us. Things that cannot be heard because they are not said, and things that cannot be recorded because some sounds are, in fact, too loud. Listening is never fully transparent; it always retains opacity, not as a way to exclude (the majority of us didn't hear a thing, so we'll all agree it's just not a thing), but as a way to create an attunement and an intimacy of listening beyond what is just heard (only a few of us could hear that, so we are in this together).

There are political whispers and solidarity shout-outs that just can't go on record. Not only because those things don't make a sound that would be audible to you, reader in the afar, but also because if they had been audible, they would have proved too loud not to be risky. To that extent, *listening with a feminist ear* also means hearing what the world cannot quite murmur, and what the ethnographer cannot quite echo. I leave this listening to you, listener, asking you to do your own homework, one informed by the global crises beyond your home, one speculatively interpreted from a deep dive into oneself (as the contributions in this volume often echo). Interpretation also risks being all too easy, and therefore being questioned: the elections and protests we don't hear on tape but that should be scratching the depth of our tympans might have been about that home I was making in Cairo, or that home I was longing for in Phnom Penh. Just as the sound of one-too-many drones over your head. After all, one can always count on the uncanniness of all-too-close parallels.

In a way, we might equate the impossibility of all being equally together in this listening and recording to a failure itself. I try to make sense of this whole concept of failure in a generative way. I so, so, so want to see resistance. A proud stubbornness in reclamation. I hear whispers of intellectual crushes, I feel the vibrancy of some of my own canonical library. But I fall back into reality, stuck in the daily: failure is dark, it cancels

everything around, sound included, never to be replaced by the soft, floaty feeling of quiet. Failure deafens. It's a turn-off button you desperately want to press, your fingers walking the wall never to find the interrupter. The kind of failure I want to hold onto, that I read about, the kind that makes the brain bubble with excitement, is not the kind of failure that's mine, I guess. So I fail at failure too. Families who didn't quite make it in life raise kids who have no choice but to make it extra to restore balance. You can't prove a whole education system wrong just by gorgeously failing or superbly refusing: that soundtrack won't sing over any remedial track. And failing financially is a luxury if you are standing a little too close to generational debt. I am so, so, so tempted to do the intellectual thing, the socially just thing, the real thing. I am so, so, so tempted to bring back failure to the scarred face of work's constant extraction and life's exhaustion. I am so, so, so tempted to do my social theorist's job and think the thoughts of failure. But failing at that is the only thing I do these days. I so, so, so aspire to fail. But more often than not, I am just doing the same thing as everyone else: failing at failing.

ABSTRACT

Failing at Failing *brings together an essay and a soundwork to ask what becomes of feminist "homework" under the fractured temporalities of contemporary academic life. Moving between Cairo and Phnom Penh, I trace how serial relocations—propelled by precarity, institutional demands, and shifting migration regimes—rework "home" into a multi-sited, uneasy condition rather than a stable ground. The soundwork does not illustrate the text so much as it works through immersion. Composed of voice messages, urban ambiences, and translational off-keys, it practices "listening with a feminist ear," to use the terms of Sara Ahmed and Pavitra Sundar: an attunement to the quiet, the partial, and the unsayable. Failure thus emerges as a condition saturating relations of work, care, and belonging. Together, essay and sound hold failure not as breakdown, but as the very texture and tempo of dislocated academic lives now.* [listening practices; soundwork, feminist ethnography; homework; failure; multimodal anthropology]

NOTES

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1. I take "soundwork" in this piece as an expansion of Sundar's (2023, 9) concept and their use of the term "to name not just what I listen to . . ., but also how various cultural currents allow those sounds to resonate as markers of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and nation. Whereas 'soundscape' brings to the fore the relationship between sound and notions of place . . . [soundwork] enfolds a gesture to 'work' that I appreciate very much." Furthermore, I use *soundwork* in this piece not only to refer to the attuned work of listening to sounds otherwise unheard but also to the audio-production itself, the process of recording and editing those sounds, or what some may refer to as "soundscapes." While *soundscape*, in my reading, risks to situate sounds as preexisting in the

world "out there," *soundwork* requires us to acknowledge that sounds are made through listeners, and that listeners only exist within historical and social shifting terrains.

2. I am grateful to my writing partner Nat Nesvaderani for helping me crystallize an argument I wasn't seeing through.

3. While I am hinting here at an embodied notion of the body as home built through personal experience, I find resonance with the work of feminist and decolonial literature from Latin America that conceptualizes the body as a site of belonging, resistance, and territoriality. In particular, I found myself in conversations with Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) and their conceptualization of the border as an embodied experience, and their linking of identity, home, and belonging to the body's movement across land and geopolitical boundaries.

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