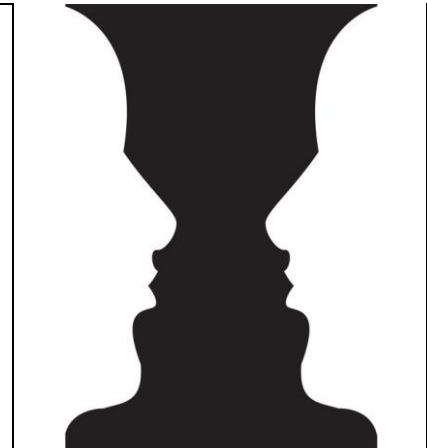

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The watermelon

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Abstract

This semi-fictional short story departs from the epistemological premise that knowledge on feelings should be explored in the complex accumulation of people's transformative lives and locates these experiences in a dynamic social context of globalising and multicultural imaginative worlds. By doing so, it indirectly explores the boundaries between ethnography and fiction and suggest in-depth insights in the cultural dynamics of people's feelings at a particular time and place. Through this intimate convergence of ethnography and fiction, where the narrator's imagination thoughtfully follows situated cultural logics, the semi-fictional story evokes Juan's feelings of guilt and loss in a righteous and inclusive sense.

Keywords

Ethnography, feelings, fiction

Foreword

Anthropologists have studied local meanings of death and mourning, where related feelings like pain, guilt, anger, or the absence of these, are situated differently (Robben 2005; Rosaldo 1989; Scheper-Hughes 1992). Anthropologist Andrew Beatty (2010, 2013) argues more in general, that besides context, emotion research needs narrative and he suggests that ethnography can learn from literary examples how to capture the full significance of feelings in action. In my view, Beatty's proposal to explore people's feelings unlocks possibilities to fuse different forms of narratives. Playing with different realities, what is the world and what is imaginative, can likewise teach us about feelings. Therefore the semi-fictional short story 'The watermelon' narrates the lived and imagined experience of Juan after a fatal car accident in Caracas where his best friend died. Shock, solidarity and social isolation together with different therapeutic remedies,

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(prescribed) drugs, alcohol and Santería healing practices shaped Juan's life for many years after the accident.

Through shared personal experiences with Juan and his family and friends, personal memories of the tragic event, in combination with latter fieldwork on the local meaning of mourning and experiences of guilt in Argentina, I relocate the Venezuelan experience in an imaginative migrant life in contemporary Buenos Aires where a particular local interpretation of psychoanalysis, memories and trauma shape people's affective lives on a daily basis. This intimate convergence of ethnography and fiction, where the author's imagination thoughtfully follows situated cultural logics, the story evokes, not explains, Juan's feelings of guilt. Conceptually, the short story materializes the epistemological premise that knowledge on feelings should be explored in the complex accumulation of people's transformative lives and locates these experiences in a dynamic social context of globalising and multicultural worlds. By doing so, the story implicitly explores the boundaries between ethnography and fiction and suggests in-depth insights in the cultural dynamics of people's feelings at a particular time and place.

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Startled by the loud noise, Juan rushed outside. The street was scarcely recognisable: the huge rubber tree with its thick green leaves was almost touching the roof of the borrowed Peugeot, but a few unluckily suspended electrical cables just held it. As if his yelling could catch the tree, the soaking-wet neighbour started to shout like a madman. Through the now dark green sea of leaves only the faint honking of cars impatiently waiting could be heard, though the rain continued to fall on Juan's head. It reminded Juan of an earlier time, although he wasn't sure why. He immediately felt guilty about the damn tree falling on his friend's car. Although the colossal trunk hovered just above its roof, a few branches had pierced one of the doors. The car belonged to his friend's mother who had died recently— how on earth was he going to explain this? According to Juan, the city council should have chopped that damn tree down ages ago. It was just a matter of time, waiting for the next storm to hit. Why didn't these council people ever do what they should? The police would soon be there, asking for the car's papers for the official report, and he didn't have anything for them – not even a driving license. Perhaps they'd think he'd stolen the car.

The neighbour was already complaining about the council to that hysterical news channel *Crónica*. As if sensing disaster, they always managed to arrive well before the police whenever there was a shooting or an accident. It was still raining when Juan tried to call Gabriel. No answer. “¡Coño!” Juan thought that Gabriel was probably fucking his new girlfriend, like every other evening for the past couple of weeks. On the third attempt, Gabriel finally answered the phone. He muttered that he would be over in a bit. Juan could do nothing but wait impatiently. Minutes seemed like hours, and he lit a cigarette. He had to give it up, but this shit really didn't help. He stared at all the green in the street. He dragged deeply on the smoke and tried to figure out what it reminded him of. It felt unpleasant and he quickly pushed the thought away.

Gabriel shuffled over with his new girlfriend at his side. Juan didn't like her: he felt she was using him, but he had to admit it was a long time since he had seen Gabriel looking so cheerful. Juan gave them both a kiss, noticing that they had dressed in a hurry. Gabriel's t-shirt was inside out, and they both smelled of sex, like they only just came. It made Juan strangely jealous. While he was trying to explain to Gabriel what had happened, the neighbour asked if they would like to tell their story in front of the camera - considering they were the most direct victims of this 'violence'. Juan looked at Gabriel, and they both started to laugh: "This will be your three minutes of fame! Yeah dude, get that face of yours on camera!" Finally your girlfriend's pretty face will be put to good use, he thought, but thankfully managed to keep it to himself. At first Gabriel refused to join in. The young producer kept pushing him to tell his story, but tense-faced, Gabriel only gave short answers, saying the tree fell without any sense of drama. After all, the car could probably still be saved. Juan was confused by the extremely visible cleavage of the young woman doing the interview: it was pretty extreme even for *Crónica*. She tried to ask Gabriel how he felt about this dreadful incident, since the car had belonged to his late mother, waving her arms dramatically when she said 'dreadful'. Juan could see this exaggerated gesturing annoyed Gabriel. He remained silent and stared sullenly into the camera. The neighbour pointed out that the police had arrived and the camera was swiftly turned to the swirling blue lights shining through the leaves.

Juan patted Gabriel's shoulder. "This will take a while. It will be hours before the council cleaners arrive. The police have already said this isn't their job. Would you like a beer?" He knew Gabriel thought his drinking strange: boozing cheap and disgusting Quilmes was something he simply did not understand. Gabriel shook his head. Those one-litre bottles were dangerous, but even though he had to get up early the next morning Juan started knocking them back. The green of the leaves still disoriented him.

The council squad consisted of five blokes who looked as if they had never handled an electric saw before. Their attacks on the branches were clumsy. At the last large branch, broader than Juan's body, one of them started to shout "¡pelutodo, pará!" Before the man working on it could register what his colleague was shouting, it was too late. With a deeply satisfied creak the trunk collapsed lethargically onto the car roof. Slowly Juan dropped his face into his hands. The dark red Peugeot was now completely wrecked. Gabriel and his girlfriend didn't seem to mind all that much. Locked in an intimate embrace they sat on the pavement and just watched the accident unfold. Juan could have strangled her. Why was he so angry? It's not like it was her fault these guys were so hopeless.

Three hours later the street was empty again. The car had been towed away, the cameras were long gone and once more the nightly traffic of Buenos Aires raced by. Gabriel and his girlfriend had left an hour ago. She was dog-tired, she said. Thousands of wood chips on the tarmac and the gaping hole where the tree used to be were all the evidence of the crash. Juan was exhausted. The next morning he had to go and see if he could submit a claim for damages with the council, and that thought made him even more exhausted.

Juan had been waiting, slumped in his chair, for an hour when Gabriel finally arrived with all the car's papers. He wore the same clothes as the day before and he flopped down on the row of sagging chairs of city district 13. Juan thought he really looked like shit. From the state of his hair he still hadn't showered. It made Juan again strangely jealous and he turned his head away. The bored secretary at the desk was examining her nails, letting the phone ring irritatingly long. She wasn't particularly ugly, but had these large horse-like teeth that showed even when she wasn't laughing or talking. Juan muttered to Gabriel that they needed Cortes, but he wasn't there yet. He tried to start a conversation about the car, but Gabriel dismissed it, saying, "These things happen. It's best to just become reconciled with all that rain as well as with the council - even though we're not really in the habit of doing that here!"

With an ironic laugh Gabriel said that they would work something out with that Cortes guy. According to Gabriel, things worked differently here than in Venezuela. Juan might have lived in Argentina for years, but he'd better leave bureaucracy to him. His sudden arrogance got on Juan's nerves. Gabriel talked on without taking any notice. Last night he dreamed about his mother. It was lifelike, he said. "I felt her breath when she embraced me. It was like I'd seen her just yesterday." Juan listened half-heartedly, only nodding now and then.

It was quite a boring dream, but it seemed to cheer Gabriel up completely. Juan still found it hard to analyse his dreams. He'd been trying for two years but it hadn't worked much. He only managed to remember half of them or thought them irrelevant or absurd. Both men sank into a long silence. A chubby man of about fifty with grey curly hair walked in and gave the secretary a kiss. "Coffee with medialunas?" The man nodded contentedly and walked slowly into his office. After three quarters of an hour Juan and Gabriel were allowed to enter. With a half-eaten *medialuna* in his mouth, Cortes listened to the story about the car and the tree. According to Gabriel, negligence on behalf of the city council was the cause. It was their job to keep the neighbourhood safe from this kind of natural violence. Juan could tell by his voice that Gabriel had done this kind of thing more often, and wisely kept his mouth shut. Gabriel's background as a lawyer made his story hard to dismiss, but Cortes didn't seem shaken. He jotted down some notes on a piece of paper and called his secretary. He firmly ordered her to draft a document for archive N° 2776, using these details, and gave her the greasy sheet of paper. Cortes looked at the men and using the same authoritative tone, suggested they file for damage reimbursements from the funds that were recently made available for floods in the city district. Gabriel immediately replied that he would file two damage claims - one for the flood and one for the damages caused by the fallen tree. Maybe he would get both. Both men laughed and shook hands while saying their goodbyes. Juan was amazed at how quickly it had been dealt with. When they were outside again, Gabriel warned him it might take a couple of months: but pay they would. "Otherwise we will simply sue them." Gabriel had to go to work in *Tribunales*; he gave Juan a quick hug at the metro entrance and slowly disappeared underground.

Juan needed to hurry too: he had an appointment with his psychoanalyst. At *Cabildo* he took the bright yellow no. 41 bus to *Almagro* and looked at the traffic around

him. That heavy feeling was back again. Even though the damage to the car was probably fixed and Gabriel wasn't angry with him, he couldn't seem to get rid of that horrible feeling. Everything around him turned green: last night's leaves seem to have been burned onto his eyeballs.

With her frosty upright posture Beatriz awaited him in her fake Corbusier chair, giving him a curt nod when he came in. The dark blue divan was in front of her. Not wanting to lie down, Juan demonstratively sat down facing her. Beatriz gave him another economic nod and looked at him questioningly. It had taken a while before Juan had got used to this silent invitation to talk. His first sessions had all consisted solely of long silences, so silent that it became uncomfortable and Juan just started talking about the traffic and the awful humidity in Buenos Aires. Everybody always complained about that. It was Gabriel who told him his therapist never asked him any questions either. He just started to talk about whatever came to mind. Free association, he called it.

Juan said he really did try to keep track of his dreams, but he hadn't had enough sleep that week. He preferred to talk about what happened the day before and that strange, heavy dark green feeling that wouldn't go away. He stumbled on with the flow of his thoughts. "I am fed up with being alone. The tree fell onto the Peugeot. Gabriel's mother is dead and last night he dreamed about her. My libido is non-existent - once again. We filed a damage claim for the Peugeot." Juan also told her about the whiny neighbour and about the excessive amount of beer that he drank, about Cortes and Gabriel and his girlfriend having sex. A couple of times he talked about *patilla*. He thought he dreamed about it the night before, but he couldn't be sure. He knew they call *patilla* something else here in Buenos Aires, but he couldn't think of the word.

Juan got used to his weekly catharsis; this time however, it didn't bring relief to talk about everything. Beatriz only asked him what it meant to him that Gabriel told him about his dead mother that morning. "Didn't it subconsciously remind you of the time your mother fell ill and wasn't there for you? Didn't that make you angry?" Juan nodded without thinking, but then shook his head violently. "No, no, this has nothing to do with my mother. It is different. The feeling reminds me of something that happened later - quite a while after my mother had recovered." Beatriz glanced up at the clock: the hands showed twenty-five to three. "Let's continue to talk about the tree accident on Friday afternoon. I think it's an important subject to elaborate and analyse. During the next couple of days try to write down everything that reminds you of tree and the events that occurred afterwards." Five minutes later Juan was outside again and all at once he was no longer hungry. Everything stuck to his body. It was one of those awful humid days again - and they say Caracas is hot!

Juan suddenly missed his old light blue Ford Sierra. He made his way home and called his boss in the metro, telling him he won't be at work until the next day and justifying his absence by blaming Cortes at the council office. At home he jumped into bed without getting undressed or closing the shutters. He wouldn't sleep anyway. Daniel's funeral surfaced in Juan's mind. The weather had been beautiful all day, except for the twenty seconds the coffin was lowered into the grave. It was almost as if the heavens wept. Juan hadn't thought about that day for a long time. Quickly he made a

scribbled note of it, as Beatriz had told him. The cemetery was in one of the smarter neighbourhoods of Caracas. On the rare occasions that he had visited Daniel's grave to smoke some pot there had been a pleasant breeze: but the visits hadn't done much for him, and it wasn't as if he was doing Daniel a favour either, so he had soon stopped. Juan knew his mother didn't approve, but she'd never said anything. During the first year she forced him to go to the service with her every month on the same day as that fatal one in February. "Damn it, it's been fourteen years since then!" Juan was startled by his own voice in the empty room. The traffic outside seemed to have disappeared completely. His memories filled the space and absorbed all sounds. It even smelled like home now - the same smell of ripe, almost rotten mangos and wet dogs. He missed it now and then, but there was no going back.

Juan couldn't remember much about the day of the accident. In the weeks that followed his brother would tell him things now and then - or his mother would: but his father and most of his friends kept silent. Juan tried to go back to the day of Daniel's funeral. He'd worn one of those hideous, pathetic liver coloured neck braces. The doctor told him to: if it had been up to him, he would have left it at home. Daniel's face in the half-open coffin was brutally battered. They had tried to make the best of it, but the light pink colour on his lips looked too artificial. Juan had stood there stupidly until his mother pulled him away. The rest of the day was a haze. Juan remembered that Gloria was wearing a huge pair of black sunglasses. Her whole body hung limply on the arm of her husband. It was the first time Juan saw that Daniel really had looked like his father, but then twenty kilos lighter and with a mop of curly hair. Gloria hadn't said much when Juan hugged her and stammered that he was sorry her son was no longer with them. She looked through her dark glasses and smiled faintly. "Now you must live for two, Juan." Those were her words! Juan still couldn't believe it, but for the first time in fourteen years he acknowledged his anger: "What an unbelievable bitch, to say a thing like that! How does one live for two?"

Juan vaguely recalled the day he left the hospital. It was the day after the accident. All of his friends, his brother and his parents were sitting in his bedroom. That is when they told him. They were only three words: Daniel is dead. Then a meagre explanation followed. As they were driving home from the faculty a truck had caught them. After turning three summersaults they had landed on the guardrail. Daniel's long and skinny body was thrown through the back window. He died in hospital a couple of hours later. That was it.

It had been his father's favourite car. Juan had driven the red '65 Mustang only occasionally. The seat belts of those old cars didn't have those triangles on them for extra resistance. His brother told Juan weeks later that the roof and the door on the driver's side were completely crushed. The back window had been knocked out and a rubber glove belonging to one of the paramedics was still stuck to the boot with Daniel's blood. He didn't say anything else. It drove Juan crazy that nobody spoke: for years there was this deafening silence. At first his friends dropped by once in a while. They would smoke some pot and listen to Pink Floyd at eleven o'clock in the morning. I wish you were here was one of Daniel's favourite songs. Juan couldn't bear to listen to it anymore.

The song had become a cliché, even though it still hurt so much to hear it. The pot would help for a little while, but the hours that followed were dreadful. For days he would stare at the walls of his dimly lit room, thinking of nothing at all. He became ill and his mother smothered him with placebos from Farmacity. For three weeks he lived on effervescent tablets, vitamin C powder with lemon, lozenges, and wet compresses, Gatorade with mandarin flavour, painkillers, and cough mixtures - nothing worked.

His long-gone memories frightened Juan. Juan lay in almost complete darkness but it was still stuffy in his room; sweat was pouring down his back and he had a hard time not becoming delusional. The ceiling fan only circulated the hot air. He remembered that he still hadn't managed to save up enough to get that second-hand air-conditioning installed. It had been standing on the damn balcony for weeks now, while every night he tossed and turned in the suffocating heat. He quickly scribbled down 'Preveral', the name of the cough syrup his mother bought him, on the paper next to him.

What did she know? Sometimes he had drunk Preveral with a friend to get high. It was a cough syrup, containing a small amount of codeine and could be bought at the pharmacy without prescription. If you drank half a bottle, you drifted away into delightful nothingness. One morning Juan had drunk half of it and purposely let the bottle smash on the ceramic floor so his mother wouldn't be surprised about it being half empty. Juan wasn't able to recall anything about the rest of the day. Not even that Teresa, the maid, would have mopped the floor to clear the remains of the Preveral and the glass shards of the dark brown bottle.

They were strange months, strange years even, Juan thought. Everything was a haze of events, people, thoughts and nebulous feelings and tensions. He was never really happy, not even when he went to the beach with his friends, or drank a couple of beers or smoked some pot at somebody's house. He wanted everybody and nobody around him. It was Bernardo who had told him about Mercedes, a Cuban who had been living in Catia for a couple of years now.

Before he forgot, Juan jotted 'Catia' and 'Mercedes' down on the paper next to him.

You could only visit Mercedes on Friday evenings and Sunday afternoons. Catia lies close to the hills in the western part of Caracas and Juan only went there now and then to buy some weed. Even though Bernardo knew the neighbourhood quite well, Juan was quite sure about not going there in the evening; instead they chose a Sunday afternoon in December.

It was raining and Juan wasn't in the mood. He stayed in bed until one o'clock. Through the intercom Bernardo's familiar voice managed to persuade him anyway. With a great effort he dragged himself upstairs, where Bernardo was waiting for him in his old Mercedes. Without saying a word he started the engine and drove downhill. Juan had no idea what to expect: he had brought money and smokes. By then the rain was lashing down, so much so that in some spots the water reached your knees and drainage covers were floating across the tarmac. While they silently fought through the water, the old car slowly filled with smoke. Juan was nervous and sensed Bernardo wanted to tell him something, but the silence continued.

At the first red traffic light Bernardo bent over Juan and pressed the door lock down. When they took the last turning of the cota mil and drove towards Catia, Juan was relieved it was raining. The streets were empty and the *malandros* had stayed inside - or so it seemed. They had to leave the car at a makeshift garage behind a derelict block of flats. The owner appeared to be still in need of sleeping off the previous night's excesses. While he muttered the ridiculously high hourly rate through the side window, the poor air of the *aguardiente* filled the car.

They walked through the empty flooded streets of Catia. Juan had never been here on foot before and he was too anxious to look around him properly. After passing through a maze of steep streets they arrived at Mercedes' house. It was painted bright yellow, only the upper façade showing some typical red bricks. Bernardo explained that Mercedes lived upstairs with her three children and two grandchildren. Downstairs she held consultations. The door was open and it was dark inside. A strange smell met them. A woman dressed completely in white, even her stockings and sensible shoes, sat behind a table. She had been expecting them, Mercedes said in an oddly warm voice. She looked at Bernardo and said it had been a while since he had been there, and started to laugh outright. Her full red lips framed a row of pearl white teeth. She was missing two of her top left teeth, but oddly enough Juan thought this was rather charming. Mercedes lit a fat cigar and gave Juan a penetrating look. She wasn't a typically beautiful woman, but her round face and her almond-shaped pitch black eyes drew him in.

In the dim light Juan tried to recall all the things Mercedes said and asked. It was more than twelve years ago and it needed a lot of effort to reconstruct his thoughts of that day. Apart from the smoke, it smelled like rum and menthol. Big bunches of eucalyptus lay on top of a cupboard filled with old photographs, paintings and paraphernalia; Juan had no clue as to their purpose. Around Mercedes' neck hung a necklace embellished with a staring blue and black eye as protection against the *mal de ojo*. Juan had also had one when he was little. The eye was somewhere in a drawer at home, next to all the other little trinkets of *la Virgen* that his mother used to buy for him on her pilgrimages to Italy and France.

Mercedes had started by asking questions. "What day did it happen?" "23 February." "What time did it happen?" "Around half past eleven in the morning." "Where did it happen?" "On the motorway near the Petare junction." "What was the weather like that day?" "The sun was shining." "What had you eaten and what did you drink?" "Two empanadas with meat and some pineapple juice." "Had you been smoking?" "We shared some pot." "Where were you going?" "To my place." Mercedes didn't write anything down, but now and then she would nod encouragingly, inhaling deeply and slowly blowing out the smoke in Juan's face. It made him cough a lot, but he lit up another cigarette immediately. Mercedes didn't ask who had been driving, which struck Juan as rather odd.

There was no sense of time and space in the dark house of Mercedes. Juan thought the conversation had lasted about an hour, but it might as well have been five minutes, or an entire afternoon. The room remained a vague space, the walls seeming to change, growing smaller or larger as the conversation developed. It hadn't scared Juan.

It seemed more as if the house transformed itself into the space he needed to tell his story. The last thing Juan could remember of that afternoon is that in her strange warm voice Mercedes gave him instructions.

“In exactly two months, a week and six days, on the same day as the accident, but precisely two years later, you must go to the coast. The beach of Catia la Mar will do just fine, but somewhere else is fine too. On the way there you must buy a *patilla*, which is at least seventy centimetres long and has a deep, dark green coloured skin. You must pay for it with the money I will give you in a minute. In addition you must leave another 1,000 *bolivares* on the counter. Then you must wait until dusk and walk towards the sea, with the *patilla* in your arms. When you get to the water’s edge, you must turn around and with your back facing the sea: you will throw the *patilla* over your head. Don’t look back and walk away until you can no longer hear the ocean. This is when you can go back home.”

“That’s all”, Mercedes said, laughing. “Here is the money and this is what you must pay me.” She showed Juan a piece of white paper with an amount written on it. Juan couldn’t decide whether it was too much or too little for what Mercedes had just done. He paid without thinking and they said goodbye. Outside the rain had stopped and people were coming out of their redbrick houses. Bernardo and Juan said nothing as they walked back to the car. The man at the garage lay on a broken plastic garden chair, sleeping in the watery sunshine. His t-shirt was rolled up to his chin and his fat round belly gleamed in the sun. He wouldn’t wake up. Bernardo placed the money on his belly and they drove slowly away to the east. At the top of the hill they said goodbye. He couldn’t have done it alone, Juan muttered. His parents thankfully weren’t home and he locked himself in his room. Without any tossing or turning, he fell asleep at once.

It was Tuesday, six o’clock in the morning, and Juan suddenly awoke. He’d had another couple of bad nights’ and he kept dozing off at the faculty. Today he wouldn’t be going to university. Nobody knew except for Bernardo. He’d told his mother that he would get up at the crack of dawn the next day to study for a calculus exam together with a new friend.

Not bothering with breakfast, Juan got into his light blue Ford Sierra and drove up and then down the hill towards the sea. He hesitated briefly but decided not to turn on any music and took his first deep drag on his cigarette. It caused a pleasant dizzy feeling in his empty stomach. He decided to wait until the end of the afternoon before eating anything and to drink only water. It seemed fitting for what he was to do today. It was still reasonably quiet on the roads. The first harried men in suits merged onto the motorway honking their horns. Juan was hoping to have left the city by seven o’clock otherwise he would get stuck for at least an hour and a half at Plaza Venezuela. The evening before, he had decided to go to Playa Los Caracas. He had been there a couple of times with some surfing friends. It was a little further away, but he hoped fewer people would be there. In the weekend it would be impossible to be alone on the beach. Besides a bunch of surfers, it would be filled with families, parasols, cool boxes with Polar and Johnny Walker, or some other cheaper whiskey, and lanky teenagers with tiny

bikinis and sagging shorts with loud merengue music blaring from their souped-up cars. Good thing it was a Tuesday.

In his room in Buenos Aires he couldn't remember where he'd bought the dark green *patilla*.

The old lady was friendly and she didn't think it was weird that Juan bought an entire watermelon measuring more than seventy centimetres. Nor did she look surprised when he checked its length with a tape-measure that he had retrieved from the junk drawer at the last minute. Juan paid her with the money Mercedes had given him and while the old lady turned around briefly to get the watermelon from the crate, he quickly placed a 1,000 *bolivares* note between a pile of receipts and pieces of paper on the counter.

The watermelon felt heavy in his arms and Juan noticed he was hungry. It was another forty kilometres or so to Los Caracas and so he bought a two-litre bottle of water and another packet of Marlboros. The beach was deserted: he took off all his clothes and left his things and the watermelon on the white sand. He ran towards the sea. There weren't many waves that day and the water was lukewarm and salty. It made his eyes sting. It felt strange to swim naked. He never did and it surprised him how the salty water felt gliding along the inside of his thighs. It was a nice feeling, but not the same as when he was aroused. It was calmer. He remembered it had been a while since he last had sex. A year after the accident he had ended up in bed with his ex one more time - awful sex that was. Juan only thought about how his ex had started to complain immediately that she hadn't come yet.

Juan had at least another six hours before dusk and he quickly pulled his pants on over his wet thighs. He decided to walk to the end of the bay and then back again. He hid the watermelon beneath a pile of sand and walked towards the east. The sun shone brightly on his shoulders and he had forgotten his sun block. He knew he would be bright red by the end of the day. At half past six it was dusk and Juan got into his car and drove back to the city. His back was burning against the imitation leather seat of his light blue Sierra. Dusk in Venezuela never lasts very long and Juan wept in the dark. Without inhibition, tears streamed down his burning cheeks.

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Some afterthoughts

Anthropologists can examine what people do with stories in other cultures, for instance by trying to understand what a particular story means from different viewpoints. Stories are never universal in meaning, not to mention what values people attach to stories. But that is not what 'The watermelon' is about. Scholars can also tell fictional stories in order to generate knowledge about a particular matter. 'The watermelon' tells a story that fuses 'truths' from fieldnotes and 'truths' from long-gone memories, but many elements from the story emerged from imagination, but not an imagination without restrictions. The main challenge, while writing about Juan's guilt, was to guide imagination by

previously acquired cultural logics regarding people's feelings in Venezuela and in Argentina.

Namely while doing fieldwork in Argentina, I noticed that people I met were quite equipped to discuss their feelings, feelings they considered troublesome or particularly meaningful. I remembered that in Venezuela people I knew did not talk that easily about their feelings. This cultural difference intrigued me, and a story developed about an imagined character called Juan and his guilt about two 'real' car accidents in both countries. The first tragic accident, when Juan's best friend died, happened long ago. The second accident happens in the narrative's present, when Juan borrowed a car from a new friend. This time only the car is severely crushed. The parallels between the accidents are perhaps subtle: the cars' red color, the dark green of the leaves and the watermelon, the smell of rain, and the borrowed state of both cars. Juan's feelings are also analogous, or at least the recent accident in Buenos Aires triggers previous uncomfortable feelings of guilt. Juan's current social relationships, his new friend Gabriel and his psychoanalyst Beatriz, have transformed the values Juan attaches to his feeling and influences how he lives with his guilt. After his now weekly therapy, in his suffocating bedroom Juan remembers again the accident in Caracas, his best friend's funeral and everything he did to get rid of his guilt. Juan's memories become frighteningly clear and at some point he fears that he is becoming delusional. While the story goes, present and past merge confusingly into one, indirectly questioning reality as such.

The story's overall configuration of real-life events with fiction, one might say, endangers academic integrity and a scholar's reliability. Such critiques are understandable. As a writing experiment, however, I consider that integrating fiction helps communicate matters that otherwise often remain unsaid in academic work. Academic texts, for instance, are not really suitable to address explicit sexual references. But Juan's associative erotic thoughts implicitly address overt talk about sex and desire that is quite common in Buenos Aires and communicates, literally from the gut, how Juan's guilt influences his current relationships. Also the abundant swearwords should probably disappear in academic writing, but both in Venezuela and Argentina, such language is quite common and much less offensive among adolescents and young adults in daily life Caracas and Buenos Aires. Including sexual references and swearwords provided additional tools to evoke Juan's complicated feelings in words.

More in general, writing in scientific language about people's feelings turned out to be quite a challenge, as academic texts are often barely fitted to generate understanding about feelings in practice. On the other hand, when you read fiction, instead of description and analysis the purpose is to make you feel. In other words, the reader empathizes with the main character and in this way learns about other people's feelings. I believe that we can also generate knowledge about feelings through such arousal. For that reason, I suggest that the integration of fiction in ethnography, while confining your imagination to previously learned cultural logics, enables anthropologists to capture feelings in action and write about them in alternative ways.

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