Peeking Behind the Curtains
Exploring Death and the Body through Patchwork Ethnography

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Abstract: Patchwork ethnography is a viable methodological and theoretical approach. Fieldwork can be accessible, achievable and accommodating of both personal and professional circumstances and responsibilities of the researcher, and external factors such as living within a COVID-19 world. In this article, we explain patchwork ethnography and showcase how the methodology was implemented during the first author’s PhD fieldwork conducted in 2020–2021 relating to peeking behind the physical and metaphorical curtains of the death industry to understand the handling, management and conceptualisation of the dead human body in Adelaide, South Australia. We demonstrate how field sites were constructed and discuss the methodological tools utilised to produce an ethnographic experience. We also question the ongoing viability of notions of ‘traditional’ fieldwork practices.

Keywords: anthropology, death studies, ethnographic methods, ethnography at home, patchwork ethnography

Voices at the Curtain

This article is part of a supervised, cross-disciplinary ethnographic study exploring death and the body through the lenses of anthropology and psychology. This is a part of the first author’s PhD by publication; a somewhat uncommon format for the anthropology discipline. Experiences and critical reflections relating to the ethnographic fieldwork focus on the first author, who will be referred to as ‘I’. However, when all three authors have contributed to discussions pertaining to theoretical concepts, this will be articulated as ‘we’. Through this approach, we aim to further show the richness of utilising a patchwork approach as through our own individual ‘patches’ we have brought together our voices, the production of this article and the ethnography itself.

During the first year of my PhD candidature in 2019, I attended seminars and heard about the extensive fieldwork some of my peers had undertaken both overseas and within Australia. Captivated by their anecdotes, I felt deep respect for each of them. They were not just PhD candidates, they were anthropologists going out into the field, conducting ethnographic research and, as the famous adage goes, being there (Geertz 1988; Hannerz 2003; Watson 1999). I also remember feeling both excitement and trepidation at the prospect of my own future ethnographic fieldwork. With the support of my supervisors, we began mapping out what I would strive to achieve in 2020. Set in my hometown of Adelaide, South Australia, we envisioned that I would venture behind the physical and metaphorical curtains of the death industry in order to gain an understand-
ing of how the dead human body is handled, managed and conceptualised.

My methodological goal was about ‘being there … and there … and there!’ by undertaking multi-sited fieldwork within the death industry, with hopes of securing the main field site within a local funeral home (Hannerz 2003: 202). I explored the possibility of completing one or two training modules from the Certificate IV in Embalming as a pre-field work measure pertaining to work health and safety procedures in the mortuary. There were also plans of attending public tours of cemeteries, funeral information evenings, and recruiting and interviewing participants known under the umbrella terms of ‘death/death-care workers’, which can be used to describe those who are responsible for handling and managing the dead body across various contexts (Gould and Holleran 2021). My supervisors and I felt hopeful that this proposed plan would be successful, as other scholars within anthropology (Bradbury 1999; Hertz 1960; Hockey 1990; Horsley 2008; Schäfer 2005) and other disciplines (Abello et al. 2018; Cahill 1999) had been able to gain access behind the curtains of various death-related sites overseas, in Australia and across different time periods to observe and at times partake in death rituals, mortuary and body handling practices. This hope only blossomed as there was the prospect of being hosted by a funeral home in Adelaide that had invited me to ‘become’ an unofficial funeral director by shadowing the workers and observing what occurred within the mortuary.

Yet, just as the curtains appeared to be opening, difficulties arose. The opportunity with the funeral home was later revoked, with them citing privacy reasons as they believed the presence of a researcher might cause worry and concern to some families. Shifting the focal point of the main field site, I decided to apply to do research in a local medical school to spend time in their labs to observe how the cadaveric body was handled and managed. This application for research was also rejected due to reasons such as being too intrusive, disruptive and too big a burden on the workers to host a researcher. During this time, the emergence of COVID-19 caused South Australia to go into periods of enforced lockdowns. As a result, the training modules and public tours I was intending to attend were cancelled and the death industry was preparing for a potential surge in deaths and managing the ongoing impacts (Gould and Holleran 2021). Underlying all this, I also struggled with personal issues that made it increasingly difficult to leave home. All of these challenges caused me to become disheartened. The curtains I strived to look behind were now tightly pulled closed and the chances of conducting the fieldwork I had imagined appeared to be slim to impossible. Ironically, I did not anticipate that I would be grieving the death of the ethnographic research I had first envisioned.

My supervisors recommended shifting towards an interview-based ethnography with the intention of forming solid connections that could lead to securing a field site later, and I set out to achieve this. While I was progressing slowly, I initially felt hesitancy in classifying my interview-dominant research as ‘ethnographic’, as I did not want my research to be seen as less-than or inadequate compared to extensive face-to-face fieldwork and participant observation (Hockey 2002; Hockey and Forsey 2012). In turn, I became haunted by Bronisław Malinowski’s ghost, with thoughts swirling around my head of anthropologist archetypes and what fieldwork should involve and entail (Forsey 2010a: 564; 2010b). This is a dilemma that many anthropologists, scholars and PhD candidates have faced. Arguably, ‘traditional fieldwork’ has now become somewhat mythic as scholars break away from and reject its colonial origins of studying ‘The Other’, and challenge what even is ‘traditional’ or ‘conventional’ fieldwork (Blum 2020; Eggeling 2022; Faubion et al. 2009; Góralska 2020).

How could I make ethnographic research both at home and in my home work for me, my circumstances and the constraints I was experiencing? While I could not ‘throw back the curtains’ of the death industry and step inside like I had originally intended, the methodological approach of patchwork ethnography allowed me to take a peek across 17 months between February 2020 and July 2021.

This article critically reflects on experiences, lessons learnt and the steps taken in constructing this patchwork ethnography. First, we open with a definition and summation of patchwork ethnography and methodologies. Second, the article takes the reader through the ethnographic processes. Taking apart each patch, the parameters of the fieldwork are established by detailing how I constructed and interacted with field sites located within my home, and in online and offline spaces. As the dominant feature in my research, I draw particular attention to the process and experience of conducting ethnographic interviews. We highlight the necessity of strong supervisory support in reflecting on what constitutes patchwork data, and we share an important lesson learnt from supervisors here relating to instances where apparently not getting data or access is still data finding. From these sections, potential benefits and factors to consider when utilising
patchwork ethnography can be garnered. Lastly, the overarching aim woven throughout this article is to bolster the notion that patchwork ethnography is a viable addition to the toolbox of ethnographic methods that allows all researchers, regardless of their circumstances and context, an opportunity to conduct research that may not have otherwise been possible through other means.

**A Patchwork of Ethnographies and Methodologies**

The notion of ‘patchwork’ has been linked to various concepts within anthropology, such as the ‘patchwork ethnographic method’ (Tsing 2005) and ‘patchwork ethnography’ (Günel et al. 2020). Anna Tsing developed a patchwork ethnographic method by forming ‘discrete patches’ of knowledge through a combination of ethnographic fieldwork and journalistic and archival means to conduct her ethnography of global connection (2005: x). In conjunction with previously conducted ‘deep immersion fieldwork’, she had intentions to undertake additional long-term fieldwork, however due to personal and professional factors, this was not possible so she opted for shorter, segmented trips instead (2005: 273). This notion of Tsing having to modify her methodological approach due to these factors is echoed in the manifesto on patchwork ethnography proposed in 2020 (Günel et al. 2020).

Within the manifesto, it is acknowledged that many ethnographers are questioning and challenging the ‘fieldwork truisms’ such as the traditional and masculinist assumptions and attitudes held relating to the practice of fieldwork and the researcher, and the separation and connections between the field and home (Günel et al. 2020: para 1). In this vein, patchwork ethnography also builds on feminist and decolonial concepts pertaining to ethnography (Abu-Lughod 1990; Stacey 1988) and strives towards inclusivity (Günel et al. 2020). Additionally, the possibilities of when, if and *should* researchers return to physical, long-term fieldwork have also been questioned, both within the manifesto and elsewhere (Chambers 2020; Fine and Abramson 2020; Günel et al. 2020; Johnson 2022; Podjed 2021; Scerri et al. 2020). Despite COVID-19 amplifying the need to approach fieldwork differently, it has been claimed that patchwork ethnography, conducting ‘research at a distance’ and moving away from what is classified as ‘traditional’ has been used and questioned by researchers long before the pandemic began (Blum 2020: para. 2; Cardonza et al. 2021; Günel et al. 2020; Patchwork Ethnography 2021).

The manifesto also highlights that while researchers have utilised other methodological innovations to navigate through the various challenges they face within the field, such as autoethnography (Adams et al. 2015; Ellis et al. 2011), home-bound pandemic ethnography (Horton 2021), hybrid ethnography (Przybyski 2021; Seim 2021), online ethnographies (Góralska 2020; Hine 2000; Pink et al. 2016; Sade-Beck 2004), multi-sited fieldwork (Hannerz 2003; Marcus 1995), networked ethnography (Berthod et al. 2017; Collins and Durington 2014) and rhizomatic ethnography (Bailey 2022; Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Travlou 2013), these methods may not necessarily take into account the researcher themselves and how personal and professional factors may affect their ability to conduct fieldwork. In some instances they continue to be ‘black boxed’ as they go against ‘traditional’ methods (Günel et al. 2020: para. 3). Therefore, Gökçe Günel, Saiba Varma and Chika Watanabe have proposed another approach to add to the methodological and theoretical toolbox through patchwork ethnography:

Recombinations of ‘home’ and ‘field’ have now become necessities … ethnographic processes and protocols designed around short-term field visits, using fragmentary yet rigorous data, and other innovations that resist the fixity, holism, and certainty demanded in the publication process. Patchwork ethnography refers not to one-time, short, instrumental trips and relationships à la consultants, but rather, to research efforts that maintain the long-term commitments, language proficiency, contextual knowledge, and slow thinking that characterises so-called traditional fieldwork. (Günel et al. 2020: para. 4)

Key concepts can be extracted from these hallmark features of patchwork ethnography. The unavoidable coalescence of home and field brought on primarily by the pandemic and lockdowns has generated challenges and breakthroughs in ethnographic research. From a challenge perspective, being bound to both one’s hometown and physical home can greatly reduce the scope of accessible research. As a result, gaps and fragments in knowledge may arise from limited or no physical access to field sites, which must be acknowledged and reflected on to navigate this predicament (Günel et al. 2020: para. 6). Additionally, there have been debates over the distinctions of field and home, and the validity and efficacy of conducting ethnographic research at/from within home (Greenhouse 1985; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Jackson 1987; Martinez et al. 2020;
Peirano 1998). Factors such as insider/outsider positionality and the potential advantages and disadvantages that come from where the researcher is situated within their field site have also been discussed (Holmes 2020). Looking from a breakthrough perspective, an increase in home-based ethnographies is likely, which will further showcase how researchers have utilised, further built on or discovered that they can use innovative methodologies like patchwork ethnography as a foundation for their fieldwork. Examples include Liana Chua’s (2021) extension of patchwork ethnography in which she proposes the concept of the ‘patchwork ethnographer’ and various works that utilised patchwork ethnographies and methods across the disciplines (Amescua-Chávez 2016; Henderson 2021; Södergren 2022). We also acknowledge concepts that, while not directly related, echo sentiments found within patchwork ethnography. These include resilient research (Rahman et al. 2021) and agile research (Watson and Lupton 2022), which demonstrate how researchers are successfully adapting and swiftly converting their research methods, particularly during COVID-19, in order to meet deadlines and uphold research consistency.

Through patchwork ethnography, characteristics found within traditional fieldwork methods can be somewhat emulated and upheld in a flexible manner. This is achieved through encouraging the researcher to either create ‘new modes of being there’ or form methodological combinations to devise and conduct research, collecting and analysing data that may not have been accessible through other methods or, in some instances, impossible to physically attend (Günel et al. 2020: para. 6). In turn, it also unlocks new ways to think about the temporalisation of fieldwork, data analysis and reflection, and offers a different approach to the write-up of research that resists fixity and the linear approach typically applied to the publication process (Cardonza et al. 2021: para. 12; Günel et al. 2020: para. 6). That being said, not everything can be classified as patchwork ethnography. These factors include singular, brief and instrumental trips to the field, and forming consultant-type working relationships (Günel et al. 2020: para. 4). While these methodological approaches are more commonly utilised in rapid ethnographies/rapid ethnographic assessments (Sangaramoorthy and Kroeger 2020; Vindrola-Padros 2021) and ethnographies by proxy (Plowman 2017), and can be considered viable options, they fall outside the defined parameters of patchwork ethnography.

Patchwork ethnography offers an additional approach that provides the opportunity to those who may not be able to, or do not want to, conduct traditional fieldwork. Its ‘effective, but kinder and gentler’ design vastly widens the scope on what and how research can be undertaken, thus further strengthening inclusivity and accessibility for the researcher and research alike (Günel et al. 2020: para. 4). Using my own fieldwork as reference, I will share how I upheld a multi-layered, complex and long-term commitment to my research.

Patchwork Ethnography in Action

Due to a combination of difficulties accessing the physical field sites, COVID-19 and personal challenges, I needed to reconceptualise and construct my field sites. With my home (my hometown and physical home) as the primary base and ‘field site’, I built on this with online and offline locations and the use of multi-modal resources. I recruited participants and gained a large portion of my knowledge through facilitating interviews both in-person, over the phone, via email, through the video-conferencing software Zoom and conducting online research between February 2020 and July 2021.

Online

With the use of my computer and mobile phone, I focused on three main field sites that I would regularly ‘visit’: a website that houses local livestreamed funerals for public access, a subcommunity within the video-based app TikTok and an assortment of local funeral home websites. Due to the global pandemic, there was an increased availability of publicly available livestreamed funerals and memorials, which could either be viewed live or watched after the event via links from funeral home websites or streaming business services. Traditionally, this has not been accessible for those outside of the family and friends of the deceased who physically attend. As a result, the phenomenon and impacts of livestream funerals have been increasingly a focal topic for publication (Gould and Holleran 2021; MacNeil et al. 2021; Pitsilides and Wallace 2021). With this option, I decided to undertake observation within a local livestreaming website to see how funeral directors, priests and celebrants would acknowledge the body through their actions and words. As I viewed more footage and spent increasing time looking at the website’s interface, I began correlating it to and labelling it the ‘Netflix for funerals’ as opposed to being a remote
‘field site’. Additionally, I saw the viewer counts for each livestream and I wondered why some funerals had thousands of views whereas others had single figures, which suggested ‘popularity ratings’ as evidenced by viewer counts. With careful reflection with my supervisors, we discussed the boundaries of research and voyeurism, the ethical dilemma of privacy (Gould and Holleran 2021), the difficulty of discovering from whom to gain informed consent, ownership of the footage and the potential consequences of public livestream funerals becoming a form of entertainment and morbid curiosity for both scholars and members of the public alike. Therefore, we decided to step back from using these data for my research purposes.

I explored the video-based social media app TikTok, paying particular attention to the subcommunity known as ‘DeathTok’, which also became an online field site. This subcommunity is typically associated with death-related videos ranging anywhere from crime scene cleaning, tombstone restoration and various occupations within the death industry. Through these videos, I found content creators who are employed in the death industry, such as cemetery staff, death doula, embalmers, funeral directors and mortuary technicians. While upholding confidentiality for the deceased, these creators typically upload death education content, such as anecdotes from their occupation, answering questions from viewers pertaining to body processes and entertaining videos such as ‘mortuary makeup tutorials’, and ‘rating’ things, such as which clothes are the ‘best’ to dress the deceased in practicality-wise according to the funeral director. The majority were based in the United States, which was outside of my research scope. However, at the time of research, one funeral director located in Australia was found.

I also ‘visited’ South Australian funeral homes via their business websites, viewing what was presented to the public in front of the curtain. In total, I viewed an assortment of 26 corporation and family-owned local funeral home websites sourced through the Google search engine and the White Pages business directory website. During this research, I spent time categorising how they presented themselves, the (in)visibility of the deceased body, and the images and language they chose to discuss death and the deceased. One may argue that the rhetoric displayed online is carefully manufactured to foster a positive image and increase marketability, and might not truly reflect the reality of values and practices that occur away from public view (Armour and Williams 1981; Coetzee et al. 2014). Nevertheless, the websites provided an additional vantage point that may indicate what is considered ‘acceptable’ for the public to be aware of in relation to death and the body within Adelaide. For instance, comparing this with interviewed participants affiliated with the funeral industry, it is apparent that factors such as in-depth explanations of embalming and reconstruction procedures, and issues that may arise with the handling of the body in varying states, are not available to the public via business websites as it may be considered disturbing, distressing or insensitive. In turn, this type of information is also rarely given to the public unless it is explicitly asked about during a funeral consultation and is relevant to the circumstances, and ultimately is based on the discretion of the funeral director.

Online materials and communities also became useful tools in understanding how death and the body were represented and discussed in several public forums and contexts. Death-related topics depicted in mainstream media such as the local and international coverage of the exhumation of the Somerton Man in 2021 and Australian-based documentaries about death and the body like Four Corners: After Death (2019) and Untold Australia: The Secret Life of Death (2019) were also viewed. To gain an understanding of South Australian laws relating to the handling and management of the dead body, I acquainted myself with relevant legislation, such as The Burial and Cremation Act 2013, Coroners Act 2003 and Transplantation and Anatomy Act 1983. In turn, terminology and choice of language used towards death and the body within public coronial inquest records were accessed. Lastly, my supervisors and I became members of the Australian Death Studies Society (2022) to learn about how death is currently being discussed and researched from an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary scholarly standpoint in Australia.

Offline

This aspect of research formed a small part of the overall fieldwork. During the pre-research phase, my principal supervisor and I were invited to visit a local funeral home where we were shown their admin building, coffin showroom and back-of-house offices. After this time, I also had a tour of a mortuary in a local hospital, where I interviewed a participant. I was accompanied throughout the tour, being carefully navigated through the long corridors, the autopsy theatre, the loading and body transfer area, and the cool rooms, to ensure I did not see anything I wasn’t cleared to observe – namely, death and the
deceased body. While there, a death occurred and the orderlies needed to transfer the patient into the cool room, the viewing/ID room was set up twice and the autopsy theatre was prepared for the collection of organs for donation. Aside from being told this information, the only evidence that the mortuary housed the deceased from the hospital upstairs was the anonymous body bags residing within the cool room and a long hair stuck in the sink of the autopsy table. In addition, I met with another participant in-person to conduct their interview at a café, prior to the first lockdown in Adelaide. Aside from the mortuary tour and interview, all other interviews were facilitated through Zoom, over the phone or via email.

**Interviews**

It is important to briefly mention here the significance of the interview as part of anthropological research and in turn, its viability of being the basis of an ethnography (Forsey 2010b; Hockey 2002; Skinner 2012; Spradley 2016). Arguably, within a Western cultural context, interview-based studies can be considered culturally appropriate and, in some instances, may be the most effective way to undertake an ethnography (Hockey and Forsey 2012: 74). Further, conducting telephone and online interviews can also be considered an acceptable and reasonable methodological alternative to document lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic (Rahman et al. 2021; Serekioane et al. 2021; Watson et al. 2021). This factor rang true in my circumstances. As indicated by initial research into field sites and a few responses from potential participants, gaining physical access to their places of work was not going to be possible and, according to some, was not appropriate for someone not involved in the death industry to observe their workplace. Therefore, approaching the field at its fringes and peeking in through the patchwork curtain via interviews was deemed more culturally appropriate and feasible within the current Adelaidean context surrounding access to death and the body, and thus the best way I could learn about the field.

In total, I approached 88 people who work within the death industry via publicly available email addresses, to see if they would be interested in participating in my research. Response rates were low, with many emails being ignored. However, I established contact with and conducted 21 interviews with both current and retired death/death care workers. Occupational roles included: academics, cemetery workers, crematorium operators, death doulas, embalmers, funeral directors, law enforcement, medical staff, memorial consultants, mortuary technicians, pathologists and photographers. The choice of undertaking interviews via phone, Zoom or email was offered to all participants. Based on their choices, two face-to-face (prior to enforced lockdowns), ten phone, seven Zoom and two email interviews were undertaken. I utilised semi-structured interviews, which were broken into two sections. While participants were aware of these sections, the questions I was hoping to address were typically not provided prior to interview unless requested. The first section comprised of body-based questions, which were purposefully abstract in nature with no definitive answers, to understand how people conceptualise the human body and, in turn, death. This also posed the opportunity for participants’ varying philosophical, religious and secular worldviews to be discussed, which may not be directly affiliated with their line of work and where they may have to answer questions according to various occupational protocols. However, these forms of responses were prompted within the second section of the interview structure, which focused on occupation-specific questions. With these, I asked typical, specific, guided and task-related ‘grand tour questions’ so participants could share with me their experiences, which provided me with rich descriptions of the spaces and various events that occurred within their areas of employment (Spradley 2016: 87).

At first, I thought that interviewing from afar would be detrimental, based on the reasoning that death can be considered a highly sensitive and emotive topic. Even with the participants’ vast experience working with death and the body, particular aspects may be considered off-limits for the participant to fully share with those either outside of the industry or who they do not know well and/or trust, and in turn, for the researcher to ask in the first place. Additionally, some topics might be difficult for them to discuss, and talking about death in an interview format may unexpectedly distress them. Based on this, conversations require a strong foundation of rapport, trust, careful wording and attending skills in order to encourage deeper discussions and avoid causing offence if something is misconstrued. As these factors are usually strengthened or mitigated through physical presence and being able to interpret and express oneself through visual cues like body language (Cachia and Millward 2011), this became a concern as many of my interviews were conducted over the phone. Therefore, I had to rely on engaged and deep listening skills, tone of voice, the ability to decipher verbal cues and the appropriate use of
probing questions to demonstrate my engagement, curiosity and understanding, and to ensure the participants were not becoming emotionally distressed during their interview (Cachia and Millward 2011; Forsey 2010b; Hoskins and White 2012; Johnson et al. 2019; Sipes et al. 2022). This experience lends itself to the concept of ‘leaning in’ and upholding positionality as a researcher (Hoskins and White 2012). Essentially, it was vital to know when and where it was appropriate to lean in and engage, while being cautious to avoid ‘tumbling into the exploration … getting totally lost’ (Hoskins and White 2012: 184). This is particularly relevant in topics such as death that may not only distress the participant but the researcher as well if they find themselves connecting participants’ recounts to their own experiences of death, mortality and loss. Overall, while there were a few initial misunderstandings and technical issues, I found that the format of phone calls, virtual meetings and email interviews proved to be quite successful with the sensitive topic of death. In some instances, it may have encouraged bravery and emotional vulnerability within participants’ responses and the anecdotes they chose to share with me, which might not have occurred if we could see each other or be in physical proximity (Azad et al. 2021; Sipes et al. 2022).

An additional consideration of conducting both fieldwork and interviews at home that is normally overlooked is understanding the native language (Spradley 2016). While I am fluent in English and all interviews were facilitated in this language, I was not fully aware of the ‘semantic differences’ that existed between the participants and their various roles working with the dead, and the influence this would have on the ethnography (Spradley 2016: 18). Therefore, it was vital to learn the languages of the death workers to properly understand and avoid offending them with assumptions or mistranslated assumptions. To illustrate this point, a participant used the phrase ‘facing the final lid’ when describing a funerary practice. Initially hearing the term, I assumed they meant it in a literal sense of facing the final funeral of the day, however with clarification I have learnt that, in this context, ‘final lid’ is the final checks done with the deceased before the lid of the coffin or casket is locked. Another example here is my assumption that ‘cremains’ was the appropriate abbreviated form of ‘cremated remains’. Therefore, it was used when asking a participant if they thought whether ‘cremains were still a person’. Although I couldn’t see my participant as this was a phone call, I could hear that they were taken aback with the term and they corrected me accordingly, firmly stating that it was ‘cremated remains’. While I clarified this meaning with them, it is likely that within my interview data there are terms which are now lost in translation because either myself or the participant assumed different things or colloquial terms were not unpacked.

What can be distilled from the discussion of this research project is that it possesses core characteristics of patchwork ethnography. Being immersed within the death industry in South Australia for 17 months highlights the long-term commitments made to the topic area, the participants, and online and offline field-site interactions. Conducting lengthy research with a deep level of intensity allows for reflection and reflexivity in research (Mortari 2015), and slow scholarship (Mountz et al. 2015). As a result, I was able to exclusively focus on death and the body in South Australia, allowing research efforts and skills to grow over time. Lastly, each constructed field site and subsequent patches formed assisted in acquiring and building on death language proficiency and contextual knowledge found within the various death industry sectors.

Making a Virtue of ‘Gaps’ in Data

While patchwork ethnography was the methodological thread, supervisory support was paramount in the construction of my patchwork ethnography. This was particularly evident in the constant reassurance I received reminding me that the research I was conducting, the tools I used and the information I was both receiving and not receiving were all still forms of ethnographic data. As previously mentioned, patchwork ethnography greatly widens and strives to legitimise what can be researched, the varying forms or tools chosen and modes of analysis through which this can be undertaken (Cardonza et al. 2021; Günel et al. 2020). While this is a rather freeing concept, as an early researcher I found myself at times overwhelmed by the possibilities and, in conjunction with my preconceived traditionalist notions of anthropology, growingly concerned if I was even conducting an ethnography at all. At this time, I distinctly remember the inner crisis I felt at the realisation that my original research methods were not going to work. These feelings were amplified when my attempts at access were being mostly met with resistance or completely ignored, and I would tend to encounter gaps and blockages in gathering my data, which I interpreted as halts in research progression. However, with careful scaffolding from my supervi-
sors I learnt a valuable lesson. Despite these gaps of knowledge and lack of access in my research, this was viable, workable data that could be explored. Further, as I’ve found, this notion can be complementary with patchwork ethnography’s methodology, which encourages researchers to work with rather than against the blockages that may arise (Günel et al. 2020). With these factors in mind, I greatly shifted my perspective, attitudes and relationship towards my research. Where defensiveness and worry about perceived lack of data once resided, now stands pride, confidence and steady movement towards an end goal. While not receiving information and access may have stopped the construction of perfectly shaped sequential patches, this was still data. It encouraged me to find creative ways to change direction and work with these situations, thus creating an ethnography comprised of uniquely shaped patches.

Although I was able to peek behind the curtain and learn rich contextual knowledge about death and the body, I was also told aspects both forbidden and so intimate to the reality of death and the processes that occur that a handful of participants retracted their statements post interview, deeming the information to be too graphic or gloomy, or they were fearful that they could still be identifiable to their employers and other members of the death industry through deductive disclosure/internal confidentiality (Kaiser 2009; Tolich 2004). As a result, this left me with fragments of knowledge that I ‘received’ but simultaneously ‘did not receive’, as it cannot be shared both out of ethical obligation and respect to the participants and the deceased from which the stories arose. However, this experience in conjunction with not being able to gain physical access to long-term field sites might indicate that there are facets with regard to death purposefully being omitted from the public narrative within Adelaide. Reasons could be based on historically deep-seated death anxiety (Menzies et al. 2018; Tomer and Eliason 1996), taboo (Gorer 1955; Walter 1991), denial (Becker 1973), institutional, medical, professional and secularisation (Clark 2002; Walter 1995), terror and fear (Collett and Lester 1969; Moore and Williamson 2003), threat (Krieger et al. 1974) and sequestration within western cultural contexts (Mellor and Shilling 1993). Additionally, there may also be unwritten rules among Adelaide-based death-related businesses that are currently impinging on workers openly sharing this information. This notion is also extended to research conducted via TikTok, where there is a lack of Australian and South Australian based death workers on the platform. While this may be perceived as a gap, it can also be a finding attributed to factors such as contrasting views of global and local death culture and awareness; attempts to protect the deceased, their families and the general public; attempts to reduce fear spreading among the public; or to mitigate negative preconceptions that may exist within society towards the death industry and specific businesses. It is important to mention that efforts have been made in Adelaide to try to provide glimpses behind the curtain, such as public tours of cemeteries and information evenings at various death-related businesses, and a small handful of participants have further highlighted the importance of reversing taboos and providing effective death education to the public. What can be gleaned from these examples is that it is possible to make a virtue of ‘gaps’ and to see them as additional avenues of analysis and exploration as opposed to viewing them as deficits or progress blocks.

Curtain Call: Points to Consider and Benefits of Patchwork Ethnography

Through the research project of the first author, we found that discipline and structure is vital for the successful use of patchwork ethnography. Too little or too much time devoted to research can hinder the process and potentially cause burnout or disengagement of the researcher. Further, this notion can become complex when home and field sites cross over and occur in the same spaces. As an example, in this specific research project, the mobile phone and computer, which were the main research tools, doubled as tools for relaxation and recreation and at times these boundaries would inadvertently blur. The first author would catch herself spending long hours surrounded by death, or stepping into a field site when it was supposed to be ‘rest’ time because the field was only a phone, computer or newspaper away. Despite having a dedicated research account, the topic of death would also creep onto personal social media pages because being interested in the topic of death outside of research, she would still find and ‘like’ death-related content. This was particularly prevalent through the video social media platform TikTok, where the algorithm noted that she had liked death-related content prior to research commencing and therefore this content would sporadically show up on the For You Page, pulling her out of ‘rest’ time and back into the ‘field’ when mindlessly scrolling in the evenings. Therefore, it becomes imperative to be acutely aware of blocking ‘rest’ and ‘field’ time...
slots and staying within these parameters, and when crossover occurs, consciously stepping away.

Lack of access, world changes due to COVID-19 and personal issues made the prospect of conducting ethnographic fieldwork in-person and long-term virtually impossible, as is increasingly becoming the experience of many anthropologists (Blum 2020; Fine and Abramson 2020; Góralska 2020; Johnson 2022; Podjed 2021; Serekoane et al. 2021; Watson et al. 2021; Watson and Lupton 2022). Through patchwork ethnography, we were able to take a peek behind the patchwork curtain, exploring death and the body in Adelaide. This was achieved through utilising a unique combination of research tools and constructing field sites to form patches of knowledge and experiences that worked with the circumstances, any blockages and lack of access that arose. In conjunction, strong supervisory guidance provided reassurance that the patchwork approach included learning rich contextual knowledge, increasing ‘death’ language proficiency and having time to engage in slow thinking processes to deeply reflect on knowledge gained, interactions shared with participants and experiences of conducting fieldwork and utilising a patchwork methodology. As a result, we argue that this approach is highly appealing to not only anthropologists but also researchers across all disciplines due to its accessibility, achievability and versatile nature. This appeal also widens the research scope, research tools and analysis methods that can be used to create a unique ethnography such as this one. The forms patches can take are limitless and, in time, it is likely that additional researchers will also share their own creations that were made possible through patchwork ethnography.

We also argue that the creation of alternative methods like patchwork ethnography are highlighting a shift away from what is considered ‘traditional’ methods. This shift, with which many anthropologists would agree and potentially grieve, was set in motion a while ago, both out of choice and necessity; it has now gained notable traction exacerbated by factors like COVID-19. It evokes further discussion of whether we will, should or could go back to paradigmatic practices, and questions how anthropology as a discipline will continue to (re)shape with the times and needs of researchers and field sites.

As authors with a range of methodological and disciplinary backgrounds, we bring a wealth of experience to bear when practising and reflecting on the notion of patchwork ethnography. We believe that one of its crucial features is its long-term commitment and slow thinking. This feature distinguishes it from alternative approaches such as rapid ethnography, qualitative interview studies or short-term consultancies. With its length and slow scholarship, it echoes some of the core features of traditional ethnography, which requires a substantial commitment of researchers. Yet because of the flexibility of the approach and the ability to patch together different methodological tools and ways of accessing data, patchwork ethnography allows for in-depth research and analysis in a broad range of contemporary contexts.

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