Stoned, sitting on the couch, glass pipe and a bag of weed on the wooden coffee table in the cozy, second-floor living room where an original Italian marketing poster for *Vertigo* hangs on the wall (“nel capolavoro di Alfred Hitchcock”), an orange poster with the film’s iconic hermeneutical spiral advertisement image, a shabby, graduate-school-days table brought from Boston, which is very much unlike our glorious, half-million-dollar, three-story, five-bedroom house of three thousand square feet (plus the plot) of the St. Louis metropolitan area, land that used to be part of the Louisiana Territory and before that the Mississippian culture, and that is now ours, purchased with the salaries of two professors, college sweethearts caught committed in a relationship that at so many junctures spiraled, the haunting and sentimental Jeff Buckley song “Last Goodbye” playing for years in the background. Two people bonded by some glue—if only the experience of having weathered so much shit together—who, like everyone, get stuck and keep moving, stuck moving, working life in fits and starts, keeping

1. Hitchcock, *Vertigo*.
things from crumbling in a nowhere-near-crumbling 1910s house paid for by financial aid recipients from families where there are few college degrees. Two people who met in the underneath of Vanderbilt Hall in the late nineties and smoked cigarettes on the dorm’s patio, looking across West End Avenue, where there used to be a Tower Records, when CDs were a thing, when this conjugation became a thing, two people with different geographical and cultural backgrounds who have a biblical upbringing in common and who, upon arrival at move-in-goodbye-go weekend, wanted bodies bad and felt shame and necessity, freedom and shame, and who, through patches, stuck it out, marrying one year after reaching the legal drinking age, probably just to sanctify the situation, and who have a framed print of a drawing by a popular American artist hanging on a wall downstairs, a wedding gift from a classmate, one of the bridesmaids, with the epigram “I saw them standing there pretending to be just friends, when all the time in the world could not pry them apart.” Two people who are not the offspring of academic or otherwise knowledge-economy families, who went to graduate school at the world’s greatest university and went through hell there, and the hell didn’t end there (“Forever, forever ever? Forever, ever”), two people who joined the professoriate and, unlike most of their colleagues, were repaying student loans decades beyond the dorm room nights. I’m stoned, on the couch, home alone, stuck in the upstairs playroom of adolescence, kicking and screaming, rapturously, exhaustingly snatched in fun and games, obsessed with endless war and film art, war movies, all kinds of movies, an embarrassment of shelves, everything in its right place, staying up “very, very, very, very late,” more than a decade beyond the dorm, tenured, cushioned, having made a career writing hypercritical, ventilating scholarly publications about societal hypocrisies and industrial harms and winning professional awards, all the while amassing heaping personal wreckage in my own life and hurting people, assholing my way through graduate school and after-

5. Outkast, “Ms. Jackson.”
ward, hurting my sweetheart of the rodeo,¹⁰ who had a poster in her dorm room that read, “Buck Mills Berry Me,” and a sweet refrain, saying, “I have a tender heart and a gentle spirit,” and hurting a good man, wielding ethnography in ways that hurt a really good man who felt like a father to me, shitting all over affections and relationships. I sink into the leather, lagging and lost, failing at a version of life, reaching fort-da, back and forth for my pipe, blazing on repeat, flat looping, going nowhere, a not-contributing slouch of a schlub, not seen for years in the lobbies of the Hyatts and Hiltons, absent from the scene conversation hubbub buzz of the anthropological voice, professionally, sociologically, and biochemically stuck.¹¹

The Sitch

It was on that couch, and in those days, that I checked out an experimental film made at the height of the war.¹² Its lack of direction and abrasive, improvisational violences and appalling brutishness were challenging and hard to appreciate. No coherent or compelling plot, except a vague theme of breakdown. Widely acclaimed as “an essential piece of the canon of 1960s American independent cinema,” it is revered for innovative cinema vérité methods, postmodern blurrings of fiction and documentary, and maniacal obsessions with conspiracy and revolution.¹³ The director characterized the filmmaking process as a blended experience of “a circus, a military campaign, a nightmare, an orgy, and a high.”¹⁴ And, well, these nouns happened to fit my own sitch. Purposeless pot plot. Problematic lack of structure and agency. Penchant for polemics.

And now. No longer drinking or doing drugs, one might or might not say sober, contending with past and persistent wrongdoings and deficiencies, undertaking artistry and productivities after ethnography, I have put that dreadful movie in my desert island trunk, and I want to make my own.

¹⁰. The Byrds, *Sweetheart of the Rodeo.*
¹³. Guest, “Norman Mailer Collection.”
I am inspired by its use of fragments and fleeting images, its embrace of an aesthetics of incompleteness, failure, and the unvarnished okayness of being not great, and how these features might lend themselves to an anthropology that unhides the illiberal real lives of anthropologist selves. Approaches that further trouble the construction of the anthropologist as an exemplary professional with indubitable knowledge, territory, and psyche. Approaches that continue to challenge genre conventions in materials and styles of self-experience, self-expression, and writerly personality as much as the aboutness of population- and field-based projects that inevitably take on the terms of “the them, the there.”

But let’s be honest. Mine is not the navel that everyone wants to be gazing at. (Mostly) straight. Male. Tenured. At an elite institution. Here I am at the fountain. Periodic trips from the swivel to the Student Center for the salad bar and soda machine. Large screens beam. Ethos of exploration. Mission statements. My mission is to go out there and get them. It’s been like this since North Carolina. Every year for a decade, my editor has called me to check in. I’ve fabled hypothetical field sites and project framings. A new one each year, it seems. The shame of the second book. And a self—stuck in the first one.

“Sure thing, shooters out in Chesterfield and suburban settler identity.”
“Or, um, I like sports. I can write about what’s happening in sports.”
“No?”
“Yes, right, of course, I’m an anthropologist. The field. The voices. Vignettes.”

“Okay, then. I’m gonna interview parents about concussions. Get the gritty perspectives. I’ll land a big grant and fly around the country for peewee games. How does that sound?”

Because the normal trajectory is to move on to the second book. To steadily keep researching and publishing. But I didn’t do that. Mental breakdown and substance abuse stalled my career. And now. In contending with an ethnography hangover and ill health, I’m writing about those very topics.

Because let’s be honest. Everybody’s dealing with shit, and it’s difficult to talk about. Academia is replete with mental illness, unhappiness, and

15. Durban, “Anthropology and Ableism.”
anguish: graduate school, funding and grants, writing all the time, having a life, the job market . . . And everybody must write in the constraining “an ethnography of” genre for access to jobs and promotion. And those books take forever to write. And they are not pleasurable to read or write. We cannibalize other people’s lives in producing insular and technical knowledge products for a paywall purgatory, and we cannibalize each other in a constricted job market. We’re stuck forever reasserting the indispensability of a curious thing that—it’s at the same time acknowledged—should burn. It’s comical to want to destroy your livelihood; it’s also a veritable, genuine moment. I can’t let anthropology burn . . . because I fell in love with it a long time ago. And because salary, health care, commitments, relationships, and retirement savings. I’m attached to “it.” I suspect all anthropologists have stories of love and lament that make this endeavor a monument, a work of mourning, and a marriage of plain old dirty laundry.

I’m in the privileged position of being able to tarry with nonrespectability more easily than others. I feel able to say these things and experiment with form and conception. I came out of grad school before the economic crises and pandemic. I benefited from a market of abundant jobs. I wrote in the abiding colonial genre for my tenure book. I’ve made a living according to an absurd premise of higher-education hoping: that further empowering and credentialing relatively privileged people within a system designed to unequally deliver advantages could undo foundational social structures. A discipline dedicated to making suffering, the abject, and cultural otherness available for upstanding liberal future citizens to consume. The reproduction of a profession, a class hierarchy, and society.

tl;dr

This is a book about a recovering drug addict and recovering anthropologist who feels jammed, stuck in the middle (Middle America, middle age, 16. Jobson, “The Case for Letting Anthropology Burn.”
17. Ibid.
midcareer, mediocrity, meaninglessness). The lens of analysis is reversed to expose the backstage of a life in anthropology, the messy, unbecoming self behind scholarship, the fraught dynamics of being professional and institutional. The resulting untidy, grunge anthropology—raw, emotional, ironical, introspective, angry, jaded, distorted—turns out to be a source of both critical engagement with the discipline and personal catharsis for a despondent main character.

Spheres of personal formation—anthropology, higher education, family, religion, the military, sports, popular culture—have fed into and supported pleasures, fulfillments, definition, and belonging for straight man. They have also been sources of confusion, disheartenment, indignation, and alienation. In the mode of “affect-inflected” anthropology, this saga about straight man as unfinishedness roams around sites of experience, metamorphosis, and writing. Love and lament in life—and specifically in anthropology. A kind of real-life campus novel that takes on anthropology’s function as a culture resource for global health and the neoliberal university and unsettles the discipline’s hopeful claims about its own role in social change. A long-form curriculum vitae chronicling hopelessness not as epic narrative, but in the disarray and fraying of the little life, in stuckness and minor moves. What Donna Haraway calls “modest possibilities of partial recuperation.” The “little narrative.” Wild strawberries. (“The deep, satisfied smile of a man who just now understands the punchline of a joke he heard long ago.”)

about a boy

fits and starts since the semester’s start. here i am in my swivel with the old radiator. i turn the room’s heat on and off on the hour to keep the temp right there, right there. right where it’s a dance with the antiquated interior of the old dorm in a swivel chair. two computer monitors for bragging

22. Biehl and Locke, Unfinished.
23. Haraway, Staying with the Trouble, 10.
27. Hornby, About a Boy.