

A duo-ethnographic tale

of solo female researchers' fieldwork experiences in remote Australia:

GENDER AND LIMINALITY IN ACADEMIC FIELDWORK

RESEARCH RATIONALE:

Academic fieldwork is a crucial component in scientific advancement, knowledge production, and research training. While fieldwork is often reported on its conduct, methods and techniques, the intersection between liminality and gender in the solo fieldwork experience of female scholars has yet been fully scrutinised in tourism research.

RESEARCH AIM:

This study explores the lived and recalled experiences and evaluates the effects of engaging in remote solo fieldwork on two female tourism scholars.

METHODOLOGY:

Duo-ethnography with visual memory work

DATA:

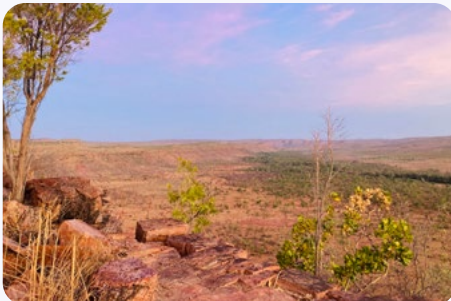
- 71 images and written memories
- 14 hours of reflexive conversations

FIELDWORK LOCATION:

Remote Australia features notorious ruggedness, inconvenience and seclusion from civilisation, often associated with masculine traits and strong liminal meanings.



Uluru, Northern Territory (Uluru-Kata Tjuta National park)



East Kimberly (Kununurra)



Tasmania (Freycinet)

FINDINGS:

1 Transition into the field



Hot and sweaty

A: It felt like a very disorienting and unusual place. Nothing like what she was used to. She was carrying her baggage and herself in the heated landing strip of an airport too small to be real, sweating and feeling hot, with the way understanding that she was in a place that was completely unfamiliar to her.



En-route to arrival

I: She pulled over with a mixed feeling of relief and worry. Relieved that she can finally get some rest and worried about the upcoming challenges of approaching strangers in the field. Oh well, she rolled down the window, taking a deep breath of the sandy dry wind with an iron taste. Oh well, she thought to herself, one thing at a time.

4 The Survival toolkit



Forming routine

I: Subconsciously or superstitiously, Lily believed it was crucial to ending her fieldwork with another challenging hike, just like the pilot trip, so everything fell into place. In hindsight, this compulsive behaviour has its trace in Lily's habits – she always preferred to order the same dish, she liked to take a walk on the same route every day, and she liked to do house chores in certain orders. Lily found familiarity and formed her micro-rituals in these compulsive and trivial things, which were also reflected in this foreign land. (Y34)



Voluntary self-care

A: Every single day, Giulia would leave the lodge exhausted. A full day of observations, from 6am to 5pm, had done it for her. ... It was overwhelming. She, therefore, decided at the end of the day that she needed to ground herself in nature. She took off and went to the fisherman's village 10 km away. The village was composed of one pub and one convenience store/petrol station. But was overlooking the beautiful bay. Giulia went to sit on the rudimentary jetty and spent a good hour just staring at the sunset.



Comfort from mobility

I: Waking up 5 am in winter was a whole new beast. Every morning, Lily would stay in the car for 10-20 minutes with the heater and music on. In the outback, the car acted as a tiny mobile haven for Lily – it could take her from place to place, shield her from harsh weather and offer a temporary refuge. She felt in complete control and safe when she sat in the driver's seat.



Micro Communitas

A: Every morning at the lodge, Giulia would say good morning to the staff. She did not want to interrupt them in their daily tasks, but she felt she wanted to express some of the gratitude she had felt as a result of the staff's genuine hospitality back to them. Every morning Abby, the restaurant supervisor, would prepare a coffee for Giulia. Giulia would not ask for it, but the coffee would pop up like magic while she was sitting in the lounge waiting for interviews to start.

2 The strangeness, danger and discomfort of fieldwork



Swimming with crocs

A: One thing starting to build in her mind was that as much as she had spoken to the staff and tried to predict the unfamiliar situations and dangers, she was, in fact, completely unprepared to handle them. What would have happened if she had a close encounter with a croc on her own? What would have happened if she had not noticed a venomous snake on her room front steps or a close encounter with one of the wild bulls at the station? These threats felt all too real.

The gullible incident

I: The two males insisted on getting the interview right now and jokingly refused to let Lily go. Lily immediately had a funny feeling and raised her voice to almost shouting – "It's lovely chatting with you, see you later!". The two guys got startled by Lily's raised voice and the attention it attracted. Lily quickly escaped, ran into her car, and drove off. Her hands were shaking. She felt so stupid and naive at that moment. Things could have gone wrong if she didn't run away.

3 Being vs Performing vs Wishing: The tension & negotiation of identities



Perseverance through pretence

I: she found herself awkward with strangers, partly because the 40-degree heat drove everyone back to hotels after 6am. She felt quite useless and desperate as if she had wasted all this time for nothing. She often experienced powerlessness when she failed to convince tourists to participate. Sometimes she didn't feel quite like herself, as if she had to engage in exciting conversations to gain trust and pretend to be someone else, like a salesperson.



Me in a parallel universe

I: Lily watched this van drive in with loud rock music and heavy exhaust noise. It looked like a moving graffiti wall. A group of friends unloaded their foldable chairs and icky full of beverages, dancing and singing whilst waiting for the sun to set. Lily thought – what a carefree bunch – and the line on the van was on point and super relatable. Honestly, even till now, Lily still doesn't know what exactly she is doing or whether PhD/research is worth it. She often felt like a big impostor who would be exposed one day. Lily wondered if she'd ever be as carefree as them. Perhaps in a parallel universe, where she's not an academic, where her identity is not attached to anyone, she could live like a nomad or a free soul, roaming around the world in a van like this.

The academic tourist

A: She was floating around in natural pools in an almost desert place. And while she was there, soaking in the hot spring water, she was thinking, "I am here for research, so I should feel exhausted and be busy all the time. Why am I wasting time?" She was concentrated on trying and go back to resembling some sort of appearance as a researcher, or at least what society would expect of a researcher. But really, how could she do that immersed in the water, with her bathers on, with nobody around?

5 Transformative outcomes

Unlearning

I: The busyness was something that Lily had to unlearn, despite the unsettling sensations it brought. Lily locked the phone in the car and sat on the roadside, trying to embrace the void and the nothingness, accepting and learning to enjoy the void and emptiness. This is the complete circle of life, ebbs and flows, fulfilled and void. It took some time for her mind to slow down and learn to be comfortable with doing and thinking nothing.



Reflection

I: After driving the final two participants back to the hotel, Lily pulled over on the roadside. "She's done it!!" Lily had a long and loud exhale, followed by a restrained yell "YES". Every single day followed the same schedule, to almost a religious level. This schedule was never something that Lily would keep up for more than three days, but somehow, she did it here at Uluru for 30 days straight with extreme discipline and persistence. She walked almost 20km each day and accomplished this tough fieldwork that she never would dream of doing alone.



Touring the sunset

A: The car was there, still, at rest, after a full day, immersed in natural beauty. ... That car was almost a metaphor for the conclusion of Giulia's fieldwork. She felt spent, yet content, after having gone through a wild ride in the outback (data collection) and now finally immersing herself in the beauty of that place, that wild and natural feel, that immersion in nature's untouched details. A bit dusty on the outside, the car could endure the harshest of conditions and go through immensely difficult tracks. And Giulia felt quite the same. Reflecting on the past 15 days she had overcome difficulties, fears, and challenges. And she felt proud, accomplished and confident. Yes, she was exhausted, mentally and physically, but she had finally done it, and that feeling was everything to her.

Perspectives - Overview Effect

I: It felt like she couldn't spare any attention or mental space for other things. Uluru just filled all the visual capacity of whoever was standing in front. But one of Lily's favourite photos of Uluru was the one taken at Kata-Tjuta, nearly 60km distance from Uluru. Lily recalled that she stood on the viewing platform, looking at Uluru. Far into the horizon, Uluru became a tiny bump, almost blending into the surrounding. At that moment, Lily had an epiphany about all the problems and worries she used to be so dramatic about.



IMPLICATIONS:

- Expand female voices and reflections on female positionality in tourism studies.
- Theoretical advancement in areas of gender studies, reflexivity, liminality, and transformative experiences.
- Address gaps concerning institutional care, and researchers' wellbeing, and provide practical reflections for solo fieldwork in remote tourism regions.
- Encourage increased engagement of female scholars in conducting tourism fieldwork.