

AFTERTHOUGHTS

The *Suomen antropologi* Ethnographic Reading Challenge: a call for communal slowing down

Each year just before the New Year, our hometown library—the Helsinki Metropolitan Area Library Network (Helmet 2024)—issues a curated 50-book reading challenge. To celebrate a new year, *Suomen antropologi: Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society*, presents an ethnographic reading challenge in a similar style.

The challenge is an outcome of one recent Friday evening when we—middle-aged neighbours and colleagues who did not know what else to do with our free time—went for a walk to our local library. Henni, an avid fiction reader, wanted to pick up the new Helmet challenge after completing her first one in 2023, whilst Tuomas, a very slow reader and former library worker, wanted to check out the comics selections.

‘What if we compiled a parallel ethnographic reading challenge?’, Henni pitched. So, we stayed at a coffee shop until closing time compiling this list, laughing at our nerdy shared interests. But, we soon realised: it’s not just fun and games. Woven into this reading challenge is a bid for something more.

The categories in this challenge purposely extend across broad, or ambiguous, categories, at times bordering on the downright silly. Our intention is to encourage thoughtful reading of ethnographies and other books that inspire our ethnographic imaginations. But who needs encouragement to do what should certainly be a key part of their work?

We do, and, in our experience, so do many of our colleagues. The ability to concentrate on a book-length text can be stretched for any number of reasons, whether they stem from challenges to our mental health and wellbeing, precarity-related stress, neurodiversity, a lack of time or endless work-related clutter. Often, the problem lies in that we are simply too frazzled by constant multitasking to just sit down and read.

Things like reading challenges can be off-putting for some, and one might ask whether turning something like reading into a challenge transforms it into yet another task requiring accomplishment. It might. But, it can also help us prioritise reading a good book over something like scrolling through our email or social media or news feed. That is, it can help us prioritise an activity like reading which calms us over something that leaves us wired and stressed.

Rebecca Solnit (2014 [2000]: 10) wrote, ‘I like walking because it is slow, and I suspect that the mind, like the feet, works at about three miles an hour. If this is so, then modern life is moving faster than the speed of thought or thoughtfulness.’

Taking our cue from Solnit, this first *Suomen antropologi* reading challenge is inspired by the idea of *thinking at three miles an hour*. For us, this means taking the time to read books, instead of book reviews. Entire books, instead of just introductions. Articles, rather than just abstracts.

Of course, deadlines sometimes push us to skim and jump around through texts. But perhaps we sometimes also do it out of habit, rather than necessity. Perhaps, in these late-stage capitalist social media algorithm-infused times of ours, we are accustomed to frantically skuttling to-and-fro, instead of sitting still and doing one thing at a time. Perhaps, we are just so hooked on quick rewards (PLING! You have an email!), that we feel too easily bored to sink into the headspace required for slow reading.

We are not the first to call for slow thinking in academia. Already in 2010, the Slow Science Manifesto declared, 'We cannot continuously tell you what our science means; what it will be good for; because we simply don't know yet. Science needs time. Bear with us, while we think' (Slow Science Academy 2010). With this reading challenge, we seek to create—again, not least for ourselves—a reason to and a framework for slowing things down. But in doing so, are we saying that it is up to individuals to slow the break-neck pace of academic work life? To an extent, yes. The tragic reality for many of us is that we ourselves are the only ones we can rely on to say 'slow down' or 'do less'. Yet, there are few things as pernicious—or as prevalent in late-stage capitalism—as blaming individuals for their failure to cope with increasingly impossible circumstances and benchmarks.

In a recent book, anthropologist Daena Funahashi (2023) analysed the Finnish societal panic around increased rates of burnout in the early 2000s, describing the rise of self-management skills as the proposed panacea for burnout. Since Funahashi's fieldwork, the emphasis on individualised coping skills for stress management have become ever more pronounced in Finnish public discourse. Popularised brain research increasingly shapes Finnish understandings of stress, sleep, and work efficiency, and many Finns (Henni included)

have found inspiration from scholars like Minna Huotilainen, who regularly feature as experts in the national news, on social media, and on various talk shows. In the Helmet network of libraries, over a hundred copies of her book, *The Concentration Resuscitation Guide*, have been in constant circulation for years (see Huotilainen and Moisala 2018).

What brain scholars rarely discuss is the fact that stress management skills do not remove structural inequality, racism, sexism, or ableism. To our mind, it is crucial that scholars remain alert to and critical of the expanding consensus related to 'self-management', whether in university management or societal decision-making, which obfuscates structural inequalities. Yet, whilst we embrace the anti-capitalist critique of individual responsibility for wellbeing, our personal experience also reminds us that awareness of how, for instance, our brains respond to stress, can significantly support our personal wellbeing, and make us better colleagues and teachers too. Social critiques should not preclude self-care or vice versa. As Audre Lorde (1988: 131) so powerfully suggested in her original notion of radical care, 'Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.'

Instead of putting the onus on individual researchers—asking each of us to strive to read more or think more slowly—we instead echo others' calls before us (Schulz et al. 2022) for communal responses to our varied individual challenges yet discussions about the emotional and psychological impacts of conducting this type of research remain rare. In recent years, debates begun to emerge about the emotional and psychological toll that qualitative field-based research on violence in general, and on gender-based violence (GBV). After all, relations and communities of mutual aid and care are what, in the end, make our research possible.

Friedner and Wolf-Meyer (2023: 4) recently suggested that anthropological theories of value, morality, and inclusion be put into practice in anthropologists' own academic communities, to render those communities more malleable to the diverse needs of their members, and to 'proactively work toward making connections between people in the effort to expand who counts as an anthropologist and what counts as anthropological praxis and theorizing.' In this spirit, we thus propose this ethnographic reading challenge not as a solo enterprise of striving to be faster and do more, but rather as a collective wake-up call allowing us to create academic communities that slow down in efforts to care, read, and think together.

Therefore, if this reading challenge sounds fun, if you too need help prioritising reading or seek company amongst others with whom you may think through books that feel hard, we urge you to start an online or in-person reading group with your colleagues. Schedule coffees to brainstorm book titles that match your interests and the various challenge-specific numbers. Set aside time to both talk about what you are going through which affects your work and to collectively rant or rage about the books you have read. Feel free to bend the challenge to suit your needs: twist the categories; replace some books with articles, cut the number of categories to 15 (as Tuomas intends); commit to complete the list in three years rather than one (as Henni intends). In place of rules, this challenge offers flexibility: do whatever works for you and your needs.

And if this challenge seems awkward, start an initiative that suits you and your community better. Just remember: the struggle against distractions, stressors, and shallow thinking is not one which you face alone. We are not equal in how these struggles confront us, as they differ for each of us, depending upon who and where we each are in our lives and careers. But we are

better equipped to tackle them if we learn from each other and work together. Organise!

HENNI ALAVA
ACADEMY RESEARCH FELLOW
SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY
TAMPERE UNIVERSITY
henni.alava@tuni.fi

TUOMAS TAMMISTO
ACADEMY RESEARCH FELLOW
SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY
TAMPERE UNIVERSITY
tuomas.tammisto@tuni.fi

REFERENCES

- Friedner, Michele and Matthew Wolf-Meyer** 2023. *Becoming Malleable: How Orienting to Disability, Communication, and the Senses Further Commits Anthropology to its Moral Project.* *American Ethnologist*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.13239>.
- Funahashi, Daena Aki** 2023. *Untimely Sacrifices: Work and Death in Finland.* New York: Cornell University Press.
- Helmet (Helsinki Metropolitan Area Libraries)** 2024. The Helmet Reading Challenge 2024. Helmet Webpage. [https://www.helmet.fi/en-US/Events_and_tips/News_flash/The_Helmet_Reading_Challenge_2024\(273524\)](https://www.helmet.fi/en-US/Events_and_tips/News_flash/The_Helmet_Reading_Challenge_2024(273524)). <Accessed 3 January 2024>
- Huotilainen, Minna and Mona Moisala** 2018. *Keskittymiskyvyn elvytysopas.* Jyväskylä: Tuuma.
- Lorde, Audre** 1988. *A Burst of Light: Essays.* Ithaca: Firebrand Books.
- Schulz, Philipp, Anne-Kathrin Kreft, Heleen Touquet and Sarah Martin** 2022. Self-Care for Gender-Based Violence Researchers: Beyond Bubble Baths and Chocolate Pralines. *Qualitative Research* 23 (5): 1461–1480. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794122108>.
- Slow Science Academy** 2010. The Slow Science Manifesto. Slow Science Webpage. <http://slow-science.org/slow-science-manifesto.pdf>. <Accessed 3 January 2024>
- Solnit, Rebecca** 2014 [2000]. *Wanderlust: A History of Walking.* London: Granta Books.

The First *Suomen antropologi* Ethnographic Reading Challenge

1. The book is written in a style you like
2. The book is written in a style you dislike
3. The book is in a theoretical tradition that does not particularly interest you
4. The book is a classic, which you have meant to read, but haven't gotten round to
5. The author identifies as belonging to a minority
6. The book has caused an uproar
7. The author is part of the community they study
8. The author is an outsider to the community they study
9. The book is an edited volume
10. The book makes broad comparisons
11. The book is an historical ethnography
12. The book is a multispecies ethnography
13. The book is written before 1950
14. The book is about work
15. The book is strongly autoethnographic
16. A sense or the senses are central to the book
17. The book is in the tradition of political economy
18. Pictures or photographs are central to the methods or presentation of the book
19. The book includes ethnographic poems
20. The book is published in 2024
21. A colleague recommends this book as underrated or having received too little attention
22. The book is set in or concerns mountains, swamps or caves
23. The book is an ethnography of an institution
24. The book is about care
25. The book is set on a continent or region unfamiliar to you
26. You know the author of the book
27. You have prejudices toward the book or its author
28. The book includes reflections on difficult fieldwork experiences
29. The book is an exo- or speculative ethnography or about outer space
30. The book deals with a topic that is difficult for you
31. The book is about fascism or populism
32. The book employs a method unfamiliar to you
33. The book deals with movement or movements
34. The book is about something very ordinary
35. The book is about the relationship between mind and body
36. The book is about laws or rules
37. The book is about play or playing
38. The book raises strong emotions in you
39. The book advocates disability justice
40. You disagree with the conclusions of the book
41. The book is published by a nonprofit open access publisher.

42. The book's author has left academia
43. The book is fun
44. The book is about a topic that concerns you or your loved ones in a profound way
45. The book is about a place in which you grew up or currently live
46. The book has a mesmerising cover
47. The book's title breaks standard conventions
48. The book raises more questions than it answers
49. After reading it, you wish you had read the book 10 years ago
50. A book you immediately want to recommend to a colleague or student