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PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION: EMBODIED INSIGHTS, CHALLENGES, BEST PRACTICES AND LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the method of participant observation (PO) and how the author has interpreted and practiced it throughout her career as an anthropologist of religion. The article concentrates on the embodied insights afforded by PO, as well as the physical, existential and ontological challenges of the PO method. The author shares examples from her own PO experiences and recommends best practices as well as some ideas for improvement. The challenges of conducting PO during an ongoing pandemic, and some lessons that may have been learned, are considered. The article ends with a brief reflection on the future of participation observation and what the pandemic has taught about what it means to be anthropologists.

Keywords: fieldwork; ethnographic methods; participant observation; interlocutors; embodied methods.

Introduction

In our American Academy of Religion 2021 roundtable, we were tasked with considering and re-considering several terms that have long been central to the conceptual grammar of the ethnographic method in the anthropology of religion. My assigned critical term is participant observation (PO) and I am going to spend the

duration of this article sharing some vignettes of my experiences with participant observation in the ethnographic fieldwork, and why for me a sustained face-to-face engagement in the field, alongside my interlocutors, is the core of participant observation. Yet, given the realities of an ongoing pandemic and health concerns, and what this might mean for our method, it is essential for us to reflect upon traditional, face-to-face means of PO. If we have not already done so, it is time to consider experimenting with and pivoting to hybrid, virtual face-to-face PO methods and even considering what it would be like to pivot exclusively to virtually mediated PO. With an ongoing ever-morphing Covid pandemic, it is an auspicious time indeed to reflect on the method of PO and the future of anthropological fieldwork.

What has long distinguished anthropologists' fieldwork from most journalism, oral histories, and other venues and methods that focus on lived engagement with humans and non-human actors is that *we're in it for the long haul*. We show up, we hang around, we ask questions, we listen, we learn from dialectical engagement, and we return. There is an investment of time, energy and effort. We spend months and even years on our craft of observing, participating in rituals and events, jotting notes, coding our observations, and writing up our results in articles, essays and books. As the University of Toronto has shared on its website, participant observation is

a research methodology where the researcher is immersed in the day-to-day activities of the participants. The objective is usually to record conduct under the widest range of possible settings. In this way, PO differs from naturalistic observation, because the latter does not involve interaction between the researcher and participants. PO was historically associated with a form of research in which the researcher resides for extended periods of time in a small community. Currently, PO is used in a wide variety of settings, and over varied periods of time, from single interactions to many years.¹

The method of PO can put us in a range of situations that are enjoyable, satisfying, challenging and uncomfortable. What we do as anthropologists of religion is demanding—it is not for the faint of heart. We ask questions about deeply held beliefs and practices which can be deeply personal for our interlocutors. But PO also provides opportunities for kinds of cultural exchanges that offer joyful interactions with humans and non-human animals that are not possible in everyday encounters. To be a participant and observer is physically, emotionally and existentially exhausting—sometimes it can push us to the brink. But it is this pushing of ourselves to personal limits, I believe, that makes the method of PO distinctive—for we engage deeply with human and even non-human actors in sustained, meaningful ways. We are able to grow not only as scholars but as humans.

1. <https://research.utoronto.ca/participant-observation>

The method and craft—yes, for me it is indeed a *craft*—of PO has quite literally changed who I am as a human. It has impacted how I engage in the world, and I see things in a more nuanced way as a result. The method of PO has taught me to be a better listener, an astute observer of people as well as non-human animals and their communities. Participant observation has led me by necessity to become a better writer. I was fortunate to be trained by three amazing scholars in my PhD program—Robert Orsi, Michael D. Jackson and Carol Greenhouse, who taught by example. This holy trinity of mentors showed great care and respect for their interlocutors and taught me how to be a better listener, how to take and to jot notes in the field, and how to write up my reflections and observations in compelling ways. I started my journey as a PO quite young and have been a PO in places as far flung as Gary, Indiana; South Phoenix, Arizona; Southern California; Mallorca, Spain; Florida; Indiana and Illinois; and most recently in Iowa for my newest book *Meatpacking America*. I have conducted what I have considered to be deep ethnographic research for the past thirty years, and quite honestly each ethnographic project and encounter brings with it a sense of newness and excitement, for I am always learning and am always a student. The method and craft of PO asks us to put ourselves in the position of a student, there to learn and to absorb information. At its best, it is a method-craft that asks us to embrace humility and to reject hubris.

I shall spend the rest of this article touching on four areas: Embodied Insights; Challenges; Recommended Best Practices; and The Future of Participant Observation.

The Method of Participant Observation: Embodied Insights

While I was trained by both historians and anthropologists, I leaned into the method of ethnography because it was a dynamic, embodied, visceral method that fit my personality. Participant observation beckoned me like a siren's song. Ever since I was a kid growing up in Gary, Indiana, and NW Indiana's "Rust Belt" region, I loved sitting, listening, observing and participating at my boisterous Lebanese American family's parties and get-togethers. The clove cigarettes, mixed with smells of lamb, hummus and anise seed liquor, arak, were intoxicating. I was mesmerized, and the hours melted away during these large gatherings held in family members' homes and in their backyards. I now realize that these early childhood experiences set the stage for what would become a lifetime of fascination with the intersections of ethnicity, migration, work and religion and were early PO experiences.

In my experience, PO is a deeply embodied experience. We engage in bodily sensations as we sit with, eat alongside, laugh with, and sing with our interlocutors. We experience hunger, thirst, cold, heat, sadness, happiness, and a wide range of affects and emotions. In-person fieldwork necessitates that we get dirty, buggy, and even bloody. For example, I've crawled in the dirt as part of my participation and observation in the faith courses that my interlocutors of Mary's Ministries sponsored back in the late 1990s. The faith course exercise in which I participated necessitated that the participant crawl along their belly toward the end of the dirt path. The lesson was that one gets dirty in life, life is a long journey, and is cleansed by the Holy Spirit. Another lesson was that community lifts you up and helps keep you whole. After each faith course participant had successfully wriggled their way to the end of the line to the finish, they were helped up by a faith course graduate who was on the other side helping with the course. I had been observing the ritual and understood the meaning of it, but it wasn't until I completed the exercise myself that I felt the flush of belonging and the different, more inclusive way my fellow course attendees talked to me. The embodied experience bonded us, and we were able to talk about our experiences with each other. We talked about how we felt on the ground crawling, what we thought about, and what we hoped for.

Another embodied experience, one that does not evoke the same warm feelings as the crawling experience, was contracting an enduring case of head lice from prison fieldwork. I had spent an intensive three days as a PO in a medium-maximum security prison in southern Indiana for a Kairos Inside weekend, a spiritual retreat for inmates, for my second book project. I returned home with a case of lice infestation so bad that my hair, and my spouse's and children's hair too, had to be shorn to get rid of the infestation. To this day, when I view a photograph of my family taken during this time, I am reminded in a visceral way how our heads itched, how we felt embarrassed, and how we hated our (by necessity) shorn hair. The protracted battle with head lice gave me a deeper empathy for the conditions of inmates and the prison environment, which was conducive to lice thriving and surviving. After calling the warden, I learned that prison lice is particularly immune to being treated, and that most inmates suffer from it for long periods of time. As my own case of head lice continued (and for which I felt a deep shame and moreover for passing it to my family members), I thought about infestation, contamination and pollution as ways incarcerated women and men have been imagined. I thought about the de-humanization of the carceral state and humans incarcerated. As I wrote chapter six of the book, "Feeding Bodies and Souls", I tried hard to channel my experiences connecting with inmates and my discomfort with my lice led to a greater empathy for my interlocutors (Nabhan-Warren 2013).

Most recently, participant observation was immersion in two rural Iowa meat-packing plants. Again, the embodiment was visceral and in order to fully understand the stories my interlocutors were sharing about their work at the packing plants, and how their religious faith helped them survive the difficult work, crucial for the PO was immersion. I immersed myself, quite literally, in the bowels of the meatpacking industry in rural Iowa. I had blood spattered on my notebooks, had sows' bodies bump against me, and I watched as cattle were slaughtered in the "hot box".

Spending time with refugees from all over the world who make their way to rural Iowa to work in the meatpacking plants led me to conduct fieldwork in two of the slaughterhouses. My PO in numerous rural locales: in cafes, church basements, parish pews, parks, kitchen tables quite literally led me to the slaughterhouses. Most of my Latino/a, African, Vietnamese and Burmese interlocutors work in some facet of the broadband and vertically integrated protein industry, which spans from farm to insemination barn to the slaughterhouses themselves. My original focus of the book research was on migration and rural Catholic parish dynamics. I was not yet aware of the centrality of the packing plants in the lives of my interlocutors back in the fall of 2012. I realized mid-way through the fieldwork that, because most of my interlocutors worked at meatpacking plants and talked at length about how their religious faith was central to their ability to do the difficult, bloody and dangerous work, I needed to try to gain access to the plants. It just so happened that one of my primary interlocutors, a parish priest in rural Iowa, helped me get access to a Tyson pork plant in Columbus Junction, Iowa. Father Joseph and I toured the plant together, along with the Human Resources manager of the plant. And that pivotal participant observation experience paved the way for an immersive week-long fieldwork experience at Iowa Premium Beef in Tama, Iowa. My PO experiences in the two slaughterhouses were critical junctures in the fieldwork itself and provided me with essential information that would help convey to the reader of *Meatpacking America* just how difficult and precarious the lives of contemporary refugees are—and how they succeed in surviving and even thriving despite the odds. I shared my own embodied experiences in the packing plants to get across the horrific experiences in which refugees work:

At this particular pork processing plant, 10,000 hogs at 200 pounds apiece are killed—or as the company prefers to say, "harvested"—and processed each day. Rows upon rows of sows with raised teats on their underbellies—they recently nursed and unbeknownst to them weaned their piglets—moved past us, slow enough so we could take in their girth and their lifeless bodies. As we followed Dave's path through the cold cutting floor, the hogs' feet and hooves grazed my arms and shoulders and bumped gently into my white-coated side. They were heavy, rubbery, so heavy that I stumbled a bit at the first body brushing against

me. Turning from the hogs on our right, I learned that the prime rib meat that we see in the stores is cut by a highly trained worker whose primary job is to slice blades in a very precise way. The Sudanese employee cutting the prime rib cuts used graceful and precise movements, slicing through huge slabs of meat that moved by him on a conveyer line ... It was very cold in the plant; we could see our breath. The damp air is kept at a constant temperature of thirty-five degrees Fahrenheit. If you have ever worked in a restaurant and have been inside the cold storage room where meats, cheeses, vegetables, and fruits are kept, that's what it felt like—almost like a freezer, but not quite. (Nabhan-Warren 2021: 98–99)

The Method of Participant Observation: Challenges

As I have expressed above, PO can be exhausting—physically, mentally and existentially. It is important to have a close group of friends with whom to decompress and I suggest a good therapist as well. I have written about the existential challenges of this fieldwork for a forthcoming edited volume, *Existential Anthropology*, edited by Don Seeman and Devaka Premawardhana (Nabhan-Warren forthcoming). In my chapter “Blood, Flesh, and Faith: An Anthropology of a Packing Plant”, I write that

Months after the fieldwork, when I sat down to process the experiences and to write, I would start to cry. The smells and splatters were still on my notebook, smudged here and there, and I couldn't even look at them. Vivid images of cattle being slaughtered, having their hides ripped and their eyes gouged out of their skulls kept me up at night. I woke up sweating and shaking. I felt sick with guilt and complicity. Why had I assumed that human lives and moreover, interlocutors, were more important to study? Here, on the kill floors and hot and cold sides of packing plants, I saw how we human animals kill, slice, cut, and package other animals for our consumption. I observed how efficiency and detachment works. The kill floor employees I talked to all said that “you get used to it” but when I would ask them to elaborate, most admitted that “you never really get used to it”. As Fidencio, a Tyson worker, told me, “you just do what you have to do, but it is terrible work. It hurts your mind, body, and soul”. What all of the slaughterers and fabricators told me was that you have to “get used to it”—the killing industry—because you have a job to do. Fathers and mothers know they have bills to pay and family members back home to support via remittances. These women and men bear the work because they feel that they have no other choice. Meatpacking in Iowa and the rural United States has often been the highest-paying job available for the workers, the majority of whom are refugees. Yet these jobs remain mostly non-unionized and in Iowa, the lines continue to gain speed, OSHA be damned.

The job that those who work for slaughterhouses do is hidden from the rest of us. During my fieldwork, I experienced the enfleshed visibility of animals and what the anthropologist Timothy Pachirat has called the “utter invisibility of slaughter, the banal insidiousness of what hides in plain sight”. In describing today's

slaughterhouses, Pachirat goes on to assert, “Facing outward, this industrialized slaughterhouse blends seamlessly into the landscape of generic business parks ubiquitous to Everyplace, U.S.A., in the early twenty-first century” (Pachirat 2011: 23).

The method of PO indeed offers rewards: particular and peculiar insights that help us understand the lifeworlds of our interlocutors. But there are risks, too: risks to our own emotional and mental health. In immersing ourselves in others’ worlds, we spend time away from our families. We can feel disconnected upon return, we don’t always know how to explain what we have experienced and felt—and we can feel very alone. I’ve been so fortunate to have a spouse who is also an academic and who is understanding and loving, but sometimes what we have experienced in “the field” can distance us from those we love. After longer fieldwork trips I make sure to block off everything else and be with my family. My three children are now teenagers, and we can discuss at a higher level why mom was away, why mom is sad, and why the work she is doing matters.

The Method of Participant Observation: Recommended Best Practices

For *Meatpacking America* I spent a year attending and hanging out at several rural Iowa Catholic parishes getting to know the various parish cultures and the people who were part of these communities. This year of showing up led to structured and semi-structured one-on-one interviews as well as many meals in homes, local restaurants and church potlucks. Activist priests were my field guides, so to speak, and helped connect me to women and men who shared their migration experiences and details about their lives in Iowa. The fieldwork at packing plants came later once it became clear that most of my interlocutors worked at Tyson. While it was not part of the original ethnographic, PO plan, I realized that I needed to observe and to participate in my interlocutor’s workplace milieu. I was able to understand the ways in which religion worked in the workplace for the company heads as well as lineworkers, who literally wore their faith on their bodies in the form of scapulars, tattoos and rosaries. Many said prayers before their shift, during their linework, and on their way home from work, thanking God, Allah, Jehovah, Mary and the saints for keeping them safe.

Be open and honest: Share your intentions with your interlocutors

I decided to meet with the heads of two packing plants to share details of my project with them. I chose not to go undercover like some anthropologists have done in packing plants. For me, the ethical choice was to present as a researcher

who wanted to understand more about the meatpacking industry which is where most migrants in rural America work. I wanted to tell a story of the plants—and this resonated with plant management who wanted their story told. I was given full access to workers for interviews and was able to shadow women and men throughout my fieldwork visits which gave me incredible insight into the inner workings of the plants. I kept my small Fieldnotes notebooks handy in my pockets and took copious notes throughout the fieldwork. Because I was open and did not hide my intentions, I was able to take notes openly and to ask follow-up questions throughout my fieldwork stays.

Have a close group of friends/family with whom you can just “be”

I’ve been thinking a lot about Lady Gaga lately, who immersed herself in the role of Patrizia Reggiani for a year and a half and spoke with an Italian accent for nine months after that. Gaga says it was hard for her to come back. She went “full method” for the duration of the project. “Off camera I never broke, I stayed with her”, she has said.² Like Gaga’s immersion for the films *A Star is Born* and now *House of Gucci*, we ethnographers of religion immerse ourselves, whether it is by going away for one to two years or for me in my most recent project, a shorter, sustained burst of activity over the course of six years in rural Iowa and a week of immersion at Iowa Premium Beef. It’s something we must do—to get “in character”—but sometimes it is hard to find our way back. Sometimes we need our family and friends for that. For me it was my husband, children and some close girlfriends.

Have humility

I think that there is nothing as important as having humility in the field. Be open and curious. Ask questions. Put yourself in the situation of being a guest and a student. We are there to learn. When colleagues and members of the wider public ask me how I was able gain access to migrants as well as meatpacking plants, I tell them that it is because I am always curious and that I show interest. I ask questions. I am a student, not a professor, in the field. In my own experience, this positionality is crucial. I can tell you that I was able to get access to the meatpacking plants, most especially Iowa Premium Beef, because I positioned myself as a student—someone who was there to learn and to absorb information—rather than a professor. This shift in mentality and positionality is the most important shift we can make, I believe, when we are in the field and when we are in sensitive

2. <https://theplaylist.net/lady-gaga-method-acting-house-of-gucci-20211103/>

situations. Be curious, humble, and a student who is there to learn—wherever your field location might be.

Fieldwork for the common good

My fieldwork experiences with underrepresented humans for the past thirty years has led me to embrace what I am calling a fieldwork for the common good. My PO experiences and writings have provided me with a platform to say something to the broader public about our problematic, troubled immigration system, immigrant labor, and the need for reforms. We need to draw upon our expertise as ethnographers and share our findings with audiences outside of academia. The recent publication of *Meatpacking America* has led to numerous podcasts, blog opportunities, and being filmed for a Univision documentary film about migration, Covid, and meatpacking in Iowa. I urge fellow anthropologists to share their work more broadly because we are experts and have something important to say and to share.

The Future of Participant Observation

In the opening paragraph of this article, I shared that I think that PO as a method and craft must be adaptable with the times. I was able to conduct all my fieldwork for *Meatpacking America* before the Covid pandemic hit, but since the pandemic hit the United States in the winter of 2020, in person, face-to-face (F2F) has been made more difficult, even impossible given people's differing levels of comfort even after vaccines were made widespread in 2021. Before Covid, it was hard to imagine conducting fieldwork in any way other than in person and for extended periods of time physically and embodied in communities. This is precisely why, for me, a GenX fieldworker, my work has been embodied in distinct, visceral ways and this is the method and form that I prefer because it is what I know. But in conversations with colleagues around the country and outside of the United States about the craft of fieldwork, I have been led to a new appreciation for the promises and rigor of virtually mediated fieldwork. My colleague and friend Susan B. Ridgely at the University of Wisconsin, a seasoned ethnographer and author, has conducted most of her fieldwork for her newest book project over Zoom meetings and the phone. For her new book project on race, place and church in rural North Carolina, Ridgely's interlocutors send her texts and call her frequently and she recently commented to me during a Zoom meeting that she thinks that fieldwork PO in this way frees our interlocutors from having to host us, the anthropologists, and places less burden on the interlocutors. As Ridgely shared, "Think about it, they don't have to host us and have us sit in their living rooms for hours.

It is hard to tell the anthropologist that it is time to go. This way, with a phone call, Zoom, or text, the power dynamics shift and it is our interlocutors who wield more control of the situation".³ I have been thinking about what my friend shared and about the politics of representation and the burden that fieldwork places on our interlocutors, and I must admit that I may have romanticized in-person, F2F encounters. Ridgely got me thinking about how my sometimes long coffee visits may have actually been a burden on my interlocutors, who were nervous to let me know that it was time to go. While I have always tried hard to be mindful of not overstaying my welcome and to read verbal and nonverbal cues, perhaps I have overstayed my welcome. Ridgely's comments are important reminders that there are always power dynamics in place and that we need to be aware of them as ethnographers.

Another recent Zoom encounter, with Swedish PhD students and faculty conducting mostly virtual fieldwork in Sweden, has led me to think about the future of PO and ethnography. As the students shared during our Zoom session, most of them have conducted their PO exclusively over Zoom. They discussed the positive aspects of the experience and how Zoom breakout rooms could be fruitful fieldwork encounters, as well as the larger Zoom room discussions.⁴ But several did share that they did not always feel that they had a connection to their interlocutors and that Zoom could feel impersonal, stilted even. Some of the graduate students were struggling to create intimate spaces of sharing and were coming up against challenges. We talked as a group about hybrid models of PO and how F2F and virtual PO might be a beneficial combination. The reality is that fieldwork and PO itself must be adaptable to the changing environmental and social situations brought on by pandemics and other global events. My meetings with Ridgely and Swedish colleagues have led me to think about the importance of being flexible and adaptable. As anthropologists, we must remain open to multiple methods. We must also know and accept our own comfort levels. For me, a middle-aged professor whose fieldwork has almost exclusively been in face-to-face format, I know that this is the format with which I am most personally comfortable, but also know that my work could benefit from virtually mediated methods. I have recently conducted some Zoom interviews and found the interaction to be mostly positive, and I have follow-up Zoom interviews all set up.

The future of PO is an exciting one, and one that we must be actively mindful in shaping. Just as we seek out knowledge from our interlocutors with curiosity, we must lean in to our younger colleagues and listen to their ideas. Those of us who

3. Susan B. Ridgely, Zoom meeting with author, January 14, 2022.

4. Swedish graduate students, Zoom with author, January 27, 2022.

are mid-career must be humble students and open to the ideas of our younger colleagues and interlocutors alike, as the future does not belong to us but to them.

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