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Writing: The Ethics and Poetics of Reflexivity in Ethnography

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Abstract

This article discusses ethnographic writing on religion as a social process and encourages the adoption of reflexivity to be ethically and analytically sound, so that anthropologists are attuned to the politics of fieldwork and representation at work. It also examines the relationships cultivated between the author and reader on the page and the collaborative practice of ethnographic fieldwork. To do so, the article examines how the subject positions of researcher-interlocutor and author-reader are complicated in the field and in writing by discussing the author's experiences during fieldwork and how she interpreted structures of feeling, bodily gestures, the conjuring of emotion, and affective atmospheres in her book on Mars Hill Church and Mark Driscoll. The article concludes with a brief discussion of the author's current research on whiteness and Christianity to encourage an intersectional approach to the examination of social hierarchies and religious identities so that race, class, gender, sexuality and other categories of difference are given attention in ethnographic writing on religion.

Keywords: ethnography; reflexivity; writing; methodology; religion.

Ethnographic writing is a relational, social process that disturbs the very notion of authority connoted by the term "author". Ethnography signifies what anthropologists do as well as what they produce, the methodological practice of ethnographers during fieldwork as well as the articles and books that they write. In this way, ethnography is an ongoing process of discovery and creation. At its best, ethnographic writing on religion is not an exercise in explication or description

whereby the subject positions of researcher-interlocutor and author-reader are clearly divided and assured, but rather a perpetual encounter of rapport and collaboration. In ethnographic writing on religion, it is possible to conjure structures of feeling in events, voices and scenes that portray and enact affective processes, inviting the reader to participate in a relationship with the people, atmosphere and language animated on the page.

My ethnography on Mars Hill Church in Seattle, *Biblical Porn: Affect, Labor, and Pastor Mark Driscoll's Evangelical Empire* (2018), examines the religious, political and economic power of affect. The book begins with a scene in which I am sitting at my laptop watching a video of Pastor Mark Driscoll telling a lie during a less than sincere public apology. I am overwhelmed with sensations that bodily disturb my point of view as a seemingly detached observer with little personal stake in the unfolding of events—an anthropologist conducting fieldwork from my desk. My feelings do not easily translate to text and become the subject of analysis because I realize, after a decade of research, that I have become bodily, if not religiously, invested in a desire to believe.

> Stunned, I looked at my browser loaded with tabs open to sites with names such as Joyful Exiles, Mars Hill Refuge, Repentant Pastor, and We Love Mars Hill, where multiple testimonies to spiritual, emotional, and financial exploitation were posted with the authors' names clearly identified. My initial sense of betrayal seemed unreasonable given I had no personal attachment to any of the people in these stories, had not seen Driscoll preach live for years, and had never considered him an authority figure given I did not and never have self-identified as a Christian. I was not the video's intended audience; there was no rationalization, let alone words, for how I felt. I was not physically shaking as I watched Driscoll lie to my face through the computer screen, but my agitation was palpable and did not recede during the entirety of his message. Even more disconcertingly, I found myself not only hoping but also believing that he was going to change course and repent of his sin, as he had admonished audiences repeatedly and vehemently to do. I kept waiting for an acknowledgement of the specific charges of abuse, and the suffering that abuse had done to those who had the courage to openly testify to its prolonged spiritual and psychological toll, including the inability to trust religious authority or step foot into a church. When that did not happen, instead of doubting Driscoll, I started wondering if I had misheard or misunderstood. In a sense, I kept the faith alive until the final minutes of his message. (Johnson 2018: 2–3)

Despite myself, I was in relationship with Driscoll and invested in what he did. He had the capacity to move and disappoint me, even over the computer screen. In that moment, I realized that the screen was a part of this process of relation, as was Driscoll's voice, sense of humor, and ability to do harm. Digital and visual technologies, and their transmission of his gestures and speech, were entangled in the ways that I knew Driscoll. After years of listening and watching him

preach, in person and remotely, Pastor Mark and his media presence came to matter through digital and visual culture. I bodily and emotionally mediated our relationship through social dynamics that included objects. I did not believe in Driscoll's spiritual or church authority, but I felt its impact nevertheless, particularly as it brought me into relationship with people that I did not know. As I state a little later in the introduction to my ethnography, "In this mode, the ethnographer is instrument rather than authority" (Johnson 2018: 6). The book took on a life of its own. I felt that I had no choice but to analyze my experiences at the church using the theoretical frame of affect and make myself a subject of study, showing the reader how I came to be in relationship with the people, atmosphere and media of the church, even though I was not a Christian.

> I had come "under conviction", but not of my own sinful nature and need for salvation. I did not become born-again in Christian terms, but I had to confront the troubling reality that I had desired to believe in "Pastor Mark". This was a desire that I did not feel I deserved, nor frankly wished to own, given I had never sacrificed for the church nor ideologically seen eye-to-eye with Driscoll. That video haunted me with surplus affect, both possessed and inhabited, that was not truly mine. (Johnson 2018: 5)

Reflexivity is critical if the anthropologist is committed to examining and disrupting the power dynamics inherent in processes of ethnographic research and writing. Put simply, reflexivity is the practice of recognizing and acknowledging the ethnographer's positionality—identities, beliefs and biases—in the field and on the page. Using reflexivity, the ethnographer resists an omniscient perspective and voice in writing, while demonstrating an awareness of the limitations of their methodological standpoint and practice. This refusal of omnipotence, presuming to have a God's eye view and knowledge of a particular culture and people, is an ethical decision that requires vulnerability and risk during the practice of fieldwork and writing of ethnography. Ethnography is a humbling experience that requires an openness to confusion, discomfort, and making mistakes.

Epistemological certainty is not the goal in ethnographic writing, even if precise analysis, anthropological insight and factual argument based on solid empirical, discursive and textual evidence is. In ethnography, truth is an aim, but whose truth is a matter of reflexive inquiry. The political and methodological stakes of representation in ethnographic writing are as important as, and intertwined with, the findings of the ethnographer. The keywords of the anthropologist of religion (e.g., "culture", "religion", "community") are best conceived and construed as verbs rather than as nouns. Change is ongoing and messy among people, so the truth-claims made in ethnographic writing are less general, stable and bound than they appear in other forms. Unlike the statistical authority assumed

by sociologists that work with quantified methods to develop numerical evidence and sweeping concepts, or the supposedly objective style of writing in which journalists report on current events, reflexivity pushes ethnographers to question taken-for-granted assumptions in and through language.

From a reflexive stance, ethnographers of religion have a methodological obligation to show readers how their preconceptions have been challenged in the field, which itself is open-ended. As I describe it, "The clunky hyphenate used by anthropologists to describe ethnographic fieldwork, 'participant-observation,' becomes usefully troubled in the examination of affect—participant-observation does not occur *in* the field, it is *of* the field" (Johnson 2018: 4). I took on the work of affectively engaging readers in and through ethnographic writing, so that they had a sense of why I used affect theory as an analytical frame. In this way, I invited readers to experience how control and abuse were affectively networked through the visual and digital culture at Mars Hill Church, permeating the church's atmosphere. I wanted Christian and non-Christian readers to feel, not only understand, how Driscoll's teaching on what he called "biblical" gender and sexuality was embodied by congregants including, it turned out, me. Instead of simply tracing the historical lineage and religious beliefs behind Driscoll's sermonizing and the church's doctrine, I encouraged readers to bodily and emotionally know the fear, paranoia and shame agitated by their communication and mediation, through ethnographic writing animated on the page.

> After the video ended, I sought to interpret and identify what I was feeling in emotional terms and settled on paranoia, figuring this irrational response would quickly subside. After all, Mark's employ of hyperbole and humor to excite and seduce audiences were renowned and considered among his gifts and strengths as a communicator. However, rather than fading, the intensity and unpredictability of sensations impossible to pin down kept me awake nights and indoors at my desk scanning the Internet for the unknown and unknowable. Information? Affirmation? Safety? And from whom or what, exactly? (Johnson 2018: 4)

Rather than hypotheses to prove, ethnographers start with questions to be considered. In turn, these discoveries are represented in a narrative form that is as culturally dynamic as peoples' bodies and socially entangled as individuals' lives. In the introduction to my ethnographic study of Mars Hill Church, I make it clear that the semiotic analysis of language and text is insufficient to understand how Driscoll cultivated spiritual authority.

> Driscoll was not witnessing to me personally in the video, nor was he using a biblical grammar that opened narrative gaps through which to insert myself as unbelieving listener. Rather than a sacred rite of passage, his concluding remarks conjured the folding of pornography into pew Bibles—a profane joke that complicated our subject positions of speaker/ listener and believer/non-believer, given its ambiguity. I could not be certain whether the prank was *on*

> or *by* him. Semiotics was an unhelpful tool of analysis, as this affective process was unnecessarily dialogical and therefore porously open-ended; mediation occurred bodily without becoming meaningful. (Johnson 2018: 5–6)

Ethnographic writing affords the anthropologist of religion the unique opportunity to delve into the details of how power works while troubling binaries often drawn between the religious and the secular. Ethnographers can portray and analyze how relationships between transcendence and immanence happen, through mysteries and questions that are unnecessarily conjured by encounters with the divine or arise in spaces designated sacred:

> I experienced conviction as irreducibly social while sitting alone at my desk. I had no language for what I was experiencing, nor had I "caught" Pastor Mark's. I could not discern divine providence or impose self-will in explanations for what was bodily unfolding. I did not ask *why* I wanted to believe Mark would repent to the extent that I even doubted myself, as there were no religious or personal reasons for such an investment; instead, I kept asking *how*. (Johnson 2018: 6)

My sense of coming "under conviction" had nothing to do with religious conversion, belief in God or a born-again evangelical identity.

Getting at the root cause of why people act as they do may appeal to those prone to psychologizing individual motives, but the ethnographer gathers evidence based on participant observation as much as interviews, because people lie and social dynamics are complex. While de-emphasizing the meaning of Driscoll's language, I examine how its onstage, onscreen and online performance exploited affective processes during which the space and medium of communication conflated. When I examine texts, films, sermons or speech, I am not strictly doing so in terms of ideology using representational frames, but as socially embodied processes of mediation. In turn, what I call an affective ecology of Evangelical Empire at Mars Hill Church is an assemblage of agency that includes human and nonhuman bodies—media technologies, collective moods and invisible demons. I demonstrate how strategies of power excite and contaminate, rather than strictly police or regulate, relationships between human and nonhuman bodies at and beyond the church's multiple locations. Therefore, assemblage was a useful concept in my ethnographic analysis of religious and political power dynamics among the people, atmosphere and technologies of Mars Hill. Writing on Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "assemblage", Jasbir Puar notes, "Assemblages do not privilege bodies as human, nor as residing within a human/animal binary. Along with a de-exceptionalizing of human bodies, multiple forms of matter can be bodies—bodies of water, cities, institutions, and so on. Matter is an actor" (Puar 2012). Assemblage was a vital analytical lens for examining how Driscoll was able to simultaneously capitalize on the Bible and pornography as instruments of spiritual and worldly

power—to brand his image, market his charisma, proclaim religious authority, and wield control to great spiritual harm.

Ethnographic writing is shaped by conceptual frameworks so that anthropologists do not fall into the trap of empiricism, whereby the world is portrayed, examined and believed to be perfectly and clearly rendered in descriptive language. To be ethically and analytically sound, anthropologists of religion adopt critical self-awareness as they consider and address the representational politics and methodological limitations at work in their writing. Reflexivity on the part of the ethnographer also shapes the crucial consideration of the people and worlds that they engage, study and create on the page. In this way, ethnographers seek to undermine the tendency to stereotype, group or classify people according to hierarchical categories in writing—us and them, self and other, or civilized and primitive. Historian Joan Scott raises the problem of writing the history of difference through visible characteristics that distinguish categories of people from some presumed (and usually unstated) norm (1991: 773). When "writing is reproduction", Scott observes, "the communication of knowledge gained through (visual, visceral) experience ... depends on a referential notion of evidence which denies that it is anything but a reflection of the real" (1991: 775–76). Thus, the anthropologist of religion is careful to examine differences not only in religious belief or theological orientation, but also race, gender, sexuality, class, and other categories of identity.

In my current ethnographic project, I am spending as much time and as many words examining topics and identities couched in terms of whiteness as I am Christianity. In this examination, I consider assumptions about and practices of religion in secular spaces where white supremacy and Christian nationalism are mutually constituted. For example, I analyze the practice of evangelical prayer before the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance among a group of predominantly white parents during a school board meeting in which anti-racist curriculum and its bogeyman "critical race theory" are discussed. Instead of explicitly representing and classifying "religion", I consider racist testimonies to "colorblindness" in relation to an explicitly religious practice in this seemingly secular space. I explore, to borrow from Scott, "how difference is established, how it operates, and how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world" (1991: 777). In so doing, I practice critical race theory in ethnographic writing more than I explain it, to contest rather than reproduce ideologies such as white supremacy and Christian nationalism, or reiterate hierarchies, categories and binaries through which whiteness becomes the norm, invisible and ahistorical.

Religious studies scholar Malory Nye (2018) maintains that the category of religion is a form of racialization, then asks, "When we speak of religion are we in fact talking about race" (2018: 1)? Rather than considering religion and race as

separate categories, Nye identifies how religion is often used as a marker of race in the process of defining certain groups as subjects for subjugation and exploitation (2018: 8). Thus, the terms "religion" and "race" create, endorse and universalize the particularities of local structures of power and difference (2018: 9). In my ethnographic writing on the public-school board meeting, I show and examine how white supremacy and Christian nationalism become entangled in a specific place and particular way, as white parents erroneously discuss the evils of what they believe to be "critical race theory", which they couch as a tool of anti-white racism and indoctrination.

In this project, I ethnographically represent and analyze what religious studies scholars Karen and Barbara Fields (2014) call "racecraft", or "social facts" that "originate not in nature but in human action and imagination ... collective yet individual, day-to-day yet historical ... the outcome [of which] is a belief that presents itself to the mind and imagination as a vivid truth" (2014: 19). After the ritual of prayer then pledge, white speakers testify to the vivid truth of race despite their belief in "colorblindness". In effect, white Christian nationalism is structurally embedded and performatively embodied in the school board meeting's agenda and procedure. In conspiratorial moral panics over "critical race theory", racecraft is produced and becomes a social fact of individual action and collective imagination. In ethnographic writing, racecraft can become usefully visible, illuminated as an event, an assemblage and a power dynamic that is concurrently and irretrievably religious and political.

By ethnographically writing about the usage of evangelical prayer and biblical verse in white parents' testimonies to "colorblindness" as they railed against "anti-white critical race theory", I critically examined how the racialization of whiteness relies on Christianity (Nye 2018: 19), even in the secular space of the public-school board meeting. I did not need to know the religious identities of the white people in the room to show how their anti-critical race theory positions were Christian nationalist. Nye notes, "markers of Christianity are often taken as markers of whiteness (such as God, the Bible, the 'family', particular sexual ethics, and politics)", a process of signification through which white Americans are interpellated in white American nationalism (2018: 19–20). In sum, "there is no simple place where 'race' ends and 'religion' begins" (Nye 2018: 22). Through ethnographic writing, anthropologists of religion can consider how complicated relations of race and religion play out locally and in detail, to better understand and more justly approach dynamics of colonial, empiric and nationalist power.

Ethnographers have the unique opportunity to demonstrate in writing how assemblages of race and religion are situated, ongoing, social, relational, affective and embodied. Reflexively writing about the empirical data through which

entanglements of race and religion become visible and visceral, ethnographers simultaneously narrate a story while critically analyzing the structures through which their evidence is discursively articulated and materially enacted.

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