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## On Teaching Ethnography in Troubled Times

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### Abstract

In this essay, I describe an incident stemming from a field-based ethnographic exercise I utilize in one of the courses which I have designed and which I regularly teach. In my estimation, the contours of the incident I describe here reveal the institutional and ideological parameters of a paradigm that currently dominates contemporary American campuses. I suggest that my experience points to frictions between that seemingly hegemonic academic paradigm and the core values and practices that the discipline of anthropology endeavours to carry into the new millennium. I conclude that this experience, and the institutional practices and ideologies it reveals, portends a difficult future for an anthropologically moored practice of ethnography — one that seeks to systematically and empathically explore the experiences of diverse others in this world.

### Introduction

I began teaching anthropology at the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington in 2005. As a member of a small joint Sociology-Anthropology department offering courses only in sociocultural anthropology, teaching an introductory course in the discipline has been a mainstay in my perennial duties. My department and our university allow faculty the latitude to design and structure courses as we see fit. In the years since my arrival, I've settled on a basic architecture for my rendition of an introductory course in anthropology: students learn about the long and storied history of the discipline, have a chance to ply some ethnographic methods out in the surrounding city, and read and discuss two ethnographic monographs during the second half of the semester. For many students, this course is the only time in their lives they will explore the discipline I love.

To many of its potential students, the fieldwork component of this course is its most attractive element. In the first year I taught the course, students conducted various field observations on campus. Subsequently, we tried riding city buses for the entirety of their route, and later rode elevators up and down the taller buildings in Tacoma in order to analyse the behavioural politics of humans in those compact spaces. After another year of experimentation, I eventually configured a fieldwork assignment around attendance at a nearby megachurch (see Figure 5). After several semesters of success with the assignment, it has become a characteristic feature of my version of our department's introductory course.

I have found this field exercise to be particularly appropriate for students for several reasons. It is logistically advantageous that there are multiple scheduled services every Sunday and several additional services offered throughout the week. This schedule yields some flexibility in constructing a syllabus, and it is a convenient assignment for students to complete amidst the variety of extracurricular obligations typical of their lives. Finally, the church is nearby and open to newcomers, thereby circumventing the challenges to entry that often stymie undergraduate students engaged in first-time fieldwork.



Figures 1 & 2: In a similar field exercise designed to carry these young adults across thresholds of significant difference, students in a more advanced class than the one described in this essay visit a local gun show, interact with the purveyors there, and similarly attempt to discern the story those gun aficionados are telling themselves about themselves, their clients, and the world we all inhabit. Photograph by the author, 2016, 2017.

The service itself provides a rich and multilayered experience, with multiple realms for students' observations and analyses: there are symbolic, textual, ritual, interactional, and demographic features that might draw their analytic attention. After a class discussion of Clifford Geertz's essay on Balinese cockfights, students have several weeks to attend a service and craft a short essay that marshals ethnographic evidence to support an assertion concerning the story these American congregants are telling themselves about themselves, and how they understand their place in the social world. Each year, I receive many papers attentive to the diversity and constitution of the congregation; many students concentrate their attention on community and the sense of belonging that is continually reinforced in most services; some focus on the performative nature of the service and the technological stagecraft involved; others levy their gaze on the profit-seeking nature of the institution and the services it mounts; still, others find altogether novel features of the service to scrutinize with their analytic lens.

In addition to its logistical utility, this assignment satisfies a deeper pedagogic yen I've recently developed. Issues, topics, themes and approaches that were once the domain of anthropology and sociology are now claimed by and central to many other disciplines and departments. Numerous colleagues in a variety of different departments are, nowadays, concerned with race, ethnicity, gender, culture, social organization, and all the other aspects of human diversity that were once principally the purview of sociology and anthropology. Anthropology's methodological toolkit has also proliferated to those disciplines that still require evidence to support their claims and assertions. In short, other mainline disciplines, many ethnic and area studies programs, and numerous other interdisciplinary coagulations envision the conversations, topics and methods that once defined social anthropology as both their own purview and, for some, their *raison d'être*.

But amidst this shifting academic landscape, and amidst the balkanization of anthropology's concerns into new programs and inter-disciplines, what remains unique to anthropology is its longstanding commitment to crossing thresholds of difference on a voyage toward an informed, empathic, and firsthand understanding of difference. This is the enduring feature of anthropological ethnography, an ideal salvaged from the discipline's colonialist beginnings (see Figure 3). Unlike other disciplines and fields, this encounter with difference is woven into anthropology's DNA. Albeit with notable and valuable exceptions in the ethnographic canon, I suggest that anthropology's unique and enduring contribution is its longstanding commitment to understanding others — others different from ourselves as observing analysts. With that enduring commitment to crossing thresholds of difference comes ethnography, the methodological toolkit designed (and refined over more than a century) to systematically enable and inform such a feat, and historically integral to anthropologists' efforts in combatting eugenics, segregation, racism and bigotry both here in North America and in many other parts of the globe.



Figure 3: In 1914, Austrian subject and London School of Economics student Bronislaw Malinowski began to await the conclusion of World War One with sustained immersion in village life on the Trobriand Islands of Papua New Guinea, and thereby established the basic template for the ethnographic method that endures to this day. Photo in public domain, from the Wellcome Library, London.

For an expensive liberal arts institution in the Pacific Northwest, a journey to the megachurch provides something that approximates such an experience for most of my students. The church remains a culturally foreign experience to many of the students at Puget Sound. The principal and recurring “learning moment” conveyed in this assignment involves students’ analytic journey beyond the simplistic and reactionary critiques that come readily to many progressive and secular young adults in the contemporary United States. In conveying the story which this congregation tells themselves about themselves and the world we all inhabit, I push students to seek some glimmer of ethnographic empathy as they build their analytic, interpretive assertions with data they have gathered.

In 2017, roughly fifty students in two different sections of the course received this assignment, and collectively they attended various services spread over several weeks. After the second weekend had passed, several students arrived in class with some degree of consternation. The most vocal of those students conveyed that they had been offended by the theme articulated by the megachurch’s charismatic minister during his sermon, wherein he (allegedly) trash-talked the Islamic tradition before making his case for the type of salvation provided by Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

To navigate this consternation, I reiterated to the students what I needed from them. In the papers which were soon due to me, I was seeking some modicum of empathy, understanding, and insight. In what ways were these xenophobic attitudes meaningful to portions of this congregation? What purposes were being served with these representations of Islam? What does this bigotry tell us about how this congregation sees the world and its place in it? And to what extent does the minister speak on behalf of his congregation? Moreover, I reinforced to my students the fact that their experiences provided a rare opportunity: in the prior years when I had used this assignment at the same megachurch, these types of attitudes and sentiments were typically difficult to discern, arduous to analytically excavate, or simply left to the vagaries of interpretation. Never before had students returned to class with such clear and visible evidence of bigotry, I noted to them.

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<sup>1</sup> That particular pastor recently relinquished the pulpit.



Figure 4: Franz Boas, often conceived as the father of American anthropology, devoted much of his life's efforts to combatting racist policies in early twentieth-century America, and countering the growingly popular eugenics of his time. He and his students were instrumental in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case and in the racial integration that characterized the mid-century period in the US.

One of those students — a young American man of Asian descent — followed our class discussion with a visit to my office hours. There he reiterated his frustration with what he had encountered at the service, but added that he had also felt afraid. Although not a Muslim himself, he recognized that with his skin and his appearance he could have been mistaken for one, and he conveyed to me that he had felt frightened by the service. In response, I offered my sympathy, confirmed how difficult it was to hear these sorts of things in ethnographic fieldwork, and related a few of the dangerous, sketchy, and disturbing settings I had encountered in my own fieldwork in the Middle East. Then I honed in on the promise I discerned in this scenario: in ethnography, we are the research instrument, and the embodied fear he experienced provided him with an evidentiary foundation to which other students lacked access. This fact yielded him an extraordinary opportunity with the paper soon due to me — the embodied fear he experienced should be central in his analysis, I suggested.



Figure 5: The large church — perhaps the busiest in town — is centrally located, surrounded by an asphalt moat of parking, accessible by public transportation, and offers a variety of services for the diversity of residents in the greater Tacoma area. Photograph by the author, 2018.

Although the paper he finally turned in was a passable effort, it failed to successfully leverage his experiential evidence into the poignant and critical analysis I envisioned to be possible. The remainder of the semester passed without incident. Once grades were filed, however, I was informed by the administration that the student had levied a pair of charges against me via our Office of Diversity and Inclusion. In the first of those charges, the student contended that I had discriminated against him — a “student of colour,” in the American nomenclature — by requiring him to attend what he now referred to as a “hate rally.” In the second of these charges, he contended that by sending him into a life-threatening scenario for a class assignment, I had demonstrated negligence.<sup>2</sup> The articulation of these allegations was facilitated by our university’s Office of Diversity and Inclusion, a now ubiquitous feature of American higher education institutions. In the ensuing months, the Dean of Diversity occasionally updated me about the process and the status of the charges being formulated against me.

In conversation with that Dean and several others in the administration, the student eventually agreed to settle his charges in arbitration. Over two long arbitration meetings in which we were both present, the student lobbed numerous additional assertions at me in support of his original allegations. He contended that he had been obligated to suffer through the entirety of the sermon that had frightened him. He suggested that security personnel should accompany all students to the megachurch in the future to ensure their safety. He demanded that I publicly apologize for my pedagogic missteps, and that I do so in writing. Several times he framed his motivations in the American trappings of social justice and activism — that in levying these charges, he merely sought to ensure future students would not have to endure what he had been forced to experience. His concern, he sought to imply, was for others.



Figure 6: A typical service at the local megachurch is a technologically complex and eventful ritual that seems particularly well configured to contemporary attention spans. It commences with approximately twenty minutes of live Christian adult contemporary music. Photograph by the author, 2018.

In the final accounting – which is to say on an official, legal and institutional level – both charges were dismissed. Although I find it frustrating to use syllabi to explicitly state what I consider to be commonsensical, and while I remain wary of normalizing the sprawling legal imaginary that has enveloped American academic administrations, to reach that endpoint I agreed to integrate the following text into the assignment for future classes:

The goal of this assignment is to cross the threshold of cultural familiarity and to briefly immerse yourself in a cultural world that is unfamiliar to you. For some of you, this setting may be too familiar to serve that function, and we should discuss a possible alternative assignment. For most of you, know that discomfort and unease are a

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<sup>2</sup> Having attended services many times at this church, and after watching versions of this particular service on the web, I believe these charges overstated harm, conflated conflict (or, in this case, social friction) with abuse, and helped establish the student’s victimhood identity, as adroitly described by Schulman (2016). Moreover, as Schulman notes, these claims appeal to, and reinforce, the power of the state to adjudicate social relations — a troubling incursion and extension of the state into our social space.

fundamental element of the ethnographic process. Our pedagogic goal, however, does not include feeling afraid or unsafe. Of course, if you encounter any situations that directly threaten your safety, please carefully and immediately exit, and see me at your earliest convenience.

What is there to learn from all of this? I understand, foremost, that the lessons I draw from my experience are both partial and relative, in the sense that others may see facets of this scenario that I fail to intuit or grasp. Moreover, I recognize that amidst a period in contemporary America in which my whiteness and my male gender are the most salient characteristics of my identity, there is some appropriate justice to the fact that my understandings are challenged, my assertions are contested, my security is displaced, and that the broad foundations of my positionality continue to erode. I am widely supportive of a social trajectory that might equalize relations in America, and like many anthropologists, my tribal affiliation foremost adheres to the whole of humanity.

Yet none of these sensitivities obviates the responsibilities and privileges woven into a career in academia. For centuries, we have stewarded a set of enduring intellectual conversations through complex, divided, and changing historical circumstances. Indeed, I've come to think of these disciplinary conversations as the keels that steady our path through troublesome seas. For anthropologists, that sustained scholarly conversation long concerned cataloguing and assessing the diversity of human differences that comprise our world, and theorizing how we might think about the human experience in the context of that mosaic of social and cultural difference. These foci were distilled via an ethnographic toolkit developed to systematically facilitate the achievement of those understandings. Those frameworks and those methodologies are central features of the courses we teach, and central features of the pedagogic experience which I have described in this essay. Sadly, however, my experience suggests to me a variety of challenges we face in stewarding anthropology through these fractious times. My concerns and anxieties are threefold.

First, how will anthropology persevere in an institutional ecosystem increasingly aligned to combat difference rather than engage it? As I was finalizing revisions to this essay, the Chief Diversity Officer on our campus issued a preemptory letter to the entire student body and all staff about "offensive and culturally insensitive costumes" that seemingly (purportedly?) pervade Halloween celebrations in America. In the closing sentiments of a long email addressed to the campus community, he notes the following: "In the event you experience, witness or become aware of something you believe to be a bias incident or behavior, I encourage you to report the incident using our Bias and Hate Education Response Team (BHERT) online form." While this may seem a pedestrian fragment of an email unrelated to the incident I have described here, consider the implicit assertions woven into the Dean's plea: that student activist energies are appropriately trained on the domain of our residential campus; that students should endeavour to police their social environment for moral infractions; that the criteria for defining those infractions can be delineated by the students themselves; and that institutional conduits and groups stand ready to facilitate student activism in this realm.

The intended outcome envisioned through these underlying assertions is morally incoherent to me. But considering the experience I have described here, the assertions themselves are also revealing. I suggest that the Dean's email is emblematic of a substantial thread woven through contemporary campus culture, and that grasping the terrain of that campus culture helps illuminate the motivations and ideas driving the student's reaction to my assignment. Nowhere outside of my classroom was the student being encouraged to engage or interact with the differences he encountered on my assignment, but in the context of the implicit assertions described above, the student was performing as instructed by an institutional culture that cultivates these outlooks and facilitates these activisms.<sup>3</sup> In short, he was policing the domain of the campus for moral infractions, the delineation of which was rendered by his own judgement and criteria. His agency was encouraged by my institution, and his activism was facilitated by our institutional ecosystem. In the United States, anthropology must now be taught in this context — in an environment in which our students are encouraged to divine and report what they perceive to be infractions to the moral order (see Winegard and Winegard 2018). Our courses, our classrooms, and our campuses are the domain for the performance and the development of their budding activist energies.<sup>4</sup>

My second concern is a corollary to the first concern: how will anthropology navigate an era in which students' activisms gravitate away from the distant reaches of our complicated and diverse world, and are instead steered to a myopic focus on the campus itself? In my case, I saw hints of the activist tenor of the student's charges in his

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<sup>3</sup> Fisher (2014: n.p.) thinks of this in terms of academic capital and its accumulation, resulting in a cultural landscape in which individual achievement "is driven by a priest's desire to excommunicate and condemn, an academic-pedant's desire to be the first to be seen to spot a mistake, and a hipster's desire to be one of the in-crowd."

<sup>4</sup> Through this performance, students are taught that policing the moral domain on campus is a form of activism. That conflation then frames subsequent interactions with difference.

repeated claim to be acting foremost to protect unspecified future students from enduring what he had experienced, and also in the transposition of the social frictions he encountered out in the world-as-it-is into the charges levied against me. But my own experience is an imperceptible blip in a much more substantial wave of campus incidents in the United States, some of which have reached national attention, and all of which are emblematic of the increasing consolidation of student activism to the domain of campus itself.<sup>5</sup> An undeniably valuable commodity, youthful activist energies are now principally directed at the faculty, administrators, and other personnel who comprise the institutions of higher education. And while activism consigned to campus can be readily recognized as neutered sorts of activism, this is of particular concern to the discipline of anthropology, with the worldly vantage point on global diversity and interaction it promotes.

Thirdly, and finally, over several centuries in pursuit of its scholarly objectives, anthropology has established a substantial and proven track record combatting racism, bigotry, xenophobia, discrimination, and ethnocentricity. In accruing these accomplishments, this discipline has relied heavily on its methodological toolkit: crossing boundaries of difference, engaging that difference, and trying to develop an empathic understanding of otherness has been anthropology's calling card in academia.<sup>6</sup> But how will that core mission persevere in the climate of today's ivory tower? In his assessment of the paradigm washing over contemporary academia, Mark Lilla (2017) traces the taproot of contemporary American identity politics to the 1977 Combahee River Collective Manifesto's declaration that "the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly from our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression." I suggest this atomistic sentiment is also perceptible in the motivations of the student and in the institutional ecosystem that facilitated the charges he levied — to "authentically" speak one's own truth, to shun unpalatable difference rather than engage it, and to reject those differences rather than try to understand them.

It is for this last reason, most of all, that I will endeavour to continue with my assignment. Anthropology should never yield the capacity to speak for others. Speaking for others is an indelible feature of our disciplinary tradition, and we achieve those ends through sustained, immersive and necessarily challenging ethnographic fieldwork. We must continue to help students experience the value of these journeys. Our methods have been integral in our disciplinary efforts to combat the racisms, bigotries, and discriminations so readily found in this world. As we wade more deeply into the moralistic cultural politics that define contemporary academia, and as American imperialism continues to erode, perhaps anthropologists should more strenuously trumpet ethnography's capacity to speak about others with understanding and empathy. Maybe this is the central feature of our enduring academic legacy. From a North American vantage point, it seems a tradition more valuable than ever as society continues to fragment into cultural enclaves, ethnic tribes, and a constellation of militant particularisms.

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<sup>5</sup> A handful of the many examples are discussed in Whittington (2018).

<sup>6</sup> Klein (2018) envisions the same value to ethnography in his recent article.

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