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Title
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Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3j45m6g4

Journal
Geoforum, 41(1)

ISSN
0016-7185

Author
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Publication Date
2010

DOI
10.1016/j.geoforum.2009.09.007

Peer reviewed

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ARTICLE IN PRESS

Geoforum xxx (2009) xxx–xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Geoforum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/geoforum

Critical review

Neither friends nor foes: Thoughts on ethnographic distance

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 3 April 2009
Received in revised form 17 September 2009
Available online xxxx

Keywords:
Ethnography
Participatory research
Conservative evangelical Christianity
Global missions
Korea

ABSTRACT

As a critical ethnographer of proselytizing missions led by conservative Korean/American evangelicals, I discuss the difficulties arising from conducting research in a hostile group setting, negotiating the dynamics of empathetic proximity and critical distance.

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Ethnography blurs lines and complicates boundaries. Participants are also observers, insiders double as outsiders, and ethnographers become immersed in the intimate lives of strangers. The paradoxical idea of conducting ethnographic research from an *oppositional* position thus draws attention to the persistence of normative presuppositions and pre-existing commitments, and reminds us that some lines may never be overcome. Therein lies the dilemma—is it possible to engage in ethical and critical research when the subject is deemed the "enemy" from the outset? Is it ever practical or productive to approach ethnography this way? To extend the admittedly militaristic metaphor, at what point shall the embedded critical researcher worry about friendly fire?

Some autobiographical details are necessary here to locate myself in this discussion. I initially set out to examine the political geography of ethnic churches as powerful institutions that significantly shape the lives and experiences of immigrants in the United States. I have been an out lesbian and a social justice activist for some time, having worked for various feminist, racial justice and immigrant rights groups over the years. In 1999 I worked as an organizer against a virulently anti-gay campaign launched by conservative Korean American pastors in Southern California who sought to eliminate any civil rights protection for gays and lesbians. Theirs was a regressive campaign of unprecedented scale, involving hundreds of immigrant Korean Protestant churches and their leaders throughout the state. Our counter-campaign was an ad hoc, gay-straight coalition of Korean American and other Asian American activists and progressive community-based organizations. Though the churches' anti-gay effort failed that year, the momentum would later deliver a significant number of immigrant votes against same-sex marriage in 2000 (California Proposition 22), and again in banning same-sex marriage in 2008 (California Proposition 8).

My interest in conservative religious formations began partly from this firsthand "frontline" experience of organizing against the immigrant Korean/American Christian Right. A major part of my research agenda was to counter a dominant theme in the mainstream scholarship on immigrant religion—the idea that the ethnic church simply eases people's anxieties about being uprooted and displaced, and meets practical social needs (Warner and Wittner, 1998; Warner, 2001; Yoo and Chung, 2008). Feeling that a more in-depth and critical look was necessary and timely, my work departed from studies that viewed ethnic churches primarily as safe havens and positively coalescing spaces of community gathering (see Min and Kim, 2002). Instead, I regarded the immigrant churches as socio-cultural and religio-political institutions with historical and theological ties to conservative South Korean Protestant Christianity and the American Christian Right (Diamond 1995). I set out to examine immigrant churches as powerful incubators of ideas and political agendas, as well as economic interests.

Researching immigrant Korean Americans in California and their transnational partners in South Korea, I soon found that the church space was more than an inbound enclave but also an actively outward space of mission-sending, with a profoundly "global sense of place" (Han, 2005; Massey, 1994). Expanding the study of evangelical missions beyond the conventional treatment as a colonial encounter between the West and the "rest," I examined how Korean/American missionaries imagined the overseas mission destinations, how transnational missionary networks were mobilized,

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doi:10.1016/j.geoforum.2009.09.007

Please cite this article in press as: Han, J.H.J. Neither friends nor foes: Thoughts on ethnographic distance. Geoforum (2009), doi:10.1016/j.geoforum.2009.09.007

and how missions actually operated on the ground. Building upon the scholarship on critical and global ethnography, I sought to "convey the ongoing processes through which sets of power-laden practices in the multiple, interconnected arenas of everyday life at different spatial scales constantly rework places and identities" (Hart, 2002, p. 13). I thus approached world evangelization as a far-reaching world-making project that takes place across spatial scales, articulating local and global hierarchies and structures of privilege. In doing so, I saw how immigrant Korean/American missionaries who occupied a subordinated location in one place were able to enact their relative privilege and force of domination elsewhere. I also found that short-term missions actually intensified existing hierarchies of age, gender, and marital status through transnational endeavors and affective encounters.

For this multi-scalar research on world missions, I have visited clandestine safe houses in China where vulnerable North Korean migrants were confined in oppressive missionary custody, and I have participated in humanitarian and development projects in Uganda and Tanzania where a capitalist work ethic and Christian family values were imparted as part of the Koreanized Christian gospel. I have attended world evangelization strategy conferences and meetings in South Korea and the United States where "Islam missions"—proselytizing activities designed to mobilize Christians to make a concerted effort to reach and convert Muslims in particular—were touted as both a religious necessity and a geopolitical priority. I have taken part in worship services and prayer revivals where hundreds of immigrant Korean Americans blessed George W. Bush's war in Iraq as a righteous Christian endeavor that Koreans were obliged to support based on military and geopolitical alliances between South Korea and the United States. I have sat through four-hour prayers for the salvation of homosexuals in Satan's clutches in San Francisco, and I have held my breath while progressive values—such as human rights and social justice—were denigrated as the work of immoral, Satanic, Communist, and secular forces.

Needless to say, while the intensive ethnographic study has proved to be invaluable in helping me understand the intrinsic logic and contradictions of evangelical missionary practices, I often found the ethnographic task of immersing myself in such milieux—and feeling so self-consciously different from my surroundings—to be distressing and emotionally difficult to bear. For a number of reasons, I felt it necessary during the course of this research to maintain a personal policy of non-disclosure about my sexual identity and political allegiances, in departure from what I am accustomed to in my outspoken, activist daily life. In other words, I went back in the closet for the first time in over fifteen years. My personal religious faith—or lack thereof—was mostly not an issue. When asked, I would frankly explain that I grew up in a devout Christian family but that I was not Christian, and this was usually sufficient. Even if attempts were made to evangelize me, I could usually decline politely. Political differences were also fairly easy to sidestep. In private and public conversations, especially concerning US foreign policy, Israel, or Islam, I kept my dissenting opinions to myself, and as long as I did not speak up, I was assumed to be in agreement.

On the other hand, I found it far more taxing to evade endless questions about boyfriends and marriages—no small feat in Korean social contexts, and perhaps even more so in church settings—and denying access to such a basic part of who I was, where I lived, and with whom led me to feel more and more isolated and distant from my research subjects. If someone had just asked me forthright if I were queer, I would not have lied. I might have even felt relieved. I concede that some may regard my decisions as "strategic dishonesty," deceptive and self-serving strategies that were ultimately disingenuous (Katz, 1996). However, I felt that the very idea of "coming out" contains a culturally and historically particular set of values that privilege public declarations and enunciations, and saw little reason to do so especially in a hostile environment. The idea that coming out necessarily equals freedom and honesty in fact reveals a problematic teleological investment in a normative liberal model of a liberated, self-possessed, researcher-subject (see Puar, 2007).

In the ethnographic research context, drawing attention to my queerness would have been both inappropriate and unwelcome, and it would have disrupted the group dynamic that I was there to observe. For instance, most of the missionaries I studied in Africa believed that the AIDS pandemic resulted from homosexuality and promiscuous sexual practices, and offered seminars on abstinence and Christian family values based on these foundational beliefs. Some who disagreed did raise questions, but thousands of miles away from home, in-group cohesion took priority and many of these internal contestations were dismissed or postponed. Had I been visible as a scholar-activist or someone who might offer some autobiographical authority on the matter, I would have irrevocably altered the terms and contours of the group dynamic, and I would have been unable to observe how the group dealt with internal conflict on its own.

I also remain convinced that the non-disclosure had much to do with a genuine concern for safety. In one case during the early phase of the research, I was accosted by a belligerent Korean evangelist who wanted me to agree to "accept Jesus Christ as my only Lord and Savior." He demanded that I promise to devote my academic career to convince others that Christianity was the only path to Salvation. I did not agree with him, I did not know him, and I was not sure if he knew me at all. The confrontation seemed entirely based on an overzealous evangelist's wish to provide spiritual guidance for a young female newcomer. At first I declined politely, and followed with a firm "no thank you," but he became increasingly hostile and violent, at one point pounding his fist on the table between us. Red in the face and sweating, he began shouting that my health and my family's fortune would deteriorate from my ungrateful rejection, and I had to endure his fury for nearly an hour while another male pastor sat by in silence. We were alone in an empty church building on a late Sunday afternoon, and there was no one else who could hear us or come to my rescue. Several times I feared that he might physically assault me or worse, as I began thinking about all the queer men and women forced into prayer-exorcism programs designed to cast out, sometimes beat out, homosexuality and other so-called demons and perversions. I eventually managed to leave unharmed and never saw him again, but from that point on, I did become extremely cautious and began to make sure to let my partner and friends know my research schedule—where I was going, who I was meeting with, and whether I expected any trouble. And I always had an exit plan and a cell phone within reach.

I share this particular story because being embedded in a fervently evangelical milieu was not simply about putting up with conversations I find distasteful or tolerating comments I consider offensive. It was not simply about pretending to be someone else in order to gain research access. The fact is, as an unmarried, relatively young woman entering a hostile collective group setting, I was not in a position of power or status. There were many moments that I felt threatened and reduced to tears, intensely aware of the psychic and ideological distance between me and the people surrounding me. As the research took its emotional toll, I envied my peers engaged in participatory research with friendly, progressive social justice groups that seemed to integrate seamlessly with their personal lives and political activities. No doubt this is untrue, but the grass did seem greener elsewhere.

It is by now well-known that feminist and poststructural challenges have demanded greater reflexivity and attention to power relations, and problematized notions of impartiality or scientific

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objectivity. "Feminists with socioeconomic power" are implored to "investigate the grounds of their strong desire for rapport and intimacy with the 'other' " (Kaplan, 1994, p. 139). It must be said, however, that despite my differences with many of the conservative ideologues and practitioners, I have never regarded immigrant Korean/American evangelicals as an "other" or the "enemy," *per se*. After all, I am an immigrant Korean/American myself with evangelical family ties. To secular critics who paint evangelicals—or any religious actors—in broad, dismissive strokes as zealots or lunatics, I continue to find myself trying to explain the complex nuances of evangelical Christianity and its politics. To those who raise their eyebrows in dismay of immigrant Korean/Americans and their "backward" religious and social conservatism, I find myself countering with questions of Western bias and racist condescension—even if I sympathized with the criticisms.

I remain haunted by questions of empathy and ethics (Blee, 1993), and remain uneasy about the hyphen. Feminist scholarship has fostered a model based on a sympathetic, egalitarian research process "characterized by authenticity, reciprocity, and intersubjectivity between the researcher and her 'subjects' " (Stacey, 1991, p. 112). Participatory research likewise heeds calls for "more relevant, morally aware and nonhierarchical practice" (Pain, 2004, p. 652) by including previously excluded or marginalized perspectives and challenging the normative production of authoritative knowledge. The participatory turn promises good things when the researcher "gives back" through respectful and mutually beneficial collaboration. The ethics of equality and reciprocity follows the feminist tradition of oral history which promises to provide "new and accurate insights into the lives and understandings of ordinary people," recognizing the "range and complexities of narratives garnered from people outside elites" (Blee, 1993, p. 597). However, as Blee points out, the feminist insistence that a researcher "return the research" is "based on romantic assumptions about the consequences of fortifying the political agendas of ordinary people" (Blee, 1993, p. 606). Blee's research subjects, many of them quite ordinary, were also former and unapologetic members of the Ku Klux Klan, and Blee did not seek to empower the Klan by "giving back." She cautions against "the hazards of similarly empowering a political vision of racial and religious hatred" (Blee, 1993, p. 606). Avoiding these hazards is no simple matter. Certainly, I object to empowering vitriolic institutions built upon imperialistic visions to expand their power and reach worldwide. But ethnographic research has forced me to grapple with the nuances and contradictions of evangelical intentionalities and missionary orientations without simply opposing or rejecting them. After all, if I did not want to be dismissive, I had to engage them, even if not empathetically.

As much as it was uncomfortable "behind the enemy lines," I could not draw clear lines in the sand with "us" on one side and the "enemy" on the other side. Perhaps this was due to my feminist training in questioning the production and maintenance of oppositional binaries and their exclusionary force. Perhaps I wanted to embrace the location on the border, wrought with contradictions and contestations. Certainly, I was at the intersection of several crisscrossing lines with context-dependent friends and foes. I was not studying alien others, cultural or otherwise. I have long been familiar with the kind of passionate, Pentecostalism-infused Christianity that characterizes the mainstream of Korean Protestantism. Having grown up in Korea until my teens, I am fully bilingual and bicultural, a background that enabled extraordinary access to both Korean-speaking immigrants and English-speaking Korean Americans, two groups that do not typically mix in Christian social arrangements. I am also of an in-between age group—unmarried in my mid-thirties, old enough to be taken seriously by middle-aged and older married women but young enough to socialize with the youth and twenty-somethings. Even my androgynous appearance and academic researcher credentials permitted access to both male-dominated spaces of organizational leadership and intellectual pontification and female-dominated spaces of the kitchen and other spaces of reproductive and care labor.

I could try to summarize by way of asserting liminality and hybridity, embracing my location as a bicultural and bilingual Korean–American insider–outsider and participant–observer. But I do not wish to romanticize "life on the hyphen" (Ortega, 2001), as it entails a precarious walk on a tightrope, requiring a delicate balance between membership and dissent, proximity and distance. And there is an immense psychic toll. Sara Ahmed has described the ethnographer as a professional stranger striving to "get closer to the object, in order to gain more knowledge" (Ahmed, 2000, p. 52), but as an ethnographer, I struggled to keep the object at an arm's length in order to gain *any* knowledge. Ethnography is said to transform "the stranger from an ontological lack to an epistemic privilege" (Ahmed, 2000, p. 53), but again, this process depends entirely on the power geometries of the field in which the stranger-ethnographer is located.

On my last night in Uganda, concluding an ethnographic research of a month-long mission trip in East Africa, a group of young women and men invited me to a farewell party in my honor. I had befriended many of them, having commiserated while sleeping on dirt floors and spending countless hours talking about the trip and life experiences, and I was very touched by their gesture. About a dozen of us sat in a circle, in late night dimly lit with flashlights, and shared lukewarm Coca-Cola and orange soda with whatever cookies and dried squids remained in our personal provisions. One woman suggested that they take turns sharing stories and impressions about me, and in spite of my protest, a round of reflections began. This is how I discovered that as I had observed them, my research subjects had of course observed me, too. One woman admitted that she was apprehensive at first about being studied, and joked that she was disappointed that I did not show up wearing a white lab coat like a proper scientist. Another woman said she was happy to see me immersed in work, and like everyone else, wished that I would accept Christ as my Savior. Someone else thanked me for sharing my toothpaste and shampoo, another complained about my withholding salacious stories of love and romance, and several shouted in joy remembering the pizza I brought back for the group after a solo excursion downtown one afternoon.

The most amazing anecdote was shared by Mina, a pseudonym, whom I had spotted from the very start. She was a painfully shy and self-effacing young woman in her late teens, with a plain haircut and simple dress, awkwardly sitting on the sidelines of most conversations. When it came to her turn, Mina said timidly that when she first arrived, she was extremely nervous about spending a month with total strangers. But then she saw someone just as alone and lonely, someone who looked just as lost and out of place, and this gave her the strength to feel that she was not alone. I was this lonely someone else in Mina's eyes. There I was, thinking that I had successfully embedded myself as an ethnographer, an active participant–observer, but the one person I had singled out as the most misfit in the group had identified *me* as her kindred spirit. I was humbled by my reflection in the mirror Mina held up, and moved by her heartfelt appreciation of the stranger-to-stranger connection she felt with me. Even though I tried to understand the missionaries by getting closer to them, I had clearly restricted access and resisted being understood *by* them. I was responsible for creating and maintaining that distance, as my ethnographical position in this case required that I remain a stranger among them. This realization was painful. The fact that this farewell party concluded with the group singing hymns and praying for me—some in tongues—seemed ironically befitting. I understood and genuinely appreciated their sentiment, but shared neither the content

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nor the expression of their faith nor conviction. The moment was an acute reminder that I was proximate, but still a stranger.

Critical ethnography requires that differences not be sublimated through empathy or similarities amplified through solidarity. Rather, it insists that the ethnographer stand in productive tension, moving in spaces both familiar and strange, negotiating the constant fluctuations of distance and proximity. It is not only in moments of empathetic proximity that profound knowledge is produced, and it is certainly not only in moments of apathetic distance that accuracy in knowledge can be guaranteed. It is precisely the tension in-between that has the potential to generate most revealing insights about the complex social worlds that we all inhabit.

Evangelical missionaries may have expressed their proselytizing intentions as an irrefutable religious calling, but in actuality, their practices reflected a multiplicity of social locations with enough nodes of affinity that I could not in good conscience hold on to a simple binary opposition of "us" and "them." The belligerent evangelist was also a frustrated Silicon Valley engineer who recently lost his job and desperate to prove himself, and Mina the timid missionary in Uganda was also a recent immigrant undergoing a traumatic adjustment process in the US. The vivacious social worker eager to work with AIDS orphans was herself a Korean War orphan, and the unflappable elderly woman who spent all her time cooking and washing the dishes for the missionaries in Africa was actually thrilled to be on her very first trip overseas. The intricate imbrications between religious motivations and secular intentions played out in the most mundane details of everyday practices. The mission field was a version of any social space, fraught with its own contradictions and contestations. It was not an elsewhere, an uncharted enemy territory—my discomfort was at least in part because it was so familiar, no matter how much I tried to distance myself.

Acknowledgements

I thank Morgan Robertson and Claudia Thiem for organizing the "Behind the Enemy Lines" roundtable at the 2007 annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers in San Francisco. This research was funded by the Korea Foundation and the Center for Race and Gender, Institute of International Studies, Institute of East Asian Studies, and the Center for Korean Studies at UC Berkeley. As always, I am indebted to Jennifer Jihye Chun for her insightful comments and encouragement.

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