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THREE CLASSROOM READINGS OF 'ETHNOGRAPHIC PRACTICE' IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES

LESSONS FROM ELSEWHERE

I recall one exercise in practical learning from my undergraduate years in anthropology and cultural studies. As we were nearing the end of the term, our instructor had labored to lay the groundwork for lessons from elsewhere, from Malinowski's demand for offshore imaginings in fieldwork among the Trobrianders to Evans-Pritchard's study of Azande magic in comparative relation to reason and science. One afternoon, we the students entered the lecture hall beset with an initiation rite of sorts, herded together toward one alcove where a brightly colored tepee made of wax print cloth awaited us. Queued up, one by one, each of us peered inside, and in wordless following of instruction, proceeded back to our seats to write what we had firsthand observed. From a superficial glance, the scene staged a modest collection of divination objects: palm nuts, a chain of seeds, stones, a faintly lit candle. In retrospect, now having taught some anthropology and religion courses, I believe the instructor had maybe simply sought a break away from the monotony of text, discussion and examination. More than this, there was something to be gained from this pedagogical simulation of fieldwork and critical reflection. What is presumed of 'ethnographic practice' and what can it offer for classroom learning?

In keeping with this special issue's focus on "pedagogical exercises and theories of practice," I offer some preliminary thoughts on what ethnographic approaches to practice might bring to the learning of everyday religion in the classroom. More specifically, I delve into three models / strategies of fieldwork and writing that invite thought on potential trajectories of practical knowledge, representation and evaluation: 1. the phenomenological domain of experience as the basis of critique; 2. the aesthetic strategies of representing alterity and difference, and; 3. the

role that material culture plays in illumining the activity of humans, things, objects and ideas. These themes have already been much rehearsed among scholars of anthropology and religious studies. What this essay seeks to do is to revisit these three aspects in synthetic consideration of what practical exercises—of experiential encounter, critically reflexive imagination and material mediation—might suggest for the instruction of religious study.

'Ethnography,' following its etymological origins, is the 'writing' (*graphe*) of a 'people' (*ethnos*) and has historically entailed a methodological commitment to fieldwork and descriptive form. When I speak here of 'ethnographic practice,' I additionally mean to invoke the pathbreaking experimentation of the "Writing Culture" collective in the 1980's, a group of anthropologists who have since spearheaded conscious engagement with the poetics and politics of ethnography.[1] Such engagement has included exploring the interactive and generative conditions for witnessing everyday life and appraising the ways in which they are known and translated to a wider audience of fellow ethnographers, students, and the public writ large. At its roots, ethnography is thus an inaugural practice of learning and imparting knowledge. As one critical form of intervention among others, it paves a way for thinking about how form and exploration go hand in hand. As one particularly gifted ethnographer Hugh Raffles suggests, the writing of culture is a "process of creating an environment, a presencing, a world-making."[2]

In recent years, ethnographic approaches to fieldwork and writing have also gained influence in religious studies, particularly among scholars of what is recognized as the growing field of 'lived religion.' Through a burgeoning interest in the mundane aspects of belief, ritual and spirituality, some aim to capture imprints of religious life that lie outside the institutional structure of organizations like churches, schools, mosques and so on. Others seek to locate 'religion' within the thick of everyday circumstances to understand better its fluid relation to other domains of life. What specifically about 'religion' lends distinctive potential to exploration by ethnography? Perhaps it is useful to ask a more suspicious question. What is assumed about 'religion' and how its lessons might speak to students through experience, text and other means of knowing and reflecting? And what does 'ethnographic practice' offer in critically productive relation to religious ways of learning and living?

Each of the following sections returns to the same scene of classroom ritual that opened this essay, from the perspective of students undergoing learning practices of encounter, observation and description. By drawing a bit on my teaching experiences, as an anthropologist of religion, I also direct attention to concrete activities that bridge field methods and writing exercises with classroom teaching. The overall goal is to consider the creative academic prospects of ethnographic practice as a pedagogical resource for students and teachers of religious studies.

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[1] See James Clifford and George Marcus, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), as well as special anniversary Orin Starn, ed. "Writing Culture at 25" in *Cultural Anthropology* (2012) 27(3).
[2] Hugh Raffles and Hemangini Gupta, "Interview for *Writing Culture @ 25*" in *Cultural Anthropology* ed. Orin Starn, (2012): 27(3).

INITIATES OF EXPERIENCE

Thrown into a classroom simulation of encounter, we the students were enlisted as participants of a scene from ritual replica of divination. Producing revelatory designs of secrecy and disclosure, the stagecraft was deliberate, of hidden and unfamiliar objects in a dark alcove within brightly colored dressing. The grounds for reflection are experiential, even if second-order and fabricated. Through the sheer acts of perception and sensation, our initiation commenced as one of feeling and observation. Although we had little idea of the enveloping, world-making contexts which gives this scene cultural sense, the idea behind the exercise was to cultivate something between curiosity and displacement. If ethnographic practice begins with experience, then it follows that the capacity to mobilize scenes like this one toward reflection and analysis is one to be valued and trained.

It is, after all, the fieldwork encounter which serves as the basis of initiation and the epistemic condition for 'writing culture.' In his much-celebrated essay "Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight" Clifford Geertz also dramatizes the ritual passage of the ethnographer as one of experiential communion. Crossing from 'moral and metaphysical' invisibility to 'unusually complete acceptance', Geertz and his wife Hildred obtain access to the lives of the villagers through obligatory participation in the scene of complicity [3], against the police in an unanticipated raid. This common conspiring stems from an unexpected experience in the field, one which introduces the possibility of overcoming cultural barriers between self and other. The beginning of ethnography lies in practical sites of encounter and 'being there.' Through experiences like this, the 'webs of meaning' are availed as preliminary objects of decipherability, description, and displacement.

Geertz's model of 'ethnographic practice' is grounded in a social phenomenology of communication, of experience and interaction definitive of the 'encounter.' Such a theory of 'practice' stems from a semiotic model of interpretation, one which Geertz credits to philosopher Gilbert Ryle's 'established codes.'[4] Pre-eminently social by nature, the practice of interpretation is thus one which opens up the empirical possibility of fieldwork and of shared interaction across differences. Perhaps Geertz's most influential essay "Thick Description" develops the notion of cultural analysis as a hermeneutic endeavor, a 'search for meaning' which risks miscommunication—whether of winks, blinks and fake-winks, or of sheep theft and anti-colonial insolence. The point is that cultural interpretation is as much about social and symbolic interaction as it is about meaningfulness. This is why Geertz insists that "formulations of other peoples' symbol systems must be actor-oriented" (14).

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[3] Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight" in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New-York: Basic Books, 1973). See also George Marcus, "The Uses of Complicity in the Changing Mise-en-Scene of Anthropological Fieldwork" in *Representations* 59:85-l08.

[4] Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description" in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New-York: Basic Books, 1973). Gilbert Ryle, *Collected Papers* (London: Hutchinson, 1971).

In his endorsement of the study of 'lived religion' entitled "Everyday Miracles", Robert Orsi mobilizes scenes of action and meaning from his fieldwork as generative fodder for interpretation, this time by his students within the classroom setting. He details their disruptive discomforts experienced and expressed after he shares his fieldnotes on practices of Marian veneration and popular uses of 'holy water' from the Roman Catholic Church of St. Lucy in the North Bronx, New York. Oral description proves enough to catalyze offense, conveyed by his students' anger and indignation at what they saw as an 'abusive' practice of religion. In Orsi's view, attention to 'lived religion' is crucial for exposing and getting past normative understandings of religion. To do this, he underscores the scholarly and pedagogical necessity of opening oneself up to "all the spaces of experience" [5] writing:

> Workplaces, homes, and streets—as well as churches, temples, shrines, class meetings, [are] the places where humans make something of the worlds they have found themselves thrown into, and in turn, it is through these subtle, intimate, quotidian actions on the world that meanings are made, known and verified. 'Religion' is best approached, [by] meeting men and women at this daily task, in all the spaces of experience' (7).

This understanding of 'lived religion' foregrounds the fundamentally experiential nature of religion, as that which precedes whatever concept of 'religion' a fieldworker or student might bring to a place of encounter. As Orsi puts it, the instructive value of felt repugnance in these sites of meeting others and other practices is to make observations of the self also worthy of critical reflection. For anthropologists, this is also the trick of critique coined as a disciplinary aim: "to familiarize the unfamiliar and de-familiarize the familiar."

Through my teaching experiences, I have similarly discovered that building off of such moments of disruption can be productive for students. With the increasing prevalence of multi-media tools in the classroom, I often introduce Eastern Christian iconography and their mass-mediated replica from my fieldwork in Egypt. These includes photographs of some 'miracle-images' that I have encountered in tandem with testimonies of pilgrims who have been healed through visual acts of beholding the presence of the Virgin in icons and other objects. I recall one lecture, for example, when as we were entertaining the activity of miracles by way of visual media technologies, one student blurted: "What does this mean if we are watching these images on powerpoint?" Her question raised an ethical issue, of how to treat imagistic material gathered from the field and gauge their status and agency in new environs. Borrowing from Orsi again, this question spurred pedagogical reflection on the relationship between 'religious idiom' and 'immediate circumstance.' That is, while students are revolted by holy images of Marian power in one classroom, they might also be compelled to consider the implications of

[5] Robert Orsi, "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion" in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. David Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

their different receptions in another. Either way, a lesson is learned from constructively drawing upon the experience of response.

A moment of discomfort among Balinese cockfights was also what occasioned Geertz's critical stance toward the theory of 'deep play.' To refresh our memory, it was Bentham's moral utilitarianism and his resulting characterization of 'deep play', gambling without net gain as fundamentally immoral for society, which served as the target of critique. From his firsthand witness of cockfights and what they did and didn't accomplish within a social order of rank and recognition, Geertz launches a position of argument. In her work on Islamic piety among women in Egypt, anthropologist Saba Mahmood similarly points out the transformative possibility of ethnographic reflection: "Critique, I believe, is the most powerful when it leave[s] open the possibility that we may be remade through an encounter with the other."[6] It may be that staged simulations of ritual divination and iconographic re-presentations from the field also provide passage for student engagement as well. If ethnography is largely a task of dislocating the commonsensical assumptions about the 'worldviews of others', then exploring pedagogies for prompting such disruptions proves worthwhile.

WRITING ALTERITY

Back to the classroom scene of divination, we the students entered into the re-created domain of oracles and avenues of invoking the otherworldly and supernatural. Amid the seeds, nuts and stones also lurked the existential proposition that gods are accessible in such an encounter. For some students, this disclosure might have risked real interaction with unknown, unfamiliar powers. For others, this exercise might easily slip into dismissal or skeptical cynicism of mystical claims to non-human agents. Returning to our seats to reflect on what we had observed, we inevitably faced the task of how to write, and moreover, write in a way that entertained the presence of gods, ghosts and spirits in what we had just seen. One way of understanding this task is that of capturing the radical status of 'other' beings without recourse to the terms of familiarity.

Geertz's interpretive turn launched new methods of writing among ethnographers interested in the limits of cultural difference and reason. The term 'alterity' is more than mere shorthand for differences that are governed and institutionalized through orders of knowledge. What it also suggests are possibilities of un-representability, singularity and irreducibility that are erased once differences are herded through the descriptive-explanatory grid of 'culture' or 'society.' As far as ethnographers in this line of thought are concerned, the challenge of writing 'others'—including the presence of gods, spirits and ghosts—remains one of sustaining difference in its illegibility, without glorifying it for its own sake. Part of this involves shedding insight into a politics of writing and mediation, which implicates ethnographic practice at its core.

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[6] Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 37.

In his widely disseminated collection of essays *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), Michel de Certeau drew his longstanding interests in marginality, alterity, and minorities into productive conversation with theories of practice and language. A pioneer of groundbreaking histories in modern mysticism and Christianity, he made topics such as absence and loss, madness and possession, into vibrant subjects of studying human subjectivity and social alienation.[7] His intellectual project was animated by the historiographical limits of translation, 'losses' and traces of pasts no longer present, as the necessary predicates of knowing others. For historians of minority cultures, this project might also be identified as one of recovering 'subaltern pasts.'[8] As anthropologists Valentina Napolitano and David Pratten best put it, de Certeau enabled anthropologists to "take seriously the challenge of 'translating' the irreducibility of everyday life into ethnographic practice, and with it explore human subjectivity in its narrative (mis)translations in more nuanced and ethically engaged ways."[9]

For de Certeau, the practice of writing alterity, as 'ethnographic practice', thus demands cultivated attention to ordinary realms of the imperceptible and untranslatable, to what is censored and forbidden. One of his last chapters in *The Practice of Everyday Life,* entitled "The Unnamable", deals with just this task of engaging what he refers to as 'an unthinkable practice.' Throughout the essay, his focus lies on the act of death, the dying man, and the incapacity of institutions and families to deal with death as that which deprives life of meaning and productivity. In his words, "there is nothing so 'other' as my death, the index of all alterity" (1984:194). What he highlights is the failure of writing and other representational forms of speech and language to capture death and loss in everyday life. Representation is what shuts death out, into "the place where I am not"(194). For de Certeau and kin ethnographers of 'alterity', the activity of writing itself suggests the Other as inescapable absence. To practice writing, then, is to instantiate and re-instantiate this gap between self and other.

Among students, I have discovered the writings of Stefania Pandolfo, an anthropologist of Moroccan Sufism, to be of inestimable value in advancing these questions and inspiring new directions toward retaining a space for radical alterity. As a poetically conceived, literary ethnography, *Impasse of the Angels* aims to "explore the possibility of an ethnography internally altered by the place and voice of others."[10] In addition to maps, tropes, ruins and poetry, Pandolfo investigates the space of dreams as a source of ethnographic knowledge, including her own. After describing two scenes from dreams she had dreamt, the first during her fieldwork and the second afterward, she writes:

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[7] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), and *The Mystic Fable: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
[8] For example, see the well-known essay Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts" In *Economic and Political Weekly* 33, no. 9 (1997): 473-479.
[9] Valentina Napolitano and David Pratten. "Michel de Certeau: Ethnography and the Challenge of Plurality" in *Social Anthropology* 15, no. 1 (2007): 11.
[10] Stefania Pandolfo, *Impasse of the Angels: Scenes from a Moroccan Space of Memory* (Chicago: U Chicago Press, 1997), 3.

> Why begin with a dream—and a dream I, 'myself' have dreamed? How can a dream of my own produce ethnographic knowledge . . . Receiving the 'locus of the other inside my language, in the space of my imagination' means that neither 'my' language nor 'my' imagination will return to me as a piece of belonging . . . Neither ethnographic, nor autobiographic. (171-2)

By placing into consideration the subject and origins of ethnography, Pandolfo interrogates her position as ethnographer through the translation of her dream into text. Rather than assuming her self as the given author of the text, she supposes, through the ontological ethics of Sufi dreaming, the presence of multiple, fragmentary voices in her vision and narrative. According to Pandolfo's interlocutors, sleeping and the dreaming that occurs when one is asleep is "as if one were dead." Pandolfo's response, similar to that of de Certeau's, is to write dreams and attribute to the writing of 'others' the status of ethnography. In doing so, she reflects upon the genre of authorship and the failure of writing as part of its intrinsically ethical dimensions. Regarded as both the writing of loss and of displaced self, 'ethnographic practice' is valued as a pedagogy of 'death' and as consequently, of possessively creative insight.

Reflecting on different types of writing and representation is part and parcel of 'ethnographic practice', particularly in its creative dimensions. How might we encourage students to reflect critically on the conditions of ethnographic production? What does it mean to study ethnographies not only for their informational content (i.e. fieldwork data), but also for the creative ethics of their form? Ethnographic analysis is not quite the same as literary fiction, and I do not mean to suggest that anthropology courses become venues for the instruction of creative writing. But, I do think that scholarly attention to the qualities of ethnographic form is what it means to attend seriously the languages and voices of those listened for through research, reading and writing. In the classroom, building upon efforts in experimental writing also advances learning about creative authority in various practices of writing, as well as the dialogical potential of text and aesthetic form.

POWER OF THINGS

In our appraisal of the classroom exhibit, we the students peered into what the artifacts and agents of divination offered. Because there were no people in this place of observation, we could only speculate as to what these things were and what function they served. The scattered nuts on the tray suggested a numerological ritual. The seeds kept in a vessel were partially bathed in dust. These objects might be portals to transcendent powers or magical instruments of ritual. What would it look like to consider these things as actors and agents in their own right? One way to tap into the 'beyond' of human activity is to inspect the prospect of a material world in which things exceed what practitioners of religion and ritual intend for them. Things can pose constraints on human autonomy, and in doing so, disguise the intrinsically material nature of human freedom at every turn. An ethnography of things is also a practice of attending the specifics of action in their material form.

This final section follows a distinguished line of work among anthropologists who are suspicious of human-centered studies, that is, analyses that privilege the status of persons over things. As a result, a smattering of ethnographies has turned focus on 'images', 'ghosts', 'commodities' rather than 'people-groups' or 'areas.' 'Material religion' has also risen to fore as a flourishing topic for students especially interested in religious objects and art.[11] I have found the emerging work on things extremely productive for my research on Coptic saints and holy images, in my attempts to understand the relation between 'holy persons' and the replica of their virtuous lives, which make possible their continuing presence on earth. Beginning with the question of materiality helps advance thinking about things as more than tools and instruments subordinate to the will of users. It also requires more than a mere emphasis on objects, but a pursuit of how they are made objects in the first place.

It is useful to note that this direction is very different than the models of ethnographic practice already outlined. The cultural interpretivist approach championed by Geertz, for example, privileges human intention, agency and self-understanding. As we saw, meaning-making as the pre-eminent form of social action is the phenomenological grounds for fieldwork encounter. As for the issue of alterity and the limits of form, the study of materiality also does not presuppose a space outside and beyond representation. Another take is that the material nature of representation is a necessary condition for the valuation of such a space of the transcendent, immaterial, and radically other.

In the introduction of his edited volume *Materiality*[12], anthropologist Daniel Miller elaborates his appreciation for Pierre Bourdieu's work on 'practice' as a key launching pad for theories of materiality. Miller shows how Bourdieu turns Lévi-Strauss's structuralism of cognitive order into a "material and much more fluid, less deterministic engagement with the world." By emphasizing the placement and space of objects through a range of habitual practices and activity, Bourdieu opened discussion for how material structures of everyday life lend social sensibility to things and their orientation to the world.[13] This does not mean that meaning is thrown out the window, but that the task of deciphering what the social character of meaning changes. This also shifts how anthropologists study what being 'human' is, by circumventing a normative understanding of humanity. Quoting Miller's memorable phrase: "the stance to materiality also remains the driving force behind humanity's attempts to transform the world in order to make it accord with belief as to how the world should be" (6). Consequently, the thrust of material analysis turns more skeptical.

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[11] For a useful introduction to the field of 'material religion', see the recently published volume by Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer, *Things: Material Religion and the Topography of Divine Spaces* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).
[12] Daniel Miller, ed., *Materiality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).
[13] For a helpful introduction to Bourdieu's legacy on phenomenological approaches in linguistic anthropology, see William F. Hanks, "Pierre Bourdieu and the Practices of Language" in *Annual Review of Anthropology* 34 (2005):67-83.

What kind of 'ethnographic practice' is required for an interrogation of what it means to be a person and a social actor? By placing some doubt on the 'ethnos' of ethnography, we might get students to consider the status of things, objects, images, ideas more carefully in their readings of ethnography and their encounter with the worlds they research. Asking not so much how people make cultural sense of their lives, but how material lives make sense of what is 'human' seems to be a promising start.

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Heo, Angie. "Three Classroom Readings of 'Ethnographic Practice' in Religious Studies," in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 12 no. 2 (Fall 2012): 187-195.