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RESEARCH NOTE

Corporeal ethics in an ethnographic encounter: A tale of embodiment from the Occupied Palestinian Territories

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Summary In this article, I document a problematic ethnographic encounter that I experienced while conducting fieldwork in the neo-colonized space of the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Through reflexivity, I describe how the encounter begins to illuminate the surfacing of prejudices that were originally enacted by oppressive neo-colonial structures but which I had come to discursively accept against the communities and the peoples that were to become the subjects of my ethnographic study. As I explain, these prejudices are sourced to the perception of the denigrated embodiment of the Other — in this case, the Palestinian masculine subject. Finally, I consider how I originally understood these latent prejudices and how I ultimately came to negate them through a prudent engagement with, and deconstruction of, a reified socio-political discourse that ideologically endeavors to maintain the subjugation of a disenfranchised and unrecognized nation.

> [W]hat might be gained by relaxing the taboo on telling our own story? By relaxing it, I mean that we as a scholarly community should no longer systematically discourage our members (or ourselves) from occasionally telling our own stories. I would argue that, at a minimum, issues of diversity, socialization, and power might become more salient in our pursuits if the taboo is relaxed. Embracing the telling of our own stories might particularly allow for (a) the emergence of previously unheard voices from the field, (b) a better understanding of organizational socialization, and (c) a stronger grasp of power relations in organizations.
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> (Anteby, 2013: 1283—1284)

An ethnographic encounter

Having finished the last bite of coleslaw that remained on the aluminum plate, I take a sip of water and proceed to the front counter to pay the thirteen shekels for lunch. The two pieces of fried chicken and the thick potato wedges, which had accompanied the dollop of coleslaw was probably the most filling, but least healthy, meal that I had since I had arrived into the Middle East.

With the transaction completed, I pull out my fieldwork journal from my book bag and ask the aging restaurant owner

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for the directions to the office of my upcoming appointment. In heavy Arabic, the owner calls out, quickly prompting an olive skinned teenager wiping down a table nearby. The young man reads the directions scribbled on the pad and, in broken English, advises me that I would need a taxi to get to my intended destination. He accompanies me outside onto the bustling, cracked sidewalk of al-Manara. He hails a taxi, which stops in the middle of the street, halting the congested afternoon traffic behind it. He leads me swiftly toward the vehicle. While speaking in Arabic to the driver, the young man opens the backdoor of the cab ushering me in. Closing the door behind me, he informs me through the open window that he has given the details to the driver who, while not being able to speak any English, will take me to the area at which I have my appointment.

In just a few minutes into the ride, the restless and lively activity of Ramallah's city center has been replaced by the silence of a relatively desolate area, sparsely consisting of a few residential homes and a small gated apartment complex. Few cars pass on the road and no human presence can otherwise be detected. Sitting in the backseat in awkward silence, I wonder where the driver had brought me — whether or not he received the correct directions from the olive skinned young man at the restaurant. Communication barriers prevent me from making this inquiry. Just as I am about to really become concerned, he points to the sign of a small hotel. From the directions of my would-be informant, I knew that the sign indicated that I am in the right vicinity. I still had time, so I pay the fare and step out of the taxi.

I slip the buds of my iPod into my ears, and begin to walk along the uneven road with a copious amount of loose gravel scattered over it. The clouds have turned gray and dreary and there is a complementary chill in the air, not unlike the typical autumn day that I had become accustomed to growing up in Vancouver. Scanning the area, I look for any sign of an office — there is none.

Having walked for what seemed to be about ten minutes, I can hear, through the music emitting into my ears, a car behind me. Without a clearly designated sidewalk, I had been walking along the road so I turn my head to ensure that the car has enough space to pass me safely. The car is moving at an uncomfortably slow pace. There are no homes or buildings immediately around me, so it certainly is not the case that the occupants of the car would be slowing down because they had arrived at their intended destination. The only thing that was there was me — alone. . .in a foreign and precarious land.

I put my hand into my jacket pocket and clandestinely turn off my iPod, though leaving the buds in my ears. I want to remain alert but, at the same time, I am desperately trying not to display any sign of alarm. With Rob Thomas no longer singing to me about his middle of the night conversation with his lover, I can hear the friction from the tires against the gravel getting louder. . .and louder. My mind is racing. *Why had I made the stupid decision to come into the West Bank? I was well aware of the highly publicized kidnappings that occur in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Hell, there was a large banner adorning a balcony of my German Colony apartment complex in Jerusalem depicting Gilad Shalit, an Israeli Jew who had been kidnapped years ago. Even the information that I received from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where I was a Visiting Research Fellow, had ominously warned me not enter the West Bank as my safety could not be guaranteed.* And now, there I am, with a car slowly approaching me.

Precisely what I am dreading would happen, happens. With its engine still running, the car stops just adjacent to me. *I was fucked.* I stop in my tracks and pull out the buds from my ears. In the car, there are four Arab men, each of whom appears to be in his 20s.

'What are you doing here?' inquires the man sitting shotgun, his face a cold glare. I answer his question honestly. He asks me a couple more questions in the same vein, before saying that they are going to kidnap me. A thousand thoughts cross my mind. *Should I run? Would they accept money in return for not harming me? Why did I even decide to conduct a multi-sited ethnography, and in this region of all places? I was a doctoral student in a business school now for crying out loud. I could be sitting in the comfort of my office in Toronto using archival data to run regressions rather than being on this isolated West Bank road having this very disconcerting experience.*

I am frozen, staring back at them, wondering what to do next. 'I know that you're Canadian and we're going to kidnap you for ransom', the same man says. *What? How did he know my nationality? Being of Indian decent, it is not often when traveling overseas that someone assumes that I am Canadian.*

Suddenly, a mischievous smile crosses the same man's face, and he extends his hand through the passenger side window, introducing himself by name. I recognize the name- . . .the same name I had scheduled an interview with that day. Indeed, the man sitting in the passenger seat is my informant. He tells me that his office is just up the road and asks me to get into the car as that is where they are headed.

Towards psychologically reconciling latent prejudices

This problematic encounter, particularly in terms of how I interpreted and felt during the situation, can be read in multiple ways. The anxiety that I experienced might be reflective of my naiveté as an ethnographic researcher. Indeed, while I read many classic and contemporary texts by astute anthropologists that have effectively utilized ethnographic methods, this was my first attempt at actually doing fieldwork. A second explanation might attribute my reaction to the fact that because I was in a new geographical context, which had its own idiosyncratic set of cultural and institutional norms to which I was unfamiliar, I was rendered more sensitive to perceived threats — threats that were manifest of my own paranoia more than anything else. Yet, a third account might suggest that this encounter represents the surfacing of my own latent prejudices against an 'unknown' group. Or, perhaps these three 'realities' converged at a discursive liminal site — at which conceptions of self and Other are articulated and negotiated — to create the proverbial 'perfect storm' (on the idea of liminality, see Bhabha, 1994; Frenkel, 2008; Turner, 1987).

Ultimately, the question remained for me to psychologically resolve: How could I so imprudently accept, as my own, the stereotyping which effectively constructs the Palestinian man as terrorist, and which is foundational to a reified ideological discourse that legitimizes and justifies the