



The Ethnographic Past

World Anthropologies

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January 17, 2017

It is May 2015, and I am returning for a second fieldwork stay in the small Indiana town where I conducted doctoral fieldwork from 1989 to 1991. I have been on the phone from Ireland with some people I used to know. A former coal miner has told me that I am arriving just in time for the local Workers' Memorial Day event. We meet up in a completely transformed shopping mall, and I follow his motorbike in my car as we drive down a highway that did not exist back then towards the premises of the Central Labor Council of Southern Indiana.

I recognize people I have not seen over the span of a generation. As a retired factory worker greets me, I ask "How's Kathy?" his wife's name returning in a piercing flashback of remembered kindnesses. When I joke nervously about feeling like a time traveler, a friend from the old days responds wryly, "Hell, you think you're disoriented and confused? Think of me!" He points out that when he last spent any length of time with me, "The labor movement here was at its peak, at least in my lifetime." Reminiscences flow among the small group that lingers afterwards. They speak of the glory days of union solidarity in Indiana during and after the Pittston coal strike in West Virginia. They marvel that they were able to shut down traffic on Highway 41 during a strike at the Evansville Whirlpool plant. They proudly recall making a collective stand against permanent replacement workers during the Bootz Plumbingware strike. These were not all victories by any means. They are cherished memories of struggle in an Indiana that is now a "Right to Work" state, where not one unionized coal mine remains and where the conditions of possibility for labor organizing face unprecedented and unrelenting attack.

As an Indian woman studying anthropology in the US in the late 1980s, I resisted the assumption that I would go back home to gather primary data. Troubled by the paucity of studies of Western societies by anthropologists from my part of the world, I devised a dissertation project in the US heartland. Today, 25 years after my first fieldwork, the "world anthropologies" critique

notwithstanding, it remains dishearteningly difficult to find ethnographies written by anthropologists from the Global South that are based on extended fieldwork among working class white Americans.

“Hell, you think you’re disoriented and confused? Think of me!”

I worked mostly among working class white American men, a category that has pervaded public discourse in recent times. They were unionized workers who worked in the aluminum plant just outside town, or in the coal mines that brought a giant aluminum transnational corporation and its flagship plant to the area in the first place. I was sceptical from the outset about claiming a situation of complete anthropological role reversal. Although I was a woman of color, there was no denying my class advantage. My origins were middle class, albeit in a low income country, and it was likely that I would re-enter the middle classes after temporarily living as an impoverished foreign student. Like most Americans, the industrial workers I met defined themselves as “middle class,” though they did occasionally notice and remark upon the cultural capital that I enjoyed.

Returning as a full-fledged middle class professional—a tenured academic living in Ireland—I was curious about the politics of the 2015 phase of fieldwork. Having outgrown the shorthand “exchange student” categorization that used to be instantly applied to me back then, I sometimes encountered reserve and suspicion in the summer of 2015. The difficulties of an anthropology (somewhat) in reverse have not gone away.

The Ghost of Fieldwork Past cropped up everywhere. Ascending the hill towards the house where I had lived, I could almost see the tense figure of myself in my twenties walking up from the other side. New anxieties have abounded; some allayed by phone calls to Ida Susser, the mentor whose own revisit to *Norman Street* informed and inspired my return to Indiana. I hesitantly write this today, one week before the most anxiety-provoking US presidential election of all, wondering if any part of this work can help in understanding what is to come.

Anthropology’s empathetic mode of understanding only goes so far. I think of two “organic intellectuals” I know, both former coal miners. One has immersed himself in labor history research, the other in public activism and writing around environmental issues. However, the first is also a committed Republican voter; the second carries a loaded firearm at all times. Neither can fully explain these parts of themselves to me, and I cannot fully grasp the explanations they offer. But we have known each other for 25 years and we are still trying. Our discipline’s best hope derives from

enduring relationships and temporal depth —returning to the ethnographic past as a way of unsettling and defrosting the inevitable freeze frame of the ethnographic present.

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