

Some reflections on #MeToo and fieldwork

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At the height of the allegations of sexual abuse against Harvey Weinstein, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the United States (2017-2018). Sexual assault also marked many of my relationships with men during fieldwork. At the same time, I felt that these transgressions were in some way different from those circulating under the hashtag #MeToo. In this reflexive piece, I try to find words to describe the particular ways in which I was sexualized and gendered as a young, white, female ethnographer in a context of racial inequality.

Especially at the start of fieldwork I found it challenging to develop platonic relationships with men. One of the first problematic moments was when I invited Curtis to join me to a music festival. Curtis was a young Black man, a friend of a friend who had helped me getting settled in New Orleans. I thought that inviting him to do something fun together would be a good way of thanking him for all that he had done for me. He interpreted that invitation as an indication that I was romantically available for him. While we were watching the band, an awkward dance ensued: he kept leaning into me, trying to put his arms around my shoulder. I kept stepping sideways away from him, resulting in us moving ever more to the right of the stage. I did not know how to tell him that I needed some space without offending him. I could not

simply tell him to back off, since that would certainly ruin our relationship. How could I ask him to respect my personal space without threatening our budding friendship? I felt incredibly small as his tall figure towered over me. Later that night when I was at home by myself I felt sick; thoroughly shocked by my inability at managing the situation.

Something similar happened when I met with Kenneth for an interview. He was an older Black man who knew a lot about the topic that I was researching. We had a pleasant encounter before and based on that, I hoped for a conversation that would be interesting for us both; an exchange of knowledge of some sorts. This proved to be entirely impossible. Whilst maintaining a very friendly demeanour, Kenneth scoffed at my questions and remarks, presenting himself as all-knowing and me as utterly naïve. Adding to the hierarchical dynamics of the conversation, he interjected his lecture with flirtatious comments on my physical appearance. At my departure, he hugged me too long and too tight.

Re-reading my diary entries about those and other similar events now is a little disconcerting. My descriptions of the sexual violations I experienced are followed by numerous self-reprimands. Even though I fancy myself to be quite resistant to patriarchal norms, I blamed myself for what happened and believed I had done something to invite these transgressions. I should not have laughed at a sexually insinuating joke, should not have hugged goodbye, should have guarded my boundaries more sternly, etcetera. At the same time, I realized that I was in no way at fault; these men felt that they could lay claim to my body for reasons outside of my own control. Moreover, I was confused about the role that race played in these interactions. Our conversations had been

driven by shared commitments to racial equality, but perhaps I had misread the power balance between us? Was their objectification of me as a sexual object an answer to my objectification of them as Black men?

In these diary entries, I also read another layer of complexity. This complexity is interwoven with my identity as an ethnographer. I have been taught that good fieldwork requires engaged, embodied and emotional involvement in the lives of others. Bianca Williams (2017) writes how these (internalized) demands propel ethnographers into situations that will make them feel unsafe: “Getting into cars with people before we truly trust them; entering people’s homes for meals and interviews as a path to relationship-building; going to sites some participants refuse to visit to gain access to data.” As ethnographers, we thus push ourselves to do things and meet with people we would perhaps rather avoid in our everyday lives.

A lot of my self-criticism in my diary entries came out of a deep commitment to conducting proper fieldwork and a feeling that I was somehow failing at this. I struggled at asserting my role as researcher as my professional interest in men was constantly misinterpreted as a sexual or romantic one. Thus, I kept moving from one potential research participant to another, trying to build rapport and relationships of trust, each time having my personal boundaries threatened or transgressed, and then going through cycles of self-criticism. It was as if my — sexualized and gendered — body stood in the way of my anthropological mission.

I never fully managed to harmonize the gendered expectations that structured my research relationships and my political and professional commitments to being a good

anthropologist. The stories of sexual harassment that were circulating in the news under the #MeToo hashtag spoke of fairly straight-forward power relations. In contrast, the racialized and gendered bodies of my male research participants and me were “differentially situated within intersecting structures of oppression” (Berry et al. 2017, 547). For us, the threat of mutual objectification was always present. On a more general note, and borrowing the words from Berry et al. (2017, 547), this means that female ethnographers have to become skilled at “a participant-observation that invites our interlocutors to feel at ease even as we negotiate the fact that their ease may be contingent upon our subjugation as sexual objects”.

References

Berry, Maya J. et al. 2017. Toward a fugitive anthropology: Gender, race, and violence in the field, *Cultural Anthropology* 32 (3): 537-565.

Williams, Bianca C. 2017. #MeToo: A crescendo in the discourse about sexual harassment, fieldwork, and the academy (Part 2). URL: <https://savageminds.org/2017/10/28/metoo-a-crescendo-in-the-discourse-about-sexual-harassment-fieldwork-and-the-academy-part-2/>, Accessed on 04/10/2018.

Notes

¹ Please note that all names are pseudonyms