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8. BODILY ENCOUNTERS

Affect, Religion, and Ethnography

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz defined religion as a “cultural system” wherein there is a direct correlation between sign and signification, symbol and meaningful communication.¹ In such a scheme, religion becomes the expression of belief rendered legible and rational such that worldview and identity map in a representational mode that the researcher can access, see, capture, and diagram. Ideologically grounded in cultural practices and artifacts, religion becomes curiously static and predictable—particularly so, according to Geertz, when considered in light of moods so pervasive they “vary only as to intensity: go nowhere. They spring from certain circumstances but they are responsive to no ends. Like fogs, they just settle and lift; like scents, suffuse and evaporate. When present, they are totalistic: if one is sad, everything seems sad and everyone dreary.”² Investigating relationships between religion and emotion within the schema of a cultural system, the researcher is limited to observing and translating a relationship between sacred object and human subject as feeling hovers, lifeless and listless. Anthropologist Talal Asad has critiqued this definition of religion for its universalism.³ He argues that as an essentialized category, religion becomes transcultural and transhistorical outside of its discursive formation, and therefore separated from any imbrication with power.

This chapter is shaped by both approaches to the study of the religion. Aligned with Asad, I consider religiously inflected forms of power as discursively

and historically situated, even as they are transsubjective, entangling human and nonhuman bodies across time and space. I also rethink Geertz’s use of metaphor to link mood to fog and scent as a gesture toward a bodily, sensory engagement with emotion worth exploring. In this examination, I take up anthropologist Kathleen Stewart’s claim that “writing culture through emergent forms means stepping outside the cold comfort zone of recognizing only self-identical objects.”⁴ By approaching religion as an assemblage rather than a system, and emotion as economic rather than personal, variations in intensity matter.

In affect theory, the concept of assemblage is used to reframe language, representation, identity, and subject formation as the privileged modes through which to theorize power. Affect theorist Jasbir Puar describes the concept and its usefulness this way: “Assemblage is actually an awkward translation—the original term in Deleuze and Guattari’s work is not the French word *assemblage*, but actually *Agencement*, a term which means design, layout, organization, arrangement, and relations—the focus being not on content but on relations, relations of patterns. . . . Assemblages do not privilege bodies as human, nor as residing within a human/animal binary. Along with a de-exceptionalizing of human bodies, multiple forms of matter can be bodies—bodies of water, cities, institutions, and so on. Matter is an actor.”⁵

As an assemblage, religion becomes lively rather than lived, opening up the possibility for human and nonhuman agents to interact, phenomenologically doing religion and ontologically being religious outside of semiotic and representational frames. The space and medium of communication collapses, exposing circuits of resonance across disparate worldviews, physical distance, and temporal lag. Feminist affect theorist Sara Ahmed writes: “In such affective economies, emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments. Rather than seeing emotions as psychological dispositions, we need to consider how they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective.”⁶

As emotions circulate affective value, visceral processes of mediation trouble dichotomous relations of speaker/listener, spiritual/worldly, and human/non-human. In *History and Presence*, Robert Orsi investigates relations of spirit and matter as intersubjective, but he does not consider the agency of technology or emotion in these relationships.⁷ By contrast, my analysis opens up the definition of religion such that objects and feelings are also social agents of spirit and matter. My empirical evidence shows that rather than passive, disembodied, or schematic, visual and digital culture is affective, material, and desirous.

In anthropological theory, affect has been described by William Mazzarella as carrying “tactile, sensuous, and perhaps even involuntary connotations,” implying “a way of apprehending social life that does not start with the bounded, intentional subject while at the same time foregrounding embodiment and sensuous life.”⁸ Rather than an emotional state that can be named and is “always already semiotically mediated,” according to this definition affect is precognitive, prelinguistic, and prepersonal.⁹ As Mazzarella’s formulation suggests, affect is difficult to examine by conventional discursive methods given that it is radically grounded in the body to the extent that it cannot be articulated or rendered immediately intelligible in language.

Therefore, in this analysis, I use two distinct scenes—one in which I am sitting at my laptop watching a video and another at the same laptop scanning headlines—whose affective and perceptual scripts involve human and non-human bodies that include media technologies and animate moods entangled in relations that are networked and contagious.¹⁰ On the whole, this chapter explores how ethnography contributes to the analysis of religion as a collective yet embodied process akin to what cultural theorist Raymond Williams theorizes as “structures of feeling.”¹¹ Rather than a finished product of human design rendered in the habitual past tense, which is where Geertz’s definition of religion as a cultural system simultaneously begins and gets stuck, I examine religion as an assemblage that conscripts affective labor at once voluntary and nonintentional, of body and atmosphere.

In this chapter’s opening ethnographic example, then, I respond to the question “How do we study religion and emotion?” by reflecting on the ways that fieldwork at a multisited evangelical megachurch troubled my positionality as a researcher and identity as a non-Christian. I use autoethnography to theorize coming under conviction as spastic and infectious—a generative bodily encounter beyond the regulatory jurisdiction of institutions, doctrine, or ideology. Historian Wendy Brown surmises that even under secular conditions, “being convicted” of an error or crime echoes its usage in relation to sin: “being pinned, trapped, unfree to act . . . an urgent, yet also paralyzing state.”¹² Rather than an aggressive argument that renders individuals impotent and hinders social mobilization, I argue that the political power of conviction lies in its affective capacity to register as a belief that feels like one’s own but may be steered toward circulating emotions such as fear, hate, love, and paranoia. In this sense, conviction entails contagions of belief, described by philosopher William Connolly as “spiritual dispositions to action that both flow below epistemic beliefs and well up into them . . . the tightening of the gut, coldness of the skin, contraction of the pupils, and hunching of the back that arise when an epistemic

belief in which you are invested has been challenged.”¹³ I reassess conviction in terms of gut feeling that signals desires and passions simultaneously biological and social that can be suggested and manipulated—a porously open-ended process that troubles dichotomies of sinner and saved or profane and sacred.

From 1996 to 2014 Mars Hill Church of Seattle multiplied into fifteen facilities in five American states serving approximately thirteen thousand attendees as Pastor Mark Driscoll’s preaching on “biblical oral sex” earned him international celebrity.¹⁴ “Men, I am glad to report to you that oral sex is biblical. . . . Ladies, your husbands appreciate oral sex. They do. So, serve them, love them well.”¹⁵ In sermons such as “The Porn Path” and an e-book called *Porn Again Christian*, Driscoll stated in no uncertain terms that “free and frequent” sex between a husband and wife is necessary to assure fidelity within Christian marriages and secure masculine leadership within evangelical churches.¹⁶ “Our world assaults men with images of beautiful women,” he warned. “Male brains house an ever-growing repository of lustful snapshots always on random shuffle. . . . The temptation to sin by viewing porn and other visual lures is an everyday war.”¹⁷ As Driscoll claimed, “sometimes pornography is in an image, sometimes it is in your imagination”;¹⁸ his sexualized hermeneutic revealed women’s body parts cloaked in biblical metaphor.¹⁹ Meanwhile, question and answer sessions during services encouraged congregants to text queries that materialized as sound-bite confessions to sins and desires on large screens surrounding Mars Hill’s sanctuary. The church’s use of visual and digital media served to amplify Driscoll’s sermonizing on sex by enlisting audience participation in animating a pornographic imaginary, legitimizing his spiritual authority through the bodily and virtual circulation of shame, fear, and paranoia as affective political and economic value.

As Mars Hill’s facilities multiplied, imperatives to support the church’s propagation were framed in violent terms of combat readiness and the embodiment of “visual generosity” and “sexual freedom” by Christian wives. The orchestration of this affective labor was articulated in terms of “air war” and “ground war,” with the aim to “rally one thousand churches behind one pulpit.”²⁰ In my ethnographic monograph *Biblical Porn: Affect, Labor, and Pastor Mark Driscoll’s Evangelical Empire*,²¹ I analyze how this strategy of biopolitical control infused Mars Hill’s ministry, including sermon study in small group settings, social media forums, men’s and women’s training days, church leadership boot camps, and military missions that gifted *Porn Again Christian* to troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Globalized logics of warfare constituted and intensified terrorist assemblages of religious, racialized, and sexualized Others—threats that included hypersexualized single women; wolves within the flock that challenged

Driscoll's authority; a crisis of masculinity within institutional Christianity; and the rising popularity of Islam among men in U.S. urban centers.²² Mars Hill's facilities steadily replicated until 2014, when a deluge of evidence surfaced online supporting several accusations against Driscoll. These charges included the surreptitious use of a marketing ploy to cull the buyers lists necessary to achieve best-selling status for Driscoll's book *Real Marriage: The Truth About Sex, Friendship, and Life Together* (2012);²³ they also identified bullying, micro-management, and shunning procedures as tactics of intimidation and social isolation used to suppress information and stifle dissent.²⁴

From 2006 to 2008 I conducted participant-observation at Mars Hill's central facility in Seattle as it began multiplying into satellite campuses throughout the city and its suburbs, attending not only sermons but also gospel classes required for membership; seminars on how to embody biblical gender and sexuality; a women's training day called "Christian Womanhood in a Feminist Culture"; and Film and Theology Nights, when Hollywood movies were screened and discussed. From 2014 to 2016 I spoke with former leaders and members who worked for the church during the stages of its foundation, expansion, and dissolution, including interviews that suggest congregants remain haunted by feelings of betrayal and shame. This chapter's opening scene depicts how affective entanglements and labor during my initial years of fieldwork bodily recruited and disturbed me in unexpected ways, as well. While the second scene takes place two years later on the morning of the mass shooting at Pulse nightclub in Orlando in 2016, it also begins with me sitting alone at my computer. These seemingly disparate events are ethnographically interconnected by affective processes that queer space and time as well as distinctions between subject and object, signaling structures of feeling that are unruly and viral yet situated and historicized.

By narratively privileging "risk and uncertainty over researcher control and reflexivity," my analysis demonstrates the scholarly potential and ethical necessity of reflecting on what anthropologists Kevin Lewis O'Neill and Peter Benson call the "phenomenology of 'doing' fieldwork" wherein "ethnography's ethical possibilities are *actualized* when ethnographers change . . . not simply for the self and its interests, but rather for the sake of new kinds of collective affiliations across interpersonal and intercultural boundaries."²⁵ In this mode, the researcher is instrument rather than authority. Kathleen Stewart suggests that writing culture is "an attunement, a response, a vigilant protection of a worlding."²⁶ My examination illustrates how ethnographic engagement with affect elicits attunement to ecological and phenomenological worlding acutely generative for the study of religion and emotion.

Coming Under Conviction Online

By the summer of 2014, evidence had surfaced online supporting several allegations against Pastor Mark Driscoll of Mars Hill Church, including the use of the book-marketing firm Result Source to achieve best-selling author stature and profits; plagiarism; and well-documented abuses of authority.²⁷ After numerous former leaders posted confessions seeking repentance for sinning as—and being sinned against—church administration,²⁸ a protest was organized outside the main facility, which had shifted from Seattle to suburban Bellevue.

I watched the man I quickly became accustomed to calling Pastor Mark preach live at Mars Hill's former headquarters in a renovated hardware warehouse from a stage loaded with high-end sound equipment and beat-up guitars. Flat-screen TVs projecting his image flanked the pulpit and surrounded the amphitheater seating over one thousand. The church's cream-colored lobby bearing members' artwork, well-stocked bookshelves, and canisters of free coffee affected the contemplative ambience of a gallery in stark contrast to its black-box exterior and the buzz of the crowd before services. Young guys lingered in the parking lot at all hours beyond an entryway announcing "meaning, beauty, truth, community" within, while worship music thundering outside after gospel classes testified to the authenticity of this promise. Driving past the suburban facility where Driscoll now spent Sundays, in a mall complex sprawling with buildings so uniform it was easy to lose a sense of space entirely, I tried to imagine what sermons in the beige faux cathedral planted next to an equally looming yet nondistinct Barnes and Noble would feel like by comparison to those I had attended from 2006 to 2008.

While the issues cleverly summarized in colorful slogans on placards raised important questions, it was a thirty-minute video posted to the Mars Hill website that inspired ex-staff and congregants to mobilize behind the rally cry "We Are Not Anonymous." This performance began with Driscoll sitting down in a simple wooden chair in the imposing Bellevue sanctuary, his figure flanked by rows of empty seats rather than large screens, the pulpit lectern onstage out of focus behind his left shoulder. The camera angle was such that it felt as though Driscoll was facing me from where I sat with laptop open at my desk. His complexion was ruddy but grizzled with salt and pepper stubble. The only prop that appeared throughout his delivery was a leather-bound Bible, which he physically and verbally gestured with and to in the video's opening moments:

Hi, Mars Hill, Pastor Mark here. I wanted to give you a bit of an update on the season that we have been in and continue to be in and I was

thinking about it and when I was seventeen years of age Jesus gave me this bible through a gal named Grace who is of course now my wife, and Jesus saved me when I was nineteen, in college as a freshman, reading this bible, and I started opening this bible when I was twenty-five and Grace and I were a young married couple in our rental home. We felt called to start Mars Hill Church and so we would have some people over for a bible study and there was not a lot of people so we didn't have a full service, instead I would sit in this chair and I would open this bible and just teach a handful of people, or a few handfuls of people that would show up in our living room, and that grew to be Mars Hill Church. Now that I'm 43 almost 44, looking back it's, it's overwhelming if I'm honest, it's shocking and amazing and staggering and wonderful. What Jesus has done has far exceeded even what I was praying for or hoping for or dreaming of.²⁹

After this introduction littered with references to the Bible in his hands, a material manifestation of God's hand in Mars Hill's successful growth as well as his own spiritual authority, Driscoll explained that the purpose of this video was to communicate "in a way that is godly," by "directly" addressing congregants in a manner that was intended "as a means of loving you and informing you."³⁰ Within the first five minutes of this performance, publicly disseminated online yet purportedly broadcast for an audience of intimates, Driscoll made the statement that many I spoke with later attributed with triggering the protest:

During this season as well, I have been rather silent and there are some reasons for that. First of all, we, including myself, needed to determine what exactly was happening. If I'm real honest with you, at first it was just a little overwhelming and a bit confusing. . . . As well, one of the things that has been complex is the fact that a lot of the people we are dealing with in this season remain anonymous. And so we don't know how to reconcile, or how to work things out with people because we're not entirely sure who they are, and so that has, that has made things a little more complex and difficult as well.³¹

Stunned, I looked at my browser, which was loaded with tabs open to websites with names such as Joyful Exiles, Repentant Pastor, Mars Hill Refuge, and We Love Mars Hill where multiple testimonies to spiritual, emotional, and financial exploitation were posted with the author's name clearly identified. My initial sense of betrayal seemed unreasonable given that I had no personal attachment to any of the people in these stories, had not seen Driscoll

preach live for years, and had never considered him an authority figure since I did not and never have self-identified as a Christian. I was not the video's intended audience; there was no rationalization, let alone words, for how I felt. Such "affective space," suggests Kevin Lewis O'Neill, is "religiously managed and politically manipulated sensation [that] makes legible a series of spaces that are not necessarily territorial but that are nonetheless deeply political . . . for example, the felt distance that exists between *us* and *them*."³²

I was not physically shaking as I watched Driscoll lie to my face through the computer screen, but my agitation was palpable and did not recede during the entirety of his message. Even more disconcertingly, I found myself not only hoping but also believing that he was going to change course and repent of his sin, as he had admonished audiences repeatedly and vehemently to do. I kept waiting for an acknowledgment of the specific charges of abuse, and the suffering they had caused to those who had the courage to openly testify to their prolonged spiritual and psychological toll. When that did not happen, instead of doubting Driscoll, I started wondering if I had misheard or misunderstood. In a sense, I kept the faith alive, until the final minutes of his message:

Lastly, many of you have asked myself and other leaders, how can we be in prayer? I genuinely appreciate that, I would say, pray for your local leaders, they're dealing with things that, that I'm not dealing with . . . and, ah, there are some things in this season that are just, they're just, they're strange . . . ahh . . . unique. For example, at one of our churches, someone is folding up pornography and putting it in our pew Bibles. Just, all kinds of things in this strange season, so that when the lead pastor gets up and says, hey, if you're new or not a Christian, we've got some free Bibles in the pew, feel free to pick one up and go to page whatever for the sermon, and they open it up and they're exposed to pornography, and this can be adults or children, and so now there's a team having to go through our Bibles and take the pornography out to make sure their Bibles are clean on Sundays.³³

The working title of my book on the church had been *Biblical Porn* for a couple of years. I was also writing a chapter on spiritual warfare, and never was my sense of it so keen as I unexpectedly burst out laughing at this story's end. It was a full-body laugh that erupted from my gut and lasted for a long time, but not because I found the act of vandalism described particularly funny. After all the lies I had listened to, I highly doubted the authenticity of this anecdote, but that did not make it any less affective. William Connolly describes laughter as "a manifestation of surplus affect," which can trigger "side perceptions at odds

with the dominant drift of perception and interpretation” such that the flow of thought is interrupted to “open a window of creativity.”³⁴ It was not what Mark said that made me laugh, but the sense that we were sharing an inside joke. This surplus affective value did not register in his rhetoric, reside in a commodity, or remain self-contained, but manifested as conviction so unfocused it emitted both within and without me. In this circulation of what Sara Ahmed posits as an “affective economy,” “emotions play a crucial role in the ‘surfacing’ of individual and collective bodies through the way in which emotions circulate between bodies and signs.”³⁵ After the video ended, I sought to interpret and identify what I was feeling in emotional terms and settled on paranoia, figuring this irrational response would quickly subside. After all, Mark’s use of hyperbole and humor to excite and seduce audiences was renowned and considered to be among his gifts and strengths as a communicator. However, rather than fading, the intensity and unpredictability of sensations that were impossible to pin down kept me awake nights and indoors at my desk scanning the Internet for the unknown and unknowable. Information? Affirmation? Safety? And from whom or what, exactly?

At first, I rationalized my feelings in terms that I could understand and articulate as a feminist anthropologist—social justice. Put simply, I desired recognition for those whose suffering went unacknowledged. Despite its good intentions, such an explanation was no excuse for the disturbing and overpowering need I had to do something without knowing what that could be, other than endlessly tracking the explosion of media coverage surrounding Driscoll and the church. While Mark’s opening posture and closing story provided the perfect tactile validation for my book’s title, beyond anything I could ever dream or script, it was not until I asked permission to join the protest with former Mars Hill members via a public Facebook page entitled “We Are Not Anonymous” that its affective value became clearer. I had come under conviction, but not of my own sinful nature and need for salvation. I did not become born-again in Christian terms, but I had to confront the troubling reality that I had desired to believe in Pastor Mark. This was a desire that I did not feel I deserved, nor frankly wished to own, given that I had never sacrificed for the church nor ideologically seen eye to eye with Driscoll. That video haunted me with surplus affect, both possessed and inhabited, that was not truly mine.

Anthropologist Susan Harding notes that when social scientists have investigated why people convert to Christianity, they inevitably deduce that individuals have good reason to be “susceptible, vulnerable, and in need of something, so the question becomes ‘Why? What’s wrong? What’s unsettling them?’ Or, ‘What’s setting them up? How have they been predisposed to convert?’”³⁶ In turn, ac-

counts of various ritual practices and psychological techniques that catalyze transformation from one worldview to another posit “conversion as a kind of brainwashing.”³⁷ Harding describes her own experience of coming under conviction in terms of being “caught up in the Reverend Campbell’s stories—I had ‘caught’ his language—enough to hear God speak to me when I almost collided with another car that afternoon. Indeed, the near-accident did not seem like an accident at all, for there is no such thing as a coincidence in born-again culture.”³⁸

By contrast, Driscoll was not witnessing to me personally in the video, nor was he using a biblical grammar that opened narrative gaps through which to insert myself as unbelieving listener. Rather than a sacred rite of passage, his concluding remarks conjured the folding of pornography into pew Bibles—a profane joke that complicated our subject positions of speaker/listener and believer/nonbeliever, given its ambiguity. I could not be certain whether the prank was *on* or *by* him. Semiotics was an unhelpful tool of analysis, as this affective process was unnecessarily dialogical and therefore porously open-ended; mediation occurred bodily without becoming meaningful. Harding describes coming under conviction as chronological and spatial—a crossing from the terrain of disbelief into a liminal space of suspension or limbo that precedes the (potential) conversion from non-Christian to born-again believer. Clearly defined, preordained subject positions of listener-lost and speaker-saved are acknowledged by individuals who choose to enter into a relationship situated through a specific language with a particular motive. Instead, I experienced conviction as irreducibly social sitting alone at my desk—compelling actions, events, and conversations I never imagined possible.

In the frantic days after watching the video, I found a link to the public Facebook group “We Are Not Anonymous.” Without forethought or script, I woke up one morning and wrote to a former church leader that I had not met. That lengthy message is truncated here: “I’m writing for your thoughts on the question of whether my presence would be welcome at the protest this Sunday. . . . I have been reluctant to join anything that would make anyone uncomfortable, especially as I’m a non-Christian. . . . I’m in a strange limbo state where I’m not an ‘insider’ but not really an ‘outsider’ either, and it’s hard for me to simply watch from the sidelines with all that’s happened.”

I never omitted that I was not a Christian or pretended to be anything but a feminist anthropologist. Openly informing those I spoke with of my identity was ethical according to my methodological training, yet positionality was inadequate to the task of explaining liminality and displacement through which I came to affectively, if not theologically, resonate with former church

members. To claim any positionality in my case was feeble—a hollow gesture and ideological fiction in the face of sociality generated out of a dislocation and disaggregation of self.

When I described my experience of coming under conviction during the video to a former leader—how I trusted Mark would repent to the extent that I questioned myself—he emphatically gestured to my phone on the table as it was recording our conversation and exclaimed, “Put that down! Get that in!” At the wooden table where we sat, I was not the only one taking notes. I used pen and paper; he used a tablet. I had asked permission to record our time together, an interview that lasted nearly six hours, and whenever there needed to be a pause in the action, he would double-check to see if “we” were recording again.

Many of those I spoke with did not want to be recorded or have their names used. I understood. It was risky. I was asking people who had been socially isolated out of fear of being labeled gossips or divisive to discuss events that could be read as indictments of themselves and/or others. I asked people where they wanted to meet so that they could choose whether they would be more comfortable talking at home or in public. In one Seattle coffee shop in the vicinity of a Mars Hill facility before the church officially disbanded, a former pastor spent much of our thirty minutes together glancing around the premises, informing me when someone associated with the church walked in, eyes darting and brow lightly beaded with sweat. In one home, tears surfaced in the eyes of an ex-pastor as soon as we sat down; later during our conversation, tears welled up in mine. Many confessed they felt duped and betrayed as well as culpable. There was tension between what was attributable to human and divine will, individual agency and God’s sovereignty. People were not looking to answer, but for answers themselves. None of my interviews with former church staff were a one-way affair. I played informant, too, describing the arguments of my book, experiences at Mars Hill, and fluctuating feelings in the aftermath of its dissolution.

As I watched the video I had no language for what I was experiencing, nor had I caught Pastor Mark’s. I could not discern divine providence or impose self-will in explanations for what was bodily unfolding. I did not ask *why* I wanted to believe Mark would repent to the extent that I even doubted myself, as there were no religious or personal reasons for such an investment; instead, I kept asking *how*. While I could not have articulated it at the time or during the many months that I sought the fellowship of former Mars Hill members over longtime friends, the disjuncture I experienced was not a matter of worldview but the matter of worlding. This affective process of coming under conviction online was underway prior to 2014 and ongoing after the video’s end, compelling my inquiry into distinctions between the human and nonhuman, materiality

and discourse, as well as the boundaries constituted and policed by the categories *religious* and *secular*. Language was not the catalyst for a religious conversion; instead, there was a “conversion of the materiality of the body into an event.”³⁹ An intensification of my body’s relation to itself occurred in an event-encounter with other bodies—an assemblage of materialities that included Driscoll, his Bible, my laptop screen, tabs open to websites dedicated to former congregants’ testimonies, the (supposed) prankster putting pornography into pew Bibles, paranoia, and Satan. All these bodies were affective conductors, rendering my positionality moot.⁴⁰

Mark began blogging on the topic of spiritual warfare a few days after the anonymous video’s release, a six-part series that ended the same week in late August when he preached what would be his last sermon from the Mars Hill pulpit. The first installment of that blog series began:

In a day when, on the one hand, science often dismisses the supernatural altogether and, on the other, cultural pluralism tells us that all spirituality is equally desirable, it is hard to find anyone who believes in the reality of the spiritual world and evil. Anyone who opens the Bible with any integrity must admit that it is a book that consistently presents a worldview in which there is a very real war with the real God and his holy angels versus the fallen angel Satan and unholy demons. Sinners, including you and me, are taken as captives in this war.⁴¹

I was conscripted by the spiritual war that Driscoll promulgated through his ministry at Mars Hill. Too often accounts of evangelical cultural performances, even those that consider the politics of affect, only consider the aim of conversion.⁴² In theorizing what he calls “structure of feeling,” cultural studies scholar Raymond Williams offers an antidote for reducing cultural politics to the expression of ideology or projection of identity by foregrounding “the specificity of present being, the inalienably physical, within which we may indeed discern and acknowledge institutions, formations, positions, but not always as fixed products, defining products.”⁴³ Structure of feeling offers a means for rethinking the social as “processes [that] occur not only between but within the relationship and the related.”⁴⁴ In this modulation, political transformation does not register in “changed institutions, formations, and beliefs” but “changes of presence” that do not have to be cognitively understood “before they exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action.”⁴⁵ This concept is useful to think through in relation to ethnographic fieldwork insofar as it speaks to and offers insight concerning “structures of *experience*” that are “emergent or pre-emergent” which are not self-contained or the property of a given

individual but rather a matter of “impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and inter-relating continuity.”⁴⁶ Arguably, ethnographic research requires not only attunement to nuances in mood and milieu that speak to the affective elements of “a social experience that is still *in process*,”⁴⁷ but a willingness to acknowledge our vulnerability and lack of control as fieldwork involves us in unpredictable social experiences through unruly bodily encounters.

Ethical action is set in motion when ethnographers are open to risk that lies beyond the purview of their positionality or liberalist conceptions of self-empowerment. When the scholarly value of such possibility is foreclosed, the study of religion and emotion becomes trapped within a given cultural system. For example, cultural studies scholar Ann Pellegrini has taken up Williams’s theorizing on structure of feeling to examine performances that bridge religious and secular publics or evangelical and popular tropes. However, the limitations of investigating culture-war conflicts in terms that reiterate hierarchical dichotomies between the saved and the sinner are apparent when the only potential outcome is the conversion of non-Christians into born-again believers, whereby affect becomes a by-product abstracted from the bodily experience of cultural politics as social and in process. Pellegrini analyzes Hell House performances in terms of “structures of religious feeling” whose strategic intent refutes the possibility of any social actors who are unidentifiable beyond the binary terms of believer or non-believer.⁴⁸ In turn, there is no affective space outside of the performances themselves, or political impact beyond cultural conflict that is only reconcilable through the personal transformation of a *lost* subject into one who is *saved*. In Pellegrini’s examination, the analytic usage of structure of feeling to investigate how such cultural performances use affect to political effect is not grounded in the phenomenology of doing fieldwork but rather the empirical data collected by an outsider who remains adamantly so.

Pellegrini confesses toward the end of her investigation, “as a queer scholar of performance (not to mention an atheist) I find my own pleasures—and challenges—in thinking seriously about Hell House, what it does, what it fails to accomplish.”⁴⁹ By signaling this failure in accomplishment in terms of the performances’ inability to incite her own conversion, and relegating Hell House’s ultimate political aim to such a *religious* transformation, Pellegrini limits the relationships of the cultural, social, and political to the domain of us and them: “Hell House speaks for much larger political and cultural currents, and represents a politics of division.”⁵⁰ Additionally, she relegates her analysis of Hell House performances to observing others, such as “a low hum from the

crowd,” or descriptive statements that index her positionality as an unchangeable critic in command of any emotional response that may arise: “In comparison to the pyrotechnics of hell,” she writes, “heaven was a let-down.”⁵¹

By strictly policing her stance in relation to the Hell House performances in the name of academic objectivity and researcher reflexivity, Pelligrini indexes the ethical and political shortcomings of such an approach. Rather than investigating the politics of affect, she approaches religion as a cultural system to the detriment of her analysis. Despite her useful discussion of structure of feeling as a concept, her reading of the performance under examination curiously omits, ignores, and/or disavows affect as it bodily registered through her, rendering the relationship between religion and emotion as lifeless as the pervasive mood conjured then dismissed in Geertz’s discussion. This cultural studies approach claims authority before it embarks on inquiry, whereas, as anthropologist James Clifford notes, “Ethnography is actively situated *between* powerful systems of meaning. It poses its questions at the boundaries . . . it describes processes of innovation and structuration, and is itself part of these processes.”⁵² While Pelligrini uses the primary method used by ethnographers in her study of religion and emotion—the clumsy hyphenate “participant-observation”—she wields it as a tool rather than an opportunity. As Clifford describes it, “The predominant metaphors in anthropological research have been participant-observation, data collection, and cultural description, all of which presuppose a standpoint outside—looking at, objectifying, or, somewhat closer, ‘reading,’ a given reality.”⁵³ However, Clifford adds that participant-observation also enacts “a delicate balance of subjectivity and objectivity,” whereby empathy becomes central.⁵⁴ My empirical evidence suggests that, more so than empathy, the ethnographic study of religion and emotion produces surplus affect that is unintentionally, even problematically, transformative. Longitudinal fieldwork forces the ethnographer to face the limits of scholarly control, whether they admit to it in writing or not.

Economies of Love-Hate

It was an emotional Sunday morning on June 12, 2016. I was scanning updates about the mass shooting in Orlando. The first news report I saw of the attack on Pulse nightclub announced that there was a possible terror link. This assumption was soon amplified by Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, who said that if “this is something inspired by radical ideology, then I think common sense tells you that he targeted the gay community because of the views that exist in the radical Islamic community about the gay community.”⁵⁵ He continued,

“We have seen the way radical Islamists have treated gays and lesbians in other countries. We’ve seen that it’s punishable by death. We’ve seen some horrible things that they have done.”⁵⁶ Conjecture concerning the psychology of the shooter has been debated, but Rubio’s statements have remained unchallenged. His common sense was bolstered by pundits such as the *New York Times* op-ed columnist Frank Bruni, who stated that the attack was against “freedom itself,” given that the United States “integrate[s] and celebrate[s] diverse points of view, diverse systems of belief, diverse ways to love.”⁵⁷

In their responses, Rubio and Bruni construct a nationalist imaginary that posits the United States as exceptional in embracing diversity, freedom, and love. Notwithstanding the fact that the gunman was an American, both soundly rest blame for Omar Mateen’s rampage on an amorphous elsewhere while framing the emotional narrative of the largest mass shooting in U.S. history in binary terms of us/them. Specifically, Rubio conjures a battle between two seemingly homogenous communities—*Islamic radicals* outside of the United States and *the gay community* within. He erases details such as the predominantly Latino patronage at Pulse that night while ignoring others such as Mateen’s U.S. citizenship. His common sense resounds with the hubris of empire that circulates hate in the name of love.

Although President Obama is not ideologically aligned on paper with Rubio about policies such as gay marriage and transgender rights, his language in the massacre’s aftermath resonated: “No act of hate or terror will ever change who we are, or the values that make us American.”⁵⁸ Another quote from his speech read, “In the face of hate and violence, we will love one another. We will not give in to fear or turn against each other. Instead, we will stand united as Americans to protect our people and defend our nation, and to take action against those who threaten us.”⁵⁹

Once again, a tragedy turned into an opportunity to proclaim *America* on the side of love and unity and *other countries* on the side of hate and radicalness. A possible terror link is a foregone conclusion based on ideological oppositions of good/evil, the very Manichean logic that legitimized Operation Iraqi Freedom, a preemptive war fought over imaginary weapons of mass destruction. When President George W. Bush proclaimed an “axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world” after the attacks on 9/11,⁶⁰ he set the emotional tone for U.S. foreign policy at the beginning of the twenty-first century using the rhetoric of crusade.⁶¹ We can affectively examine this discourse through a lens offered by Sara Ahmed: “The reading of others as hateful aligns the imagined

subject with rights and the imagined nation with ground. This alignment is affected by the representation of both the rights of the subject and the grounds of the nation as already under threat. It is the emotional reading of hate that works to bind the imagined white subject and nation together. . . . The ordinary white subject is a fantasy that comes into being through the mobilization of hate, as a passionate attachment tied closely to love.”⁶²

Rubio referred to Mateen as “an animal” and warned, “It is a reminder that the war on terror has evolved into something we have never had to face before: individuals capable of carrying out attacks like these, with these numbers, in places you have not seen before.”⁶³ As love and hate circulate in support of national defense, they prime an atmosphere of fear in which menace potential becomes increasingly banal and easier to spot.

As I scanned for further news on the shooting, directly below the Rubio update the *New York Times* reported, “Washington Plans Extra Security for Pride Festival.” Underneath this announcement was a photo taken during the pride parade in Washington, DC, the previous day.

The picture was quickly removed within a few minutes of its posting, but rather than attribute it to a mere mistake and honor second guesses, I prefer to observe the initial impulse, which illustrates all too well what Ahmed describes in economic terms of hate:



FIGURE 8.1. Photograph of crowd at Washington, DC, parade. Credit: James Lawler Duggan/Reuters.

Hate cannot be found in one figure, but works to create the very outline of different figures or objects of hate, a creation that crucially aligns the figures together and constitutes them as a “common” threat. Importantly, then, hate does not reside in a given subject or object. Hate is economic; it circulates between signifiers in relationships of difference and displacement. . . . emotions work by sticking figures together (adherence), a sticking that creates the very effect of a collective (coherence). . . . My economic model of emotions suggests that while emotions do not positively reside in a subject or figure, they still work to bind subjects together. Indeed, to put it more strongly, the nonresidence of emotions is what makes them “binding.”⁶⁴

The woman in this photograph is not of the pride parade. According to the caption, she is a passerby wearing a hijab. Her image magnifies and augments the announcement that security has been amped up as protection against potential menace. In this image, a possible terror link is seen, captured, and identified. Hate circulates. Out of love, Americans bear arms, bolster security, and constitute a common threat that has no particular face but can be represented as different through displacement and certain signifiers—in this case, a woman wearing a hijab waiting to cross the street at the gay pride parade in Washington, DC. Love, not just hate, can lead to the careless and commonsensical depiction of future threat in the nebulous shape of racialized, radicalized, religious *Others*. Jasbir Puar contends that queer subjects in the United States are afforded benevolence in liberal discourses of diversity in lieu of “ever-narrowing parameters of white racial privilege” and “a reintensification of racialization through queerness.”⁶⁵ The woman wearing a hijab is depicted as uncomfortably out of place amid the freedom, love, and gay pride on open, colorful display.

In the following weeks, terrorist attacks hit cities in predominantly Muslim countries. Less than a month after 49 people were killed in Orlando, jihadists murdered 41 people in Istanbul, 22 in Bangladesh, and over 300 in Baghdad. However, the victims in these attacks gleaned far less global attention than those who were shot at Pulse. While the rainbow flag signifying gay pride was widely flown or posted in solidarity within and outside of the United States, the flags of Turkey, Bangladesh, and Iraq were not. This apparent lack of empathy and overt indifference led some to ask, “In a supposedly globalized world, do nonwhites, non-Christians, and non-Westerners count as fully human?”⁶⁶

Mateen may have pledged allegiance to ISIS in a 911 call, but ISIS’s subsequent praise of him did not make his connection to the terrorist group any

clearer. He also used a gay dating app and frequented Pulse before the night of the shooting, but questions regarding his sexuality remain unanswered. The construction of his psychological profile to determine motive and label the killing a hate crime, act of terrorism, or both, stoked uncertainty rather than abating it. President Obama’s speech only temporarily countered the empiric histrionics of the 2016 Republican Presidential nominee that soon became President-Elect Donald Trump, who proposed a ban on migrants from any part of the world with a “proven history of terrorism” against the United States.⁶⁷ When Americans declare love as *our* value, an object possessed and wielded as a shield in supposed unity for the sake of national security, such discourse is no defense against hate. Economically, emotion is not partisan, self-contained, or *good* or *bad* in moral terms. Love is not any better or worse, on the side of right or wrong, than hate is—insofar as affective value is concerned.

As I revise this chapter for publication two weeks after the 2016 Presidential Election, accounts of hijabs being wrenched from women’s heads circulate on the Internet, and exit polls indicate roughly 80 percent of white evangelicals voted for Donald Trump. “Love Trumps Hate” may have been a well-intentioned campaign slogan, but in this election cycle it could not best “Make America Great Again.” Affect theorist Lauren Berlant writes, “all attachments are optimistic . . . cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object.”⁶⁸ Belief is an intensely problematic object of desire that enlists affective attachment; its examination requires attunement to social transformation as a process of becoming that unnecessarily signals progress.

Conclusion

As an assemblage, religion is neither rational nor irrational but relational.⁶⁹ This analytic shift affords the opportunity to examine invisible demons, collective moods, and media technologies as agents rather than fictions, fogs, and tools. By examining emotion as economic, my aim was to emphasize how it mobilizes affect, transmitting value that is unnecessarily moral or monetary. To study religion and emotion in relation is to register what lies beyond language, signification, and normative regulation. Rather than postulate definitions of worlding and attunement, I have offered empirical examples to argue for ethnography’s unique capacity to signal situations of bodily encounter. As with any methodology, what it means to practice ethnography shifts, is challenged, appropriated, and repurposed. However, at its most analytically evocative and ethically insightful, ethnography is ontological and phenomenological, a worlding in motion and an attunement in writing.

NOTES

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