

De-Exoticizing Ghetto Poverty: On the Ethics of Representation in Urban Ethnography

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To write an ethnography about poor urban people is to risk courting controversy. While all ethnographers face questions about how well they knew their site or how much their stories can be trusted, the tone and content of those questions typically remain within the bounds of collegial discourse. Ethnographers of poor minorities have incited distinct passion and at times acrimony, inspiring accusations of stereotyping, misrepresentation, sensationalism, and even cashing in on the problems of the poor (Fischer 2014; see Boelen 1992; Reed 1994; Wacquant 2002; Jones 2010; Betts 2014; Rios 2015).

One thoughtful critique is the idea that outsider ethnographies have painted one-dimensional portrayals of poor black and Latino communities. This critique has been mounted by minority, not white ethnographers, scholars who, rather than launching invectives or proposing a ban on middle-class whites from studying people of color, have instead shown great seriousness in their commentary and work (Jones 2010; Rios 2011; Hoang 2015). If we believe that studies of the urban poor are important, and that both insiders and outsiders will inevitably undertake them, then we must take stock of what these scholars see that their white colleagues do not—take seriously that writing about such communities represents ethical decisions that “ghetto ethnography” has too often handled poorly.

TWO REPRESENTATIONS

All ethnographies provide at once two representations, one of the observed and one of the observer. And though the ethnographer controls the writing both have an interest in the product. The observed have an interest in being depicted fairly, revealing not too much, and coming across as reasonable; the ethnographer, in representing herself as an acute observer, a thoughtful writer, and a reliable reporter.¹

The observer, though, has additional interests, and these will vary widely, as reflected in the written work. Consider the remarkable diversity of the recent ethnographies of the urban poor. They have included those highly analytical (Small 2004) and highly descriptive (Goffman 2014), aimed at theorists (Wacquant 2004) and aimed at the public (Venkatesh 2008), focused on people (Rios 2011) and focused on institutions (McRoberts 2003), centered on events (Klinenberg 2002) and centered on locations (Jean 2007), and on and on. This diversity reflects not only the many approaches to research but also the

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many depictions of oneself that the ethnographer may hope to communicate: as an evocative writer, a sophisticated analyst, a knowledgeable theorist, a good storyteller, a patient observer, a courageous researcher, a tenacious investigator, a truth-teller, and a muck-raker. Reflective or not, there is always some representation of the observer.

And here, in the potential conflict between this representation and that of the observed, lies, I argue, the problem that critics have identified—it is here where lack of reflection has led to inadvertent stereotypes and worse.²

To discuss why, I rely on one definition of exploitation, as the extent to which one person's gain depends directly on another's loss. Since "exploitation" is a loaded term, I should be clear: There is nothing inherently exploitative in writing about the poor, just as there is nothing inherently liberating—more often than not, their lives will continue precisely as they were. Instead, my point is entirely about rhetorical representation, how two different images are presented in the writing and ultimately—and this is why it matters—come to inform the public consciousness. When an ethnographer either purposely or unwittingly improves her representation of herself by worsening the representation of the observed, she risks a kind of rhetorical exploitation. Consider two ways ethnographers have often chosen to represent themselves, as sympathetic observer and as courageous immersive. Each in its own way can easily lead to a depiction that reinforces common stereotypes.

SYMPATHETIC OBSERVER

In his "Whose Side Are We On?," Becker (1967) argued that debating whether to remain impartial or to reveal one's commitments when writing ethnography was pointless, since approaching the field without preconceptions is impossible. The real question is whose side the ethnographer wishes to take. Many ethnographers have openly sided with their participants, using their work to "humanize" or otherwise paint a sympathetic picture of the latter. This stance may seem to obviate the problem I have discussed, since a sympathetic ethnographer might appear inherently to be at one with the interests of the observed.

Yet sympathy is no guarantee. We can find an example in history, in the missionaries who were among the world's first ethnographers. When Bartolomé de las Casas, a religious man who was among the first Europeans to visit the Americas, observed the conquistadors' deplorable mistreatment of the indigenous people, he was shocked to the point of complaining bitterly to the Spanish crown on their behalf.³ A liberal, even radical, of his time, his sympathy was not in doubt. Yet his case rested on depicting the indigenous as a "simple," "tender," "subservient" people "incapable of hard labor" and lacking the intellectual wherewithal to know how to defend themselves (de las Casas 2007/1689:3). This depiction resonated with his liberal readers back in Europe, for they accorded with prevailing conceptions. It also served two functions: the more simple-minded the indigenous, the more shocking the horrors committed against them, and the more de las Casas emerged as the conscience of a continent—his representation of himself, deliberate or not, came at the expense of the natives' representation. To be clear, none of this impugns his motives, which by all measures were pure. Yet it is easy to see how, had the indigenous been able to tell their own tales, they might bristle at their one-dimensional representation as "simple" and "tender."⁴

Certainly, one must have some lens, and sympathy is surely better than antagonism. But a commitment to elicit sympathy will focus the gaze on those aspects of the people, institutions, or places likely to evoke pity, sorrow, or anger. And the ethnographer, like de las Casas, will inevitably heighten those elements at the expense of others—see them more and find more of them, miss heterogeneity, and ignore people and institutions inconsistent with the view. The result is a picture that, though ostensibly recognizable to sympathetic outsiders, may seem preposterously one-sided to the observed. Many of today's ethnographies bear this character.

An alternative to seeking sympathy is empathy, Weber's *verstehen*. One feels empathy when one understands another's condition as one would one's own, and pity or sorrow are irrelevant. An ethnographer seeking empathy hopes to understand what aspects of the ostensibly exotic are plausibly familiar, often in the belief that similar social processes may manifest themselves in different contexts. Consider Comfort's (2008) study of low-income women whose partners were imprisoned. The opportunity would be ripe for a predictable narrative in which mass incarceration is victimizing women and destroying families, with the sympathetic author to thank for uncovering how. But Comfort pursued her work with dispassion, and sought, instead of pity, understanding. The women in her narrative are not victims; they are multidimensional people with complicated views about imprisonment. For example, they "at once denounced *and* commended the criminal justice system for its intercession in their personal lives" (2008:12). How could this be? The "women laud their incarcerated partners for a range of stereotypically feminine qualities—intensive communication, attentiveness to the relationship, expression of emotion—and attribute the men's development of these skills to the brute fact of their penal confinement" (2008:13). The women hated the imprisonment but loved the men their partners had become.

The narrative does not accord with stereotypes. Instead, it makes clear that, just as many of us do, the women have contradictory feelings about criminal justice, resulting in an unavoidably empathetic understanding of the difficulties of the observed. We understand their mixed feelings because we have our own. In this respect, Comfort succeeds where many ethnographers have not.⁵ If the reader cannot see himself in the teenager out of school, or the undocumented worker, or the single mother of three, then an ethnographic text has failed as an empathetic project, even if it elicits easy sympathy.

To be sure, sympathetic books, even if littered with simplistic portrayals, can incite liberal readers into action. As Fischer (2014) has written, "social reformers learned in the nineteenth century [that] the 'pornography of pain' can mobilize middle-class sympathy." The danger is that sympathy depends on the willingness of the reader to pity the other, and many readers will not. And a short-term gain might only come at long-term costs. The reader who pities the victim and the one who blames the victim share an understanding of the poor black or Latino woman, man, or child as the other, as representation of a problem first, and multidimensional human being a distant second, reinforcing stubborn stereotypes in the public at large that have endured for generations. A great irony of ethnographies of the urban poor may be that writing sympathetically has so often led to writing stereotypically.

COURAGEOUS IMMERSIVE

A poignant critique in these debates has been the “jungle-book trope” (Rios 2011) or “cowboy ethnography” (Hoang 2015) complaint, wherein ethnographers are faulted for implicitly or openly representing the field site as exotically dangerous. This critique is not unique to sociological studies of U.S. poverty. Anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon (Chagnon 2013) was for years accused of exaggerating the level of violence of the Yanomami of the Venezuelan Amazon for the sake of representing himself as a courageous ethnographer willing to live on the edge (Eakin 2013).

In such ethnographies, the conflict of interest between the two representations is clear: The observer is believed to be courageous only to the extent the observed are perceived as dangerous, creating an incentive to paint a one-dimensional picture centered on crime and violence. Readers who have never ventured into poor neighborhoods, like those personally unfamiliar with the Amazon forest, may see such decisions as harmless. Are not the neighborhoods, in fact, violent? They may be, but they are also many other things that might be equally important. The view that such ethnographies are merely “reporting the facts” requires one (a) to believe that a single trait, violence, can capture either the essence of a neighborhood or the character of a population and (b) to presume that writing does not involve choice. Even in the nation’s most violent neighborhood, the majority of residents do not sell drugs or rob people. And even a full-time drug dealer thinks about other things—faith, politics, loneliness, film, etc. Focusing on violence is only unavoidable if one’s view of a place or its people is itself narrow. All writing is choice: the favoring of one account over an infinity of plausible alternatives. A better question might be, what does the observer gain from choosing this representation over all others? Indeed, *cui bono*? If the answer is at all ambiguous, the ethnographer must ask herself why.

The issue becomes thornier when we recognize that the American public has an appetite, as Hollywood well knows, for crime, danger, and violence, particularly when it comes to black and Latino poor communities. Violence sells copy, and no ethnographer can feign ignorance of this fact. One way or the other, when thoughts were put to paper, the ethnographer must have decided to ignore, reject, or, all too often, capitalize on that appetite.

Consider a successful case of rejection, Hoang’s (2015) immersive study of sex clubs and sex workers in Vietnam. If violence sells, then sex sells even more, and Hoang could easily have chosen to manipulate that fact. Indeed, in a sad reflection of the state of our current discourse, at many of the Q&As for her presentations Hoang was asked the sex version of the courageous immersive question: How far did she go? Admitting to sex work might paint her as the truly brave scholar, the one willing to stop at nothing for the sake of research; denying it as preposterous might paint the observed as either deviants or victims performing work no one would do unless forced to. “In the end,” she wrote, “I decided not to disclose whether I engaged in sex work” (2015:22). She refused to engage in the potential for rhetorical exploitation inherent in her fieldwork. Indeed, the better question is, why were they asking? Hoang’s approach, along with the thoughtful discussion in her book, is a model of self-reflection.

There is a clear parallel to studies of black and Latino poor people in the U.S., except the popular appeal is not sex but crime and violence, and to “go far” does not risk the

same kind of moral opprobrium. Yet too few ethnographers today have seriously considered the ethics of that form of representation, proceeding under the implausible guise of mere reporting of the facts. There is no such thing. For violence to sell, the ethnographer must create the product.

Consider a notable alternative, Bourgois' (1995) study of Latino men who sold crack in 1980s East Harlem. The exceptionally violent context offered Bourgois ample room to depict his site as perilous and, by extension, himself as brave. Commendably, he addressed representation explicitly, signaling the potential of exploiting stereotypes for personal gain: "Any detailed examination of social marginalization encounters serious problems with the politics of representation . . . I worry . . . that the life stories and events presented in this book will be misread as negative stereotypes of Puerto Ricans" (1995:11). Rather than embrace sensationalism he rejected that approach: "This book is not about crack, or drugs, per se. Substance abuse in the inner city is merely a symptom . . . [The] two dozen street dealers and their families that I befriended were not interested in talking primarily about drugs" (1995:2). As all people, they mostly talked about other things—which the author incorporated into a frank but full-pictured narrative.

ETHNOGRAPHER'S CHOICE

Fischer (2014) has written that "[s]ensationalism, [a] kind of misrepresentation, . . . afflicts this genre. Yet how much attention would the accounts get if they simply described the ho-hum of daily life?" The question is at once frank and distressing, since it suggests sensationalism might be inevitable.

Yet American ethnographies outside of this genre have often focused precisely on the ho-hum of daily life, on the everyday experiences in ordinary settings of people such as students in medical school (Becker et al. 1961) or workers in corporate offices (Kanter 1977). Indeed, the notion of "everyday life" has produced much of the most important sociology in this country, as thinkers have been inspired to uncover what is hidden in the plain sight of ordinary experience (Goffman 1959). Perhaps the answer to Fischer's question is not so obvious.

Most studies of everyday life, though, have focused on middle-class whites, as though ethnographers have seen in poor minorities little more than their poverty and their race. Indeed, the typical studies of everyday life depict middle-class women and men who are empathetic and complex, through narratives in which stereotypes are scarce and sentiments such as pity are out of place. One might be tempted to argue that the reason is the lack of social problems in the middle class. Yet many of these people exhibit their own serious ills, including drug abuse, depression, white-collar theft, divorce, job loss, date rape, alienation, sex discrimination, corruption, mass school shootings, and many others. Low-income minorities have no monopoly on social difficulties. Middle-class whites are routinely represented as more than the sum of their problems. Why not they?

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tual debts to Chinua Achebe (1977), Edward Said (1979), and Clarence Walker (1991), all of whom wrestled with the ethics, and politics, of representation.

Notes

¹For more on writing and representation in ethnography, see Emerson et al. (2011) and Clifford and Marcus (1986).

²To be clear, the interests of the observer and those of the observed are almost never, in ethnographic research, one and the same. In fact, the hard if unpleasant fact is that the observer will almost always get more from the relationship than the observed. The observer gets a dissertation or a book, a job or a promotion, tenure or a raise, respect, national attention, and even fame. The observed, nine times out of ten, gets nothing but the chance to continue to maintain their low station in life. The rise in participatory ethnography is an attempt, with mixed results, to redress this condition.

³In fact, de las Casas' work was so important that it helped temper forced labor among the local indigenous people—even though he made his case by arguing that, instead, the conquistadors should import and enslave Africans. Later in his life de las Casas regretted that position.

⁴Indeed, the entire moral urgency of *A Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies* rests on an ironic contrast between the nobility of the supposed savages and the savagery of the supposedly civilized: "This is a most tender and effeminate people, and so imbecile and unequal-balanced temper, that they are altogether incapable of hard labour . . ." (de las Casas 2007/1698:3); "The Spaniards first assaulted the innocent Sheep . . . like most cruel Tygers, Wolves and Lions, hunger-starv'd, studying nothing . . ." (de las Casas 2007/1698:3).

⁵Her narrative does something similar in its understanding of the prison: "in order to arrive at measured conclusions about the role of punitive confinement in the lives of millions of people, the prison must be . . . analyzed like any other 'people processing' . . . institution, such as hospitals, schools, or military barracks" (2008:12). The prisons these women must navigate to see their spouses come across as simply more politically charged and institutionally oppressive versions of the standard bureaucracies everyone must navigate.

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