

Murphy Out of Place: Ethnographic Anxiety and its 'Telling' Consequences

Liam D. Murphy

ABSTRACT: In Belfast, Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, myriad problems of epistemology and research design confront ethnographers entering the field for the first time. While these often remain a permanently taxing wellspring of frustration and anxiety, their apparent resolution through experience can occasionally lull researchers into a false sense of security in the context of social interaction with field respondents. By exploring an instance in which the author neglected to apply his understanding of the important Northern Ireland phenomenon of 'telling', the article shows how method and epistemology should always be borne in mind during fieldwork situations—even those implicitly discounted a priori as nonethnographic. While such relaxation of self-awareness may precipitate various blunders and ethnographic faux-pas, it also opens up spaces of critical inquiry into the collaborative constitution of selves and others in field situations, and refocuses the ethnographer's awareness of his positioning as an outsider in webs of social activity.

KEYWORDS: fieldwork, reflexivity, telling, religion, Belfast, Northern Ireland, method, ethnography

Anthropology is an academic discipline whose practitioners pride themselves on intimate knowledge of their surroundings, but this is always more easily declared than accomplished—regardless of where one chooses to conduct fieldwork. Even among seasoned ethnographic veterans, the world as we find it often confounds even the most well considered research agenda. Mastering the practicalities of everyday living can displace the ambition to 'really' begin one's research, and can even lull fieldworkers into a sense of false security about their achievement (indispensable though this is). Elements of my own experience in Northern Ireland may perhaps serve as a cautionary tale in this regard.

As a novice fieldworker, newly arrived in Belfast in September 1997, my ambition to 'know'

this socially complex city proved especially daunting as I began my doctoral fieldwork among charismatic and evangelical Christians. Preoccupied with the most immediate concerns of life, epistemology and the issue of self-representation were, of necessity, secondary considerations to me in those first weeks. Finding a flat, providing for my financial security and getting accustomed to my new neighbourhood in south Belfast absorbed me—especially as regards the locations of shops, grocers and launderettes (the pocket-sized booklet of maps that I carried with me at all times soon became dog-eared and ragged). Having visited the city before on several short trips, I struggled for some weeks to re-acquaint myself with key landmarks, bus routes, main traffic arteries and intersections, the 'functional' distinctiveness of

different neighbourhoods (economic, governmental, residential etc.) and the many informal and quasi-official boundaries that delimit the various residential enclaves and housing estates throughout the greater urban area.

Only with the passage of many weeks did these early preoccupations give way to more substantive considerations related to my fieldwork. Even then, those familiar with the complexities of ethnographic research design will doubtless recognise or even identify with my efforts to curtail the bewilderment that threatened to engulf me during my first months in the field. My central concern was to define a community of subjects among who to conduct research—a deceptively difficult task—somehow much easier in my dissertation proposal than it ever proved on the ground. Much troubled by this unresolved issue, I often comforted myself with the certain knowledge that 'my' choices were almost certain not to be my own, but 'theirs'. The stark reality of ethnographic investigation is that researchers must be somewhat opportunistic about their sources, and one's opportunities are generally made available through the goodwill, or at least interest, of those one meets, often by accident. While I had already been fortunate in being welcomed by members of several prominent churches and religious communities, there were hardly any guarantees that my good fortune would endure. Still, I found that a cumulative approach to sampling, in which I eagerly followed up on all potential contacts (a name dropped here, a phone number scribbled down there); showed up uninvited and unannounced at various public events and services of which I had got wind; assiduously culled leaflets, flyers, newspapers and telephone directories; and filled my diary and notebooks with interviews with any and all who would agree to speak to me over a cup of coffee, was more productive and efficient than I had first expected. In addition to more formal encounters, innumerable spontaneous conversations

and anecdotal remarks have certainly found their way into these pages.

In addition to in-depth interviewing, in the best ethnographic tradition, participant observation was central to my methodological toolkit. Throughout my time in Belfast, I was fortunate to discover the many options that existed for pursuing this aspect of fieldwork, as by and large, and regardless of religious conviction, those I met were exceptionally gracious in allowing me to participate in the weekly rounds of activity. Indeed, by late autumn, 1997, I was becoming increasingly alarmed that there might prove too many organisations, churches, encounter groups and communities in which I might reasonably expect to meet and get to know religious virtuosi, entrepreneurs and devotees. As fieldnotes, newspaper clippings, audio-recorded interviews, religious tracts and book-length testimonies accumulated, my first months in the field posed the nightmarish logistical difficulty of separating the proverbial wheat from the chafe. Running the gamut from large, bureaucratic and impersonal to small and grounded in personal connections and friendships; formal churches to informal 'parachurches'; permanent to ephemeral; and from fully charismatic to partially so to 'disenchanted' rationalists, early on it concerned me not so much that I would fail to engage potential respondents, but that I might not make informed decisions about how best to focus my efforts. With how many such organisations could I reasonably expect to become familiar during my lengthy, but ultimately finite stay in Belfast? Certainly during the first weeks of my fieldwork, this was a torturous question to which I returned repeatedly as I forged ahead. Throughout, I hoped fervently that an answer would suddenly present itself—springing fully formed from the pages of my fieldnotes, as Aphrodite from the oceanic foam or Eve from Adam's rib.

Perhaps inevitably, such decisions proved more analogous to Procrustes' bed than to any epiphany or revelation on my part. While

problems of inclusion and exclusion dogged me throughout my sojourn, I eventually found solace in an eclectic strategy that, while perhaps imperfect in the sense of not exhausting *every* possible avenue of research, was nevertheless comprehensive in terms of the sheer range of practices and perspectives that it allowed me to collect. Thus, over the course of the year, I spoke, worked, prayed and/or socialised with members of some dozen avowedly religious institutions and programmes of one stripe or another.¹

In all, and with the hindsight of eight or nine years, it is clear that I suffered, in those early days, from a stubborn case of ethnographic 'performance anxiety'—a persistent worry that I would somehow fail to pull together into a coherent whole the various threads of my research interest, and that, somehow, I would never achieve that critical mass of support from field respondents upon which even the most well respected ethnographers depend.

Notwithstanding that such concerns linger, painfully, with many anthropologists long after they have been initiated into their fieldsites, it is important to recall that these anxieties provide a necessary corrective to the overconfident and the careless. While I do not propose to overindulge what Geertz (1988: 90) has called the 'diary disease', let alone advocate a Malinowskian exegesis on the social functions of anxiety, I do suggest that moments of inner turmoil and conflict provide, *ex post facto* and preferably from the comfort of one's academic 'safe house' several years down the line, a conceptual space in which to explore the subtle and not-so-subtle interplay between anthropologists and the people they work among. As Bourdieu notes, this should not be an exercise in indulging nostalgia, but rather an effort to attain reflexivity 'by subjecting the position of the observer to the same critical analysis as that of the constructed object at hand' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 41). I believe that in examining the experience of fieldworkers-*qua*-subjects, anthropologists may learn a great deal about

how social encounters are fraught, on all sides, with efforts to simultaneously organise knowledge about selves and others. At times, such encounters and the anxieties that mark them as significant (scorching them into the anthropologist's awareness to such an extent as to easily be recalled years later) are provoked by sophomoric mistakes made by the researchers themselves.

Consider, for instance, the following anecdote from my own experience in Belfast. On the evening of 11 July 2003 (known in Northern Ireland as 'Eleventh Night'), I was invited to accompany a small cohort of students and researchers interested in 'making the rounds' of a few of South Belfast's more notorious bonfires. Eagerly accepting the invitation, and only ever having observed such spectacles from a cautious distance, I was anxious to know at first hand what could be expected to happen at these events, especially given their notoriety. In the several weeks leading up to the night itself, I had made a point of traversing the greater urban area in search of these fascinating sites of loyalist culture, here noting the gradual accumulation and haphazard stacking of crates and tyres,² there observing the playground antics of preteens and bored youth, climbing about on the piles of debris and even setting small fires in anticipation of the main event. Typically, the towers to be set alight are erected on traditional, barren spaces of varying dimensions in urban and suburban loyalist enclaves. Unadorned and desolate for much of the year, these sites and their residential hinterlands are transformed annually in anticipation of the Twelfth of July. The signs of this metamorphosis typically begin to appear in early June, as gable walls, curbstones, telephone poles and other bare surfaces³ are festooned with the bright union jacks and paramilitary flags, bunting and the murals that are ubiquitous in unionist and loyalist neighborhoods throughout the marching season. On several occasions, as I took photographs, I nervously exchanged waves and good natured greetings with teenagers who, striking

poses for the camera, stood at full height atop these alarmingly precarious pyres. Protestant and Catholic friends alike told me that in interface areas, these children and teens could be expected to take up sentry duty in the final nights leading up to 11 July, watching over the unfinished towers and thus ensuring that they would remain intact until needed. Were it not for their vigilance, I was jokingly assured, kids from the 'other side' might be tempted to spoil their fun by prematurely torching these highly combustible structures. For national and international media consumption, Eleventh Night, together with the Twelfth of July itself, is sometimes portrayed by loyalist political leaders and apologists as a harmless cultural festival, akin in some respects to other internationally known events such as the New Orleans Mardi Gras or, indeed, the republican *Fla*—an annual, internationally recognised cultural festival held on the Falls Road in West Belfast. Closer to home, it is widely recognised that, in sharp contrast to the family-friendly, light-hearted multiculturalism of the Fla, Eleventh Night festivities are invariably contentious. Among others, they are fraught with the possibilities of alcohol-induced street violence (particularly in those neighbourhoods that abut south Belfast's Golden Mile bar district), sectarian attacks, gratuitous paramilitary activity and displays, and the damaging effects of long-term environmental and pollution created by the hundreds of bonfires that are the Eleventh's central focus and rallying points.

While a number of pyres, of varying degrees of craftsmanship, are to be found distributed throughout the several loyalist, residential pockets that litter the city centre, perhaps the largest is that reared in Sandy Row—a militantly and unambiguously Protestant neighbourhood (its colours are in evidence all year round) with strong historical links to loyalist paramilitaries (most notably the Ulster Freedom Fighters [UFF], a group widely perceived to be nested within a still larger organisation, the Ulster Defence Association [UDA]).⁴ Sandy Row spans

roughly five city blocks between Great Victoria Street and Shaftesbury Square just to the east and a series of small streets that comprise the (likewise homogeneously Protestant) Linfield Housing Estate to the immediate west. Unlike those loyalist neighbourhoods of the city's east, west and north quadrants, it thus lies but a stone's throw from Belfast's shopping, educational, recreational and governmental heart. Despite its proximity to the forces and institutions of state, the neighbourhood is generally held to be a contested space in which patrolling police and security forces exercise heightened alertness, and which convention dictates is uniformly off limits to Roman Catholics.

An autobiographical note is in order here. Because many Belfast neighbourhoods, sometimes misleadingly called or "urban villages" (cf. Buckley and Kenney 1995: 20), are all but homogeneous with respect to religion and political orientation, I was frequently cautioned to be prudent when wandering about generally, and to be especially on my guard should I find myself (presumably inadvertently) lost in a staunchly loyalist enclave. In such a situation, Catholic and Protestant friends alike warned me, I might consider introducing myself not as Liam (a classically Gaelic, hence Catholic name) but rather as William, Billy, or Bill (the Anglicised equivalents). In the event, I found with very few exceptions (perhaps, as the Irish saying goes, God really does 'hate a coward') that using my Christian name had little outward impact on how people regarded me: throughout my fieldwork, I was uniformly treated with courtesy, respect, friendliness and the generosity of spirit for which the Irish are justifiably well known. Of course, this does not mean that I was never regarded with suspicion or spoken to without some trepidation on the part of interviewees—indeed, there were doubtless occasions on which people wondered about my motives and purposes—but what does seem clear is that Belfast's residents are by and large familiar with the sundry activities of social-scientist researchers. A review of the cumula-

tive interdisciplinary literature on the Troubles shows that for many years, a bevy of anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, historians, social psychologists and others, hailing from both international destinations and closer to home, have been active in Belfast and elsewhere across Northern Ireland—collecting data, administering surveys, conducting interviews, pouring through archives and libraries and snapping photographs. Furthermore, this observation does not even take into account the scores of journalists, film-makers, community workers, politicians and the many others who have sought to document or report on the lives of Northern Ireland's people. Not without reason has the region become well known as among the most intensively studied societies in the world.

In the event, and while my companions and I observed several conflagrations in process (for instance, in hinterland streets of what is widely known as 'The Village', several dozen residents carefully stoked makeshift pyres in the middle of the street), the most impressive and dramatic was that held at Sandy Row. Arriving in the early evening at the entrance to the public grounds on which the fifty to sixty foot pyre—not yet lit—had been erected, the jovial ambience was striking. Conspicuous for our obvious status as outsiders (our group being composed of visitors from the U.S., Spain and England, among others) and anxious to appear friendly, we eagerly, if randomly, struck up conversations with those around us, all of whom appeared to have come to view the event. As my eyes grew accustomed to the dim light, I saw that several hundred residents of the neighbourhood, clearly in high spirits and eager for the night to get underway, chatted amiably while others danced to the tinny melody of anti-Catholic folk music barely audible above the din of conversation and laughter (see De Rosa 1998 and Radford 2001 for further detail). In one corner of the yard, a vendor sold loyalist-themed hats, CDs and other kitsch, while his neighbour served watery lager from a keg. As

one elderly, yet spry, man stole away a female acquaintance for a dance, another, dignified-looking septuagenarian in tweed blazer and cap greeted me. Having been clearly marked, even from a distance, as a stranger to the area, I shook his outstretched hand. Returning his broad smile, and struggling to hear even my own voice above the din, I introduced myself by name as a visitor from California. At this, the man started, cocked his head and gave me an odd look which might best be described as falling between bewilderment and suspicion. Retaining his pleasant demeanour, he said in an undertone, 'You'd be the *only* Liam Murphy here tonight, I can tell you that straight away'. With that, he turned on his heel and disappeared into the expanding throng, leaving me to wonder whether I had not just made a silly (and potentially dangerous, given the context) mistake.

Three years later, it is clear that, indeed, my lack of caution was a mistake on several levels. To begin with, I had illegitimately removed myself from the field in my own imagination—forgetting where I was and to a certain extent caught up in the drama of the event; I lost sight of that of which ethnographers should never lose sight: their own irrevocable status as outsiders. In my desire to participate, I set aside all the hard-won ethnographic 'common sense' I had acquired in recent years, giving free rein, instead, to my desire for honesty and openness with those around me. Herein lies the lesson.

Secondly, I had forgotten in that moment all I had learned and observed about the phenomenon of telling, whereby ethnographic subjects identify, reproduce and culturally locate themselves in relation to others. This ubiquitous form of social practice, not limited to Northern Ireland, but refined there, at least to the status of a high art, involves the reading of persons as texts that encode metonymic community allegiance. While the best known explication of this phenomenon is that offered by Frank Burton (1978), numerous ethnographers have cited telling as a critical folk-diagnostic of identity within

shifting networks of spatially contexted social relations (see Aretxaga 1997: 35ff.; Bryan 2000: 12ff.; Kelleher 2003: 11ff.; and Lanclos 2003: 127ff.). More simply, as Kelleher has phrased it, telling involves 'reading the bodies of strangers to tell whether they are Catholic or Protestant' (2003: 12). The characteristics and traits to be 'read' include, but are not limited to, the way one says one's alphabet (specifically, how one pronounces one's *h*'s [Buckley and Kenney 1995: 7–8]), the colour of clothing one wears, where one attends school, the neighbourhood or street one is observed moving into or out of, and the provenance of one's forename and surname.

As these and others suggest, and as I should have recalled, even in the superficially innocuous act of naming myself, I had established that although I was an American, and hence an outsider, the Irish Gaelic-derived name Liam Murphy also marked me as a probable Roman Catholic, or at least of a Catholic background.⁵ As noted, even at the best of times, Sandy Row is an unwelcome landscape for Catholics, who, as discussed above, are linked categorically and indiscriminately in popular Protestant rhetoric and metaphor to the political ideologies of nationalism and republicanism. This thinly veiled hostility is dramatised in the colourful displays of British patriotism and religious symbolism that together generate a meaningful environment: they turn the streets into a unified narrative of identity which anyone familiar with the character of social relations in Northern Ireland may readily interpret. During the marching season, which reaches its ceremonial apex on the Twelfth of July, this perception of outside threat is sharpened by a barrage of populist activity in the form of parades (those not marching are in many neighbourhoods cheering on the paraders or in some cases straggling alongside them as they walk)⁶ and, on Eleventh Night, bonfires. These conflagrations are provided with symbolic shape and context in part by the ubiquitous practice of immolating either an Irish tricolour or an effigy of the pope (represented as a category of person, rather than

an individual) both of which are set atop the pyres before they are lit, and which generally receive a torrent of cheers as they are consumed. In all cases, the 'web of signification' (Geertz 1973) instantiated by these symbols, perceived to receive historical legitimacy by the revered events of the late-seventeenth century (in particular the Battle of the Boyne), gives substance and encouragement to an active, rather than latent, anti-Catholic enmity that frequently finds expression in acts of exclusionary discourse, petty vandalism and thuggery, and sometimes more violent activity.

On past occasions where I had thought myself to be potentially at risk (if not in body, then at least of an ethnographic 'cold shoulder' from potential interviewees), I had introduced myself as William or Will. This tactic has, thankfully, remained a gambit of last resort: the vast majority of my Protestant and loyalist friends and acquaintances draw on many cultural resources in forming interpretations of those around them, and only (very) rarely have I felt myself under such scrutiny that I have decided, always with great reluctance, to obfuscate this aspect of my background. Nevertheless, on this occasion, my opting for transparency was ill-suited to the context. Accordingly, my interlocutor had responded to my declaration of identity in an appropriate and culturally meaningful way; on the basis of my Christian name, I had in all likelihood been interpreted as 'matter out of place' (to employ Mary Douglas's well worn expression [1966]). My presence could hardly be accounted for in terms of participation in the prevailing discourse of Protestant-unionist-loyalist triumphalism (although this word is perhaps overused in Northern Ireland), because no-one with the name Liam could be logically associated with this set of related discourses and practices. In fact, the presence of this 'Murphy out of place' could hardly be explained at all according to much of the conventional logic of loyalist culture.

In my view, it is the ultimately conflicted and inconsistent nature of such discourses that

allowed this gentleman, and perhaps others we met that evening, to make sense of my presence. While local Catholics are not welcome at such events, regional and international visitors—journalists, tourists and others—are a staple of the festivities surrounding the cycle of Twelfth activities. Indeed, media institutions, curious visitors and ‘culture vultures’ have in recent years become integral to how the tourist industry in Northern Ireland promotes the region abroad, despite the undeniable sectarian associations of such events (see Bryan 1998 and 2000: 163ff.). Still, relative to the other impressive displays I witnessed that evening—including a rushed paramilitary fusillade and the drama of the towering inferno itself—it was this simple exchange of greetings with a resident that proved most telling (so to speak), and to me, almost haunting for what it revealed about the exclusionary politics of ritual practice in Belfast. Perhaps the significant point to be made about the many symbols of inclusion and exclusion (be they bonfires, murals or personal names), bolstered and legitimised during the summer months, is that none are created *ex nihilo*, nor do they affect solely the principal agents acting in the institutional arenas of formal ritual (members of loyalist and republican fraternal organisations), politics (the various formally organised parties together with their activists), or paramilitarism (the roughly one dozen large and small outlawed armies that are motivated by political and other ideologies and goals).⁷ Rather, these concrete expressions of collective identity and will, support for which is crystallised in an elaborate array of words, images, sounds and actions, provide an intellectually and emotionally compelling teleology of belonging to which many people refer in organising and interpreting the significance of events around them. The myriad features of religious, political and social identity, in other words, comprise cultural resources out of which an elaborate and seamless *bricolage* of meaning is erected. Such interpretive practices are not, of course, agentless, nor do they take place in

vacuo. Rather, they are made by residents acting within spatial and temporal ‘homelands’, in which such symbols are both anticipated and readily deployed by those same social agents in a reflexive process of enforcement and elaboration. Whatever other effects this process might have on the creation of identity, symbol-laden activities such as those that inscribe meaning into the very streets of Sandy Row certainly have the effects of marking and circumscribing environments in which individuals and networks of individuals live and move. That is to say, the ongoing social constitution of such exclusionary neighbourhoods depends for its viability on the participation of many, not a few. It is the rank-and-file of such Northern Ireland communities, represented in this anecdote by the man I met, rather than those high-profile exponents of culture, religion and nationality, who are most deeply implicated in the ongoing production and maintenance of the many symbols of belonging and exclusion. Moreover, it is precisely because the boundaries of these homelands (particularly in urban environments) are not fixed in nature (for instance, set at a spatial distance from the wider community) but at best conventions and by-products of socio-political practice, that they are held as fragile—in need of defence against invasion.

As I indicated above, however, the revelatory potential of such encounters lies not in their confirmation of well known facts about Belfast’s ‘urban villages’ and the various symbols of identity deployed therein. Rather, such episodes should alert ethnographers to the risks that inhere in placing oneself outside the field of subject interaction, however ephemerally. They are cautionary tales which suggest that the sundry anxieties anthropologists suffer in their first exposure to the field may be necessary, if they are to avoid the pitfalls of the overconfident.

Liam D. Murphy is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at California State University, Sacramento. His email is lmurphy@csus.edu.

Notes

1. Among others, these included the Lamb of God Community, Christian Fellowship Church, Alpha Programme, Cornerstone Community, Divine Healing Ministries, Centre for Contemporary Christianity in Ireland (formerly ECONI—the Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland), Forthspring Community Centre and Springfield Methodist Church, Gateway Church, Irish School of Ecumenics (ISE), Martyrs Memorial Free Presbyterian Church, Rosemary Presbyterian Church, Ulster Temple and Whitewell Metropolitan Tabernacle.
2. Every year, firefighters respond to multiple episodes of out-of-control bonfires, and in their aftermath, the air is polluted with the fumes of sulphur dioxide, among other toxic substances (Bryan 2000: 138; Anon. 2003a). In 2003, Northern Ireland firefighters were called to respond to 327 bonfires, many of which also contributed to traffic problems in urban areas (Anon. 2003b), and some of which resulted in significant property damage (Anon. 2003c).
3. In fact, many different types of surfaces are used to host the Union Jack colours, including fuse boxes, hydrants, fences and virtually any other publicly accessible surface that (as Bryan phrases it) 'might take a lick of paint' (see Bryan 2000: 129 ff. and 137–138). Similar displays, based on the Irish Tricolour, are held in Republican neighbourhoods at various significant dates throughout the year (cf. Aretxaga 1997: 43–50; Jarman 1997: 232 ff.).
4. A number of anthropologists have written, directly or indirectly, about loyalist and republican paramilitary activity through the years of the recent Troubles; among them, Jenkins (1983), Sluka (1989), Bell (1990), Feldman (1991) and Aretxaga (1997).
5. As has been observed, the surname Murphy can occasionally be connected to Protestant families as, for instance, in the notorious case of Lenny Murphy, leader of the dreaded mid-1970s Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) splinter cell known as the 'Shankill Butchers' (Dillon 1989). Liam, by contrast, is a name that I have only ever heard connected to Catholic boys and men.
6. Anthropologists have commented on the role of so-called 'coat-trailers' (young men and women who make their way along parade routes alongside the Orange lodges and especially fife-and-drum bands [see Nagle, Bryan and Witherow,

this volume]) in stoking intercommunity enmity, hostility and violence. Often, such public displays of support for loyalist ideology are exacerbated by the consumption of alcohol (Bryan 2000: 93).

7. Since the outbreak of the modern Troubles in 1969, the most conspicuous of these on the republican side have been the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), Official Irish Republican Army (OIRA) and the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), and on the loyalist side, the UDA and its doppelganger, the UFF, the UVF and (from the late 1990s) the Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF).

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