

COCONUTS

KAYLA RUSH

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY, PHILOSOPHY, AND MUSIC, DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY

Now, how do the young prepare to meet the old? The same way the old prepare to meet the young: with a little condescension; with low expectation of the other's rationality; with the knowledge that the other will find what they say hard to understand, that it will go beyond them ... and with the feeling that they must arrive with something the other will like, something suitable. Like Garibaldi biscuits.

Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (2000: 162)

I boarded the Number 77 bus ('Newtownbreda Tesco') for the first time on a Thursday morning in May 2015 with more than a little trepidation, making my way toward a community theatre in South Belfast for my first session of fieldwork with Acting Up, a drama group for older people. I was twenty-five, more than half a century younger than some of the group's participants, and not at all certain how I would do the 'deep hanging out' expected of an anthropologist with a group of retirees closer in age to my grandparents than to myself.

The epigraph from Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth* precedes a not dissimilar scene. Irie Jones and Magid and Millat Iqbal, all eight years old, are preparing to take a selection of foodstuffs to a local pensioner as part of their school's Harvest Festival. The children, led by Irie, have selected their gifts based on their notions of what older people prefer to eat: the aforementioned Garibaldi biscuits – because they have raisins in them, Irie patiently explains to her companions: '[o]ld people *like* raisins'; a coconut – 'Old people *like* coconuts. They can use the milk for their tea'; and an assortment of other, seemingly random food items – 'some crusty French bread and some cheese-singlets and some apples', 'some Kendal mint cake and some ackee and saltfish' (Smith 2000: 162-163; emphasis in original). While I did not carry offerings of food onto the Number 77 bus, I brought with me some metaphorical coconuts of my own, patently ridiculous notions of what age meant and what it would look like: a vague association of older people with care homes; an absurd idea that one's hobbies and interests become fixed for life when one reaches the arbitrary age of thirty; and, above all, the conviction that I would have absolutely nothing in common with the group's participants, for 'old' is the opposite of 'young', or so we are told.

When we enter the field, we take ourselves, along with all our faults, ignorances, and silly ideas about the 'other'. We needn't display them prominently; we *can* try to hide these thoughts and present what we think is a more acceptable front to our participants, at least to an extent. We can even obscure our coconuts in our written work, presenting ourselves – at least to an extent – as the unprejudiced, enlightened beings we would like our peers to think us. Where we struggle to hide these thoughts, however, is in our fieldnotes, our 'raw' data in more than one sense of the term, our initial responses, our gut reactions, our meandering thoughts, our visceral struggles to make sense of the things we see and experience.

My own fieldnotes from that first session with Acting Up describe an immediate challenge to my preconceived notions of age. One of the first sentences I find in my notes from that day runs, 'I don't know what I was expecting, but I find myself surprised at how obviously active and "with it" all these people are'. From the very beginning, this group resoundingly defied my foolish ideas of what they ought to have been. For the other side of the fieldwork condition is that our research participants also bring themselves into the field. It is in this meeting of selves that fieldwork occurs, and that something that might one day resemble 'anthropological knowledge' begins to come into being.

I share with you the story of my own coconuts, rather absurd though they may be, just as Irie Jones' coconuts are absurd, neither out of 'autoethnographic self-obsession' (Delamont 2009: 58), nor to 'avoi[d] the hard work that fieldwork entails' (Gans 1999: 542), nor to attempt to replace 'thick description' with 'slick' description (Wolcott 1995). Rather, I do so because the process of change, of becoming other than one was, was central in the stories that these actors told me time and time again. And even as they told me their own stories of change – how they built confidence even as they built relationships with one another, how they welcomed friends old and new into their midst, and most of all how they came to perceive themselves as 'actors' – their stories and their persons began to change me.

Let me continue the story of my first day with Acting Up. Shortly after arriving, director and facilitator Kerry Rooney, who had invited me to research with the group, began the session by instructing us to stand in a circle for a few warm-up activities. The first of these was a game called 'red ball, yellow ball', wherein participants threw a set of two imaginary balls, one red, one yellow, to one another across the circle. Of this exercise, I wrote, 'It is harder than I expected to keep track of two imaginary balls simultaneously, and we all struggle a bit, but the atmosphere is fun, and everyone seems able to laugh at their mistakes'. My fieldnotes from a subsequent session, two weeks later, continue the story:

We play red ball-yellow ball again. It goes better this time than the last, although the balls have a tendency to change colours (either both yellow, or both red). Everyone is having fun and laughing. Kerry mentions that with one of the groups he did this with, he left while they were throwing the balls and returned to find that there was a pink ball in play.

At the time, I took the chief lesson of 'red ball, yellow ball' to be that, despite the supposed advantages of my relative youth, I was no better at the exercise than the older participants, and that laughing at our attempts to keep two imaginary balls in the air was a useful bonding exercise. And these are true. But as I look back over my fieldwork experiences and re-examine the notes I made in the field, reaping their 'virtual returns', I see something else as well. Josephides defines 'virtual returns' as fieldwork 'recollected in tranquility', that is, from outside of the field (2008: 179). For the anthropologist, virtual returns are encountered as she re-examines her experiences within the field, by revisiting 'fieldnotes, diaries, emotions, dreams, tape recordings, videos, photographs, language materials, songs and poems, objects, unrecorded memories, and mental snapshots' (194). As Josephides writes elsewhere, 'As I review my materials and reexperience fieldwork, events appear in a completed state, capturing the beginning and end of a process and thus acquiring a systemic structure' (2012: 100).

As I cast my mind back over my own fieldwork, 'if not in tranquillity, at least *post facto*' (Atwood 1985: 315), I am drawn to the shifting, rather elusive colours of the two balls in the second excerpt. In this scene, as in life, change is unpredictable, and it is made in relationship, in community. Picture this: I

attempt to play ‘red ball, yellow ball’ by myself. I sit in my office chair, palms outstretched, each cupping the shape of an invisible ball. I begin to toss the two balls back and forth between my hands, and I quickly fall into a rhythm. I mutter, ‘Red, yellow, red, yellow’, in time to the tossing movement of my right hand, and by this formula, I always know which ball is which. It is simple, and it is dull.

In the circle, though, the movement of the balls is more dynamic and changeable. It is messy. The two might be in motion at once. From time to time, one gets dropped or lost when a participant looks away, and when someone notices, we struggle to recall who saw it last. The balls change colours, sometimes in mid-air, and no one can remember which is the ‘real’ red ball, and which the painted imposter. A third ball is added, seemingly out of nowhere, and then a fourth. And every so often, the red ball fades to pink. Somewhere in the in-between spaces in the middle of the circle, in between ‘researcher’ and ‘participant’, ‘self’ and ‘other’, change occurs. Imperceptible. Unpredictable.

Reflection

‘Coconuts’ was the very first thing I wrote for my PhD, back in the summer of 2016. Several months out of my fieldwork by then, I was dragging my feet, sending my supervisor the occasional email insisting that I ‘just needed another two weeks to code my data’. The reality was that I felt lost, with no idea of how to begin so massive an undertaking. Inspiration to set pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard, as it were) came from a surprising source, in the form of a chance set of lines from Zadie Smith’s novel *White Teeth*. The moment I read the passage about Irie Jones’ coconuts, I knew what I wanted to write. I have retained the inspiration as an epigraph for this essay, and as its central metaphor.

This piece is an attempt to communicate an ethnographic experience, both in the immediate sense – the story of my first day with the acting group – but also in the longer-term, by reflecting on the ways in which my fieldwork changed me over time. This is not, of course, an abnormal experience in the field; Kirsten Hastrup has argued that processes of change and ‘becoming’ are intimately linked with the particular anthropological mode of presence in the field (1990: 49-50). In this vein, ‘Coconuts’ is also a reflection on the ways in which we interact in the field, and the ways in which we find, and in fact create, anthropological knowledge through the specific medium of our bodies, be they old or young.

References

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