

# Anger and Compassion on the Picket Line: Ethnography and Emotion in the Study of Westboro Baptist Church

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## ABSTRACT

Feminist ethnographic methods stress the role of empathy for research subjects and researchers' willingness for their work to be useful to their subjects. When the research subjects are "unloved groups," though—people whose actions or beliefs are hateful or harmful—some ethnographers argue that such empathy and empowerment is misplaced or leads to uncritical scholarship. In this reflection on the author's ethnographic study of Westboro Baptist Church, a small Kansas-based congregation infamous for preaching its anti-gay theology at funerals, including the funerals of fallen servicemen and -women, she questions the usefulness of denying an emotional connection with "hatemongers." Instead, she argues for compassion for both the victims and, more challengingly, the perpetrators of hate in order to protect researchers from the threat of desensitization.

Have you, as a scholar in hate studies, had one of these experiences?

- The person in seat 22C on the airplane politely asks what you do. Briefly, you consider saying that you are "in logistics" or something equally ambiguous before you confess that you are an anthropologist of race-based prison gangs and are, in fact, on your way to the Second International Conference on Hate Studies in Spokane, Washington, where you will meet with scholars with similarly dark interests. Seat 22C has no response to this, but cedes the armrest for the remainder of your flight.
- Your mother introduces you as a college teacher. Your mother-in-law, if you have one, ignores your career entirely in introductions, stressing that you come from a good family and secretly wondering why her son couldn't have married a nice dental hygienist.
- Even other scholars, when they hear about your research on hate groups, ask, "But you don't believe what they believe, do you?" (Your response: "You study the mating habits of the Madagascar hissing cockroach, but that doesn't mean you're attracted to them, does it?")

Despite the scholarly stigma hate scholars sometimes face and the way that the talk of our work kills conversation at a cocktail party, we love what we do—because it is interesting, if discomfoting, to a general public, especially compared with much academic work, and because it is sometimes dangerous and involves complex ideologies, unusual religious theologies, vivid and frightening eschatologies, bizarre rituals, and colorful characters. Additionally—and perhaps it would take an ethnography of hate scholars who use ethnographic methods, though that might be a little too much self-reflection even for a self-reflective field, to prove this—hate scholars may view working with extremists as evidence of their own adventurous spirits, even though, as researchers, they have a privilege that their subjects may lack: the ability to exit the scene. Writing in 2000, Sidney Mintz reminisced about the “occult fierceness, the desire to have ‘one’s people’ viewed as isolated and, hence, *legitimate* subjects of study” that marked anthropology half a century ago (2000, p. 171; italics in original). Similarly, hate studies scholars may view their work with sensitive topics and “unloved groups” (Fielding, 1982) as a badge of honor—one deserved, I think, given the challenges of ethnographic research on such populations.

We may enjoy this work—the intellectual rigor of it, the challenging methods, the evolving scope—yet this is work that we wish we did not have to do. This is not a mere academic study, but scholarship with a soul and a goal: to alleviate suffering, end institutional oppression, and bring forth justice. Scholars “can no longer afford to live with the comforting illusion that we act upon the world in socially just ways simply by inscribing and cataloguing the many ways in which justice is absent, or that we give ‘voice’ to others by writing in our voice about their lives,” wrote Catherine Emihovich in her 2004 presidential address to the Council on Anthropology and Education (306)—though hate studies scholars have never thought that they could.

To combat hatred, our work necessarily gives attention to both the victims and the perpetrators of hate, which requires a critical examination and even, at times, empathy for people whose actions we find detestable. As scholars of hate, though, we know, too, that our understanding of hate and its consequences—and thus our hope for ending hate and its consequences—is limited if we study only victims. We are repeatedly given opportunities to explain the value of this scholarship in the larger pursuit of justice when our friends, family members, colleagues, and even strangers on planes ask us questions such as “Why would you want to do *that*?” and “But isn’t studying them just giving them the attention they want?” They, rightly, find our research subjects “distasteful” (Esseveld & Eyerman, 1992). Accidentally glorifying or encouraging such groups through academic scrutiny is a “dangerous outcome,” notes Kathleen Blee (2002), “but

the consequences [of not doing the scholarship] are worse” (p. 21). Indeed, such research can be beneficial to opposition efforts. Concludes Susan F. Harding (1991) in her work on religious fundamentalists:

We—situated, implicated, and self-reflexive—can. . . come up with more nuanced, complicated, partial, and local readings of who they are and what they are doing and therefore design more effective political strategies to oppose directly the specific positions and policies they advocate. (p. 393)

To gain an understanding of hate groups, many of us use ethnography. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, and again with the election of the first African-American (and, according to much right-wing rhetoric, Muslim) president in 2008 that coincided with an economic downturn, hate group monitors saw an uptick in anti-Muslim and racist group activity, much of it claiming roots in conservative (if often unorthodox) Christianity (“The Year in Hate, 2001,” 2002; Potok, 2011). Such new activity keeps scholars of hate—and, more specifically, of religiously-inspired hatred—busy.

#### I. ETHNOGRAPHY AND HATE GROUPS

Ethnography promises to be particularly useful for studying hate groups, whose member do not always leave a tidy written record preserved in a carefully maintained archive; yet “scholarship on the far right generally analyzes right-wing extremism from a distance,” analyzing “the economic, social, attitudinal, or cultural environments that nurture organized racism and right-wing extremism rather than the dynamics of the far right itself” (Blee, 2007, p. 120). Research on hateful behavior, including hate crime, tends to be quantitative and descriptive. About research on hate crimes, Green, McFalls, and Smith (2001) observed, “To a degree unusual in behavioral science, researchers are highly dependent on statistics compiled by government and watchdog organizations” (p. 498), institutions with their own agendas in tracking such data. Ethnographic research is less common, despite the fact that “publicly available data may not accurately reflect the internal ideology of members or even goals of groups” (Blee, 2007, pp. 120-121). Blee’s work on the Klan, Mark S. Hamm’s (1993) work on skinheads, and Rapheal Ezekial’s (1995) work on neo-Nazis and Klansmen have provided models for such research on American hate groups, and Blee (1993, 1998, 2003, and, with Taylor, 2002), in particular, has written extensively about the challenges of ethnographic methods and extremism. Scholarship on European extremists groups has grown since the late 1990s in response to increased xenophobia in northern European nations (see, for

example, Bjørge, 1997; Klandermans & Mayer, 2006; and Linden & Klandermans, 2007). The April 2007 issue of *The Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* focused on ethnographies of right-wing groups, providing examples from around the globe for cross-cultural comparison. Still, ethnography remains an underused method for studying hate groups because, as with other kinds of research on hate groups, “the difficulties associated with sensitive research have tended to inhibit adequate conceptualization” (Lee & Renzetti, 1993, p. 7).

These difficulties include extremists’ mistrust of scholars (Blee, 2007, p. 121); scholars’ resistance to establishing “the rapport necessary for close-up studies of those they regard as inexplicable or repugnant, in addition to dangerous and violent” (Blee, 2007, pp. 120-121); or discomfort with the “modes of thought” that inform such groups (Lee, 1995, p. 8), although, as Mintz notes, “some of the best and most trying fieldwork has been done with people with whose values their ethnographers were *not* in accord” (2000, p. 175; italics in original). Additional barriers include scholars’ “upper-middle-class (postcolonial) distaste for violating cultural and class apartheid” (Mintz, 2000, p. 178); “the difficulties of sharing the daily lives and practices of those one is working with,” especially in contrast to a life in a private sphere that “grows more private” (Harris 2000, p. 183); the difficulty of accessing groups with members whom scholars are unlikely to know through personal contacts (Ayella, 1990); the effort involved in creating a representative sample (Blee, 1996); the challenge of maintaining access to groups that change quickly (Ayella, 1990); concern that subjects who have engaged in illegal activities will be prosecuted (Blee, 1999) or for researchers who work with such groups (Lee, 1995); the ethics of obtaining informed consent from people whose “behavior is so reprehensible or immoral that it warrants exposing” (Thorne, 1980, p. 294); the challenge of interpreting data that may include “deceptive information, disingenuous denials of culpability, and dubious assertions” (Blee, 1993, p. 597) and “mut[es] past atrocities” (p. 601); “ambient danger” that arises simply by researching in a potentially dangerous setting (Lee, 1995, p. 3); culture shock (Ayella, 1990); handling emotional responses to the group, especially rapport that threatens to impede critical analysis (Ayella, 1990; see also Blee, 1998); conversion attempts (Ayella, 1990); and the stigma of investigating a group labeled “deviant” (Ayella, 1990; see also Blee, 1998). Indeed, notes Olivia Harris (2000) with some humor,

Wanting to be [an ethnographer] involves a unique degree of personal commitment to subject one’s own desires to an alien lifeway, to endure a high level of uncertainty and often discomfort, to be ignored or the butt of constant jokes or the recipient of outright aggression. And at the end of

it is an impossible aim: to reorient one's intuitions so that they begin to coincide with those of the people one is working with. (p. 184)

For those studying hate groups with ethnographic methods, Harris' "impossible aim" is a threatening specter, and though we often dismiss it with a laugh, we must brace against a thorough reorientation of our intuitions. Early on in my own work on Westboro Baptist Church, a seventy-person Topeka, Kansas-based congregation that is known for spreading its anti-gay message via picketing at funerals, including at funerals of fallen military servicemen and -women, I learned that one of the most influential church members, Steve Drain, had joined the church after he completed a documentary film, originally titled *Fred: The Movie* and later retitled *Hatemongers*, as part of his master's degree in film and theatre at the University of Kansas, where I was a graduate student.<sup>1</sup> According to Steve, his dominant worldview was libertarian, not religious, when he began his project. Only after the filming had been completed and he had moved to Florida, where he lived with his wife and two children, to edit and release the film, did he have a religious conversion. With his protesting wife and children in tow, Steve moved his family to Topeka to join the church; soon, the rest of the Drain family joined Westboro Baptist Church, and Steve and his wife, in accordance with church teachings, reversed their use of birth control and had two more children. Steve's conversion story illustrates the potentially powerful pull of extremist groups, even for people who identify their interest as academic.

A more likely outcome than conversion, though, is desensitization to hate and its effects. Researchers must guard against the possible numbing of outrage at the harm the groups we study cause. Indeed, Blee interpreted her own decreasing outrage at stories of racist violence as a signal that she needed to leave the field and "regain emotional separation from the research" (1998, p. 396). This separation remains a challenge, even as anthropology has come to question the ability of researchers to remain objective and detached from their subjects. In his introduction to *Asylums*, Erving Goffman set a new standard: not just to observe the goings-on of people, but to understanding the meaning they assign to their lives. He writes, "It. . . still is my belief that any group of persons. . . develop a life of their own that becomes meaningful, reasonable, and normal once you get close to it." The purpose of field research is to "get close to it," which requires the researcher "to submit oneself in the company of the members to the daily round of petty contingencies to which they are subject" (p. ix-x), or, as Murray Wax (1980) defined it, "to enter into the matrix of meanings of the researched, to participate in their system of organized activities, and *to feel subject to their code of moral regulation*" (pp. 272-273; italics

added). Doing so for a clearly wronged group—victims of racism, for example—is noble, though it is, of course, emotionally difficult, whereas experiencing the daily life of and understanding the symbolic world of the one who is clearly the offender is a different kind of emotional challenge, one that may prompt other scholars to accuse us of misplaced sympathies. Even at the academic level, dualistic thinking pervades, and other scholars may dismiss studies of hate groups as unnecessary, for surely we know enough about members of the Klan or Aryan Nations to know that we don't need to know more. Or, Harding (1991) warns, “insofar as academic representations of fundamentalists are modern, then disrupting them may provoke charges of consorting with ‘them,’ the opponents of modernity, progress, enlightenment, truth, and reason,” a “risky project” she encourages (p. 375).

Critics of such potentially destabilizing research confuse two kinds of understanding: comprehension and empathy. Ethnographers of hate groups aim for comprehension, and we may use empathy as a tool to achieve it; the goal is not to create an apologetic portrait of racists or antisemites or homophobes, but one that captures the complexities of their lives, and “oral histories are exceptionally sensitive sources for recording the lack of self-consciousness in historical subjects, the sensation of normality and conventionality” of their everyday lives in extremist groups (Blee, 1993, p. 602). Additionally, because oral histories often incorporate life history interviews, “respondents are less likely to present group dogma as personal sentiment” (Blee, 1996, p. 687). Researchers will almost always find that theories that seek to explain hateful behavior by focusing on an individual—even the “lone wolf” assassin or socially outcast mass shooter—explain relatively little. Instead, hate studies scholars are likely to find explanations for hate that implicate whole societies or large swaths of it, as hate finds its nurturance in larger contexts.

Some of the surprising findings that emerge from ethnographies of hate groups—that most members of hate groups are more like members of the general population than they are different; that membership is heterogeneous; that members have rich emotional experiences and that hate groups can provide cultural traditions for members; that latent racism, sexism, and homophobia in the broader society permit and support hate crimes—can be overlooked when ethnographic data is not included in analyses. Reminds Kaye/Kantrowitz (2002), “The power of racist activism derives in part from the causal ordinary racism which permeates mainstream culture”—and the same is true of other prejudices that, in their extreme manifestations, so outrage the average citizens who remain silent about their quieter expressions (p. 4). Examining the extreme fringe can illuminate the center of the spectrum. For this project, as “for nearly every purpose,” fieldwork remains

“the best means of access we have to the data we need” (Mintz, 2000, p. 170).

Fieldwork on hate groups contains ambivalent impulses, though. Hate studies scholars want their research subjects to fail, even as they are invested in the work of hate groups. If we reveal our desire for their failure to our subjects, we risk losing access to them; but feigning sympathy for a hateful position is unethical. And if our subjects fail, we have little to report. Like workers at a weapons factory, we are successful because of conflict, even if we hate war. Untangling our investment while adhering to our professional codes of conduct, which generally stress transparency in our relationships with our subjects, and maintaining access to subjects whose positions we frequently do not respect, even as we may feel genuine concern or even affection for them (Klatch, 1988), is a formidable task, for “in order to understand, researchers must be more than technically competent. They must enter into cathected intimacies, open themselves to their subjects’ feeling worlds, whether those worlds are congenial to them or repulsive” (Mitchell, 1993, p. 55). While some feminist and post-colonial scholars have called into question the ability of elite anthropologists to do this kind of work, drawing attention to what Alcoff (1991-1992) calls “the problem of speaking for others,” others believe in the possibility of “an egalitarian research process characterized by authenticity, reciprocity, and intersubjectivity between the researcher and her ‘subjects’” (Stacey, 1991, p. 112). This dynamic is not always possible, or even desirable, for working with hate groups. Writes Blee (1998),

It is one thing to seek to understand the world through the eyes of an informant with whom you have some (even a little) sympathy, but a very different matter to think about developing rapport with someone. . . whose life is given meaning and purpose by the desire to annihilate you or others like you. (p. 388)

Even in those cases, achieving rapport may be “surprisingly, and disturbingly, easy” (Blee, 1993, p. 605). Recalls Blee (1993) of her interviews with women who are part of racist hate groups:

I was prepared to hate and fear my informants, to find them repellent and, more important, strange. I expected no rapport, no shared assumptions, no commonality of thought or experience. Moreover, I expected them to be wary of me and reluctant to express their true attitudes. But this was not the case. (p. 604)

Indeed, the ease of rapport revealed, for Blee, a “complicated and . . . disturbing reality” that allowed her to see the apparent normality of racism for

her subjects, an insight that other research methods might not have detected (p. 605). Still, achieving an ethical, workable, and productive rapport may be easier than expected in some cases and, I think, remains an important strategy for comprehending the life-worlds of individuals engaged in hate groups. Doing so requires having a rich content knowledge about the culture being studied, self-awareness, sensitivity, and a stout-heartedness not absent from other kinds of research, but necessary here.

In keeping with the inclination of cultural sociologists “to reflect upon the theoretical and methodological orientations that nurture cultural studies” (Lee, 1999, p. 548) and the reflexivity central to feminist methodology (Taylor, 1998), I share a vignette from my own field research. My fieldwork began informally in 2004 and culminated in formal fieldwork from January to October 2010. I am wary of sharing this anecdote, concerned that it not be misinterpreted as evidence of a special relationship with church members, because it is not, though I maintain a positive relationship with church members, in part because of my interest in and knowledge of the church’s Calvinist theology and in part because my proximity to the church allows for occasional visits, even now. Instead, I share this story as a moment in my field research when I was explicitly aware of the emotional challenge of responding to one of the nation’s most notorious hate groups, which the Southern Poverty Law Center calls “arguably the most obnoxious and rabid hate group in America” (2011). It is my attempt to meet Emerson’s (2001) charge

to present the ethnographer in full, rounded form, not simply as a disembodied textual voice or as a “researcher” but as a whole person with a distinctive personality, preferences and commitments who in part shapes the scene studied and whose life is affected by doing the study

and because “these deeply personal qualities, viewed not as liabilities but as mechanisms enhancing deep, original insight into the lives and concerns of others, should be subject to self-conscious description and analysis in their own right” (p. x).

## II. A SCENE FROM ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH ON WESTBORO BAPTIST CHURCH

On October 2, 2006, a heavily armed man entered a one-room Amish schoolhouse in rural Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, released the boys, barricaded the exits, and threatened to sexually assault the remaining female students, ten girls ages six through thirteen. Without making good on his threat, though, Charlie Roberts opened fire, killing three girls immediately; two more died later from injuries, and the remaining five were critically

injured. Roberts then shot and killed himself. The crime was entirely senseless and the gunman apparently mentally ill, claiming that anger at the death of his prematurely-born daughter in 1997 and guilt over molesting his cousins when they were preschoolers and he was a pre-teen could be expunged only through violence directed at the Amish community in the area, a community with which he had, throughout his upbringing in the region and through his work as a milk truck driver, had a positive relationship by all accounts. Notably, the people he claimed to have molested, now adults, denied his claims of molestation.

Amazingly to outsiders, the community was not torn apart, even under the resulting media coverage of the event. In accordance with Amish tradition, nonviolence and forgiveness were required, and the individual sorrow of family members and survivors was surrendered to God. Within days, the schoolhouse was dismantled and the space of the tragedy returned to pasture; eventually, a new schoolhouse, the New Hope School, was built to serve students in the area. When donations began to arrive for the Amish girls who remained hospitalized, the Amish in the community insisted that a fund be opened for the children of the killer. The story of grace and forgiveness was, without romanticizing Amish life, beautiful.

Then, inexplicably to most, Westboro Baptists inserted themselves into the story. Insisting that “God Sent the Shooter,” they threatened to picket at the funerals of the dead Amish girls. According to their hyper-Calvinist theology, God is the author of all human action and, because God controls all, everything that happens—death and suffering included—glorifies God. Further, God uses death and suffering to speak to humans, to express his divine anger at individual and collective sin. Although all people, because they are inherently sinful, deserve death, God spares some—his elect—out of his mercy, not because of their worth. This mercy, however, is not something God owes to anyone, and his failure to extend it does not make him unjust or unfair. Indeed, his justice demands damnation for all; his grace exempts some from it. God’s justice is thus proven in the death and suffering of the damned, even as his mercy is proven in his withholding of punishment from the elect. Shirley Phelps-Roper, a spokesperson for the church, viewed the Nickel Mines shooting as one example of this hyper-Calvinism in action, as expressed in an interview with Fox News’ *Hannity & Colmes*:

COLMES: Do you have any sense of how much additional pain you would be causing these families by protesting at the funeral of these young girls?

PHELPS-ROPER: There isn’t any way to fix that situation for them. It’s not going to be any less painful if we are there or if we aren’t there. They did that to themselves. And you say they’re not involved.

COLMES: What do you mean they did that to themselves?

PHELPS-ROPER: I mean, they sit over there and create their own form of righteousness, instead of—

COLMES: Did those girls deserve to be killed?

PHELPS-ROPER: Well, they did get killed, and they did that. Who controls the hearts of men? It was at the hand of an angry God those girls are dead.

COLMES: They deserved to die?

PHELPS-ROPER: They did deserve to die.

The Amish, argued Westboro Baptists, angered God by attempting to create their own system of salvation, one based not on the grace of God but on their own works, including their adherence to the *Ordnung*, the unwritten rules of Amish life that govern dress and adornment and their use of technology. This legalism was an arrogant effort to usurp from God his prerogative to damn or save by suggesting that humans can earn their way to heaven by dressing in a particular way or eschewing electricity. In response to this arrogance, God shattered the peaceful confidence that the Amish had in their security, sending a gunman to rebuke them, to catch their attention.

Further, God was sending Westboro Baptists to make the message even plainer: God hated their system of false religion, and God hated them. If God wanted them to be saved, then they would hear in the words of Westboro Baptist their only hope: Repent of sinful legalism, leave the Amish life, and join Westboro Baptist Church. If they did not hear this message in the signs and pickets, then God was not speaking to them because God did not want them. Church members would arrive in rural Lancaster County to share the message with the Amish directly, at the funerals of their children, when, in their grief, they would perhaps be humble enough to hear it before God sent another gunman.

Not surprisingly, the public was outraged and the Amish population generally confused. Westboro Baptists were known for their picketing around issues of sexuality, and this situation had nothing to do with that. Indeed, among the Amish, the sinfulness of homosexuality is non-debatable. Further, Amish believers and Westboro Baptists share a number of beliefs and practices, including the practice of adult baptism, the rejection of harmony in worship music, the rejection of birth control, and the mandate that women never cut their hair. For the broader public, though, the Amish of rural Lancaster County, who had just shown such grace and forgiveness to the murderer of their children and compassion for his wife and children, and the Westboro Baptists, with their message of an angry and violent God, could not have been more different.

I was not unfamiliar with Westboro Baptist Church members' picketing of scenes of national tragedy. They were at Ground Zero shortly after

September 11, 2001, holding signs saying “God is America’s Terrorist” and “Thank God for 9/11” even as smoke billowed behind them. Had the question *Would Westboro Baptists picket the funeral of Amish schoolgirls killed in a mass shooting by an insane man?* been posed to me hypothetically, I would have said, “Absolutely”—just as they would go on to picket in response to the Virginia Tech killings in 2007 and the murders of six people in Tuscon by Jared Lee Loughner in 2010 in his attempted assassination of Senator Gabrielle Giffords. And, familiar with the church’s theology of disaster, I would have said that such a picket was merely in line with the church’s coldly logical interpretation of hyper-Calvinism.

But this was different: This was my hometown.

I had run through scenes in which my academic life and my personal life could cross in potentially disastrous ways, primarily because both my brother-in-law and sister-in-law were serving in combat zones as I engaged in my fieldwork. Both lived within easy driving distance of the church, and I knew that if either were killed in combat, church members would picket, and I was prepared for that, as much as any Kansan is. But I had not envisioned Westboro Baptist Church coming to my hometown for this reason. Though I have a less romanticized vision of Amish life (having witnessed, for example, the pain that shunning can inflict on individuals as well as a community), the victims here were so clearly vulnerable—Amish, who, because of their pacifism, reject self-defense; children; girls—that the threatened picket seemed extra cruel. Kansans going off to war know that, if they die, their funerals will be picketed; Amish girls going off to school do not.

In imagining moments when I might see Westboro Baptists intrude upon my personal life, I had not expected this one. I had grown up in the area of the shooting; shopped at the Amish dry goods store, hardware store, and furniture store by the school; was baptized in the country Mennonite church only a short distance away. My grandparents taxi Amish schoolteachers—young, unmarried women—to their jobs each morning. And I had once been good friends with the wife of the killer, having attended school with her from kindergarten to graduation. We had played in her yard as children, and I had slept over at her house on her birthday, which was at Christmastime. As a high schooler, she had hosted a Bible study at her house that I attended. When she married a man none of us knew—though he lived in the community, he had been home-schooled—immediately after high school rather than pursuing college, for which she was perfectly qualified, we lost touch, but I still mourned for her and her husband when their first child died shortly after birth and kept track of her life’s developments through our hometown gossip network. The thought that members of a community I loved so much—and who were so kind to each other—would

be victimized by my research subjects paralyzed me. Old doubts I thought I'd resolved reappeared: *These people are detestable. Even studying them may corrupt you. What good will it do to learn about people who are obviously evil? Will you get sucked into their harmful theology? Will you justify their behavior? How could you explain to your friends and family at home what you are doing?* Moreover, new questions emerged. *What if they showed up at my child's funeral? What if there were a shooting at my university? What would I say if I saw church members as I entered the funeral service or cemetery? What would I do if they called me out by name?*

Thankfully, a fuller discussion with friends and family at home was curtailed when Westboro Baptists announced that they had accepted an offer of radio airtime on *The Mike Gallagher Show*, hosted by a conservative who did not support the church's position, in exchange for canceling the picket. Still, I was ill-equipped to manage my own response to their threatened picket.

Consequently, I stopped researching, unsure whether the break was a hiatus or the end of the project, but hoping that, as Robben (1995) experienced when interviewing the father of teenager who "disappeared" during political conflict in Argentina in the 1970s, "a radical break with my emotions would allow me to regard [the data] as analyzable knowledge" (p. 94). For six months, I left the topic alone, sending a donation to the Amish community and my friend's children but not processing my own feelings, avoiding news reports about the shooting, the books, and the made-for-TV movie about the event. Friends at home were equally relieved to avoid discussion about the topic, focusing any conversation about the shooting on the inconvenience of the media presence. A few folks asked if I was aware of the threatened picket, and I responded merely by affirming that, yes, I'd heard the news, not explaining the theology behind it as I might have done if the victims had been people I did not know.

I thought, six months later, that, despite having done nothing to actually address the situation, I would be in fine shape to return to my work, and, in most regards, I was. Taking my cue from the Amish, I decided to forgive, as best I could, church members, even if they didn't want my forgiveness and even though their actions were not taken specifically against me. Perhaps if I had followed Blee's (1998) advice, that researchers should "probe their own emotional entanglements in fieldwork relationships and . . . analyze these as additional sources of data" (p. 396), I would have been able to process my own anger. Not until nearly four years later—in the summer of 2010—was I aware of how deep it was.

On a long van ride with church members to a military funeral in Omaha, Nebraska, where they would picket and I would observe and interview counter-pickers, Jonathan Phelps, one of founder Fred Phelps' sons,

asked about my background. For some months, I had been attending church services regularly and observing Sunday morning pickets of other churches in Topeka and had participated in Bible studies and post-Sunday service potlucks. I knew all church members by name, and though they seldom asked personal questions about me, they knew I was a graduate student with a spouse and young children. They were not very interested in my personal life, or in converting me, believing that, if God wanted me, I would hear the truth of their words and join the church. Still, they were consistently friendly, always making sure that, during interviews, I was comfortable and furnished with a drink. They sometimes sent me home with small gifts—a jar of salsa that they’d recently canned, for example—and allowed me access to their homes and families. Still, I had resisted what Robben (1995) terms “ethnographic seduction”—the process of being led astray from one’s research purpose by the conscious or unconscious efforts of one’s research subjects, of trading “our critical stance as observers for an illusion of congeniality with cultural insiders,” thereby subverting “our understanding of social and cultural phenomena by dissuading an inquiry/beyond their appearances” and giving us the feeling that “we have accomplished something profound in the encounter, that we have reached a deeper understanding and have somehow penetrated reality” (p. 86)—and had been careful not to trade personal information about my life or beliefs in exchange for information about church members. Since such information was seldom solicited, this was fairly easy, and, while I had grown to appreciate the relatively happy lives my subjects lived and their willingness to include me in their jokes and chitchat, they were less familiar with me than I was with them. On this trip, though, Jonathan, who had shared some amusing stories of his childhood, took the opportunity to ask me questions about my own personal history. Where was I from? he wondered.

“Lancaster County, Pennsylvania,” I responded. Lancaster Countians are very proud of our county and identify ourselves by county, rather than by town, to outsiders, even other Pennsylvanians, though we distinguish further between those from the Southern End and the northern part of the county among ourselves.

“Never heard of it,” he responded.

Given the church’s threatened picket of the Amish funerals, I knew this was not true.

“Lan-CAST-er,” I tried again, this time pronouncing the county name as an outsider might, with the emphasis on the second syllable.

“Nope, never heard of it,” he said again.

I felt a tightness in my chest, and then a snap. He *had* heard of it, even if he’d forgotten. In 2006, he and his church had sent the county into an

uproar, inflicting emotional pain on people I loved, merely with the threat that they would picket. Their pain, their preparation to respond to pickets—these were not his memory, had probably never even registered with him.

“Yes, you have,” I corrected, as bold as I have ever been with a church member, the words rushing out. “Nickel Mines is there. In October 2006, some Amish girls were gunned down at their school, and you threatened to picket.” I stopped, fearful that I had raised my voice to overcome the sound of the blood rushing in my head, fearful that, if I didn’t stop, I would unleash anger that I hadn’t realized I still had. At the time, it did not occur to me that, in this moment, I might not just lose access—I might get dumped on the side of the road in rural Nebraska.

Jonathan paused for a moment, then chuckled. “Yeah, then Shir!”—his sister, Shirley, who had been interviewed on *Hannity & Colmes*—“she did that radio show, right?”

I sat back, stunned. An event that so profoundly affected me, even years later, and my loved ones, was not something Jonathan could even recall without prompting. When he did, it was with a chuckle as he recalled not the pain of the community, but his sister’s radio performance. I remained silent, not because I was so emotionally controlled, but because I could not imagine, for the first time, what to say to someone so heartless.

Soon, Fred Phelps, Sr., the driver, perhaps feeling my anger and confusion, turned the conversation to small talk. “You’ve heard of Lancaster,” he chided his brother. “Steve”—the church member who had converted after producing the documentary about Westboro—“went there for a conference last year. Remember that?” As the brothers recalled pleasant details of their co-congregant’s trip to a tourist-friendly area, I sat in silence, unsure whether I was ready to re-engage and when, if ever, I would be released from my anger.

### III. LESSONS LEARNED

“Stressing the social character of fieldwork, we are in a position to see more clearly the variety of personal, interactional, moral, and political processes that lie at its core,” Emerson reminds us (1983, p. viii), and careful consideration of the social character of my fieldwork has provided me with three insights I will share here. Sheryl Kleinman and Martha Copp (1993), in reviewing ethnographers’ accounts of their emotional engagement with their research subjects, note that, when ethnographers tell their stories, the stories frequently imply that “the author transcended any troubling feelings, at least by the time the account was written” (p. 17). That is not the case here, though I wish, for my own sake, it were; and so my reflections are in the tradition of ethnographers who try to “figure out where

they stand in their own depictions of those they study” (Berger, 2001, p. 506). At the same time, some parts of my emotional engagement with church members are settled and stable, and so I offer the following reflections. With time, perhaps more lessons will reveal themselves to me.

Lesson #1: *The personal is impersonal, but making it personal might challenge it.* Westboro Baptists are concerned with sexuality and religion; they deliver individualized messages linking sexual behavior and eternal damnation to their target audiences. Nothing could feel more personal. For example, when Kevin Oldham, a Kansas native living in New York, died from an AIDS-related illness in 1993, church members sent his parents a note declaring that he was in hell. It included a picture of Oldham’s face and declared that by “defying the laws of God, man and nature, KEVIN OLDHAM played Russian roulette with promiscuous anal sex and lost big time when he died of AIDS March 11.” The experience of receiving the letter was “unbelievable,” Oldham’s mother recalled, and his father reflected that “to lose one, then have to deal with this maniac, is almost more than you can handle” (“Grieving Family Forced to Deal with Phelps,” 1994). The attack on Oldham was intensely personal, addressed to his family and mocking his sex life—and, unlike more recent commentary by the church—it was not concerned primarily with placing Oldham’s death in the context of a morally bankrupt America. Instead, the church focused on Oldham individually and personally. When they picket at military funerals, church members hoist signs that say to mourners, “Your Soldier’s in Hell.” Not *soldiers*, but *your soldier*. *Your* son, *your* daughter. “God Hates You,” another sign reads simply. It is Jael Phelps’ favorite sign, the young adult daughter of Jonathan and Paulette Phelps tells me, because it sums up the church’s central theological points pretty succinctly.

Yet Westboro Baptists have nothing against you personally. The trip to Nebraska included, in addition to me, an openly gay journalist for a Chicago magazine. Church members were consistently polite to him, never using the language they use on the picket line to describe other gay men to describe him. They were considerate of his needs and encouraging of his questions. Though church members know I am heterosexual, they believe I am equally hell-bound, but they never shared their opinion of the state of my soul with me. Indeed, only once was I ever chastised—for my “shorn hair”—by a church member, and even then, she framed her words as concern that I be fully aware of the scriptural command that women not cut their hair rather than as a condemnation. When church members learned that I was from Lancaster County, they did not share the words that Shirley preached on the radio. In other words, the highly personal, highly hurtful words they said at pickets did not inform our actual personal interactions.

At the same time, I repeatedly heard stories from people who inter-



Photograph courtesy of Ailecia Ruscin. © 2007.

FIGURE 1.  
Jael Phelps' "You're Going to Hell" sign "is for everyone," she says.

acted with church members on a regular basis—teachers in the public school where church children attend, nurses at the women’s health center where women in the church deliver their babies—that personalizing their interactions with church members sometimes ended the personal attacks church members directed even at other Topekans. For example, one woman, a delivery nurse, told a story of how church members had picketed her church one Sunday. As she walked near the picketers, she and a picketer recognized each other from the delivery room. “I went up to her,” recalled the nurse, “and said, ‘Really? After how I’ve helped you? I think you should treat me with more respect than this.’” After that, reports the nurse, the pickets at that church ended. Though the nurse’s rebuke may not have been the reason the pickets ended, I heard similar stories a few times in my research and witnessed, in my own interactions with church members, moments when they *could* have attacked me personally but did not, just as they did not attack the gay journalist who traveled with us to Nebraska, where they unabashedly and explicitly preached that gay people are vile, “the basest of humans” (though they use this term to describe all kinds of people they believe God hates, including Jews), and hell-bound.

*Lesson #2: Research with living subjects allows for surprising findings.* Though I was immersed in the primary texts produced by Westboro Baptist Church, which maintains multiple websites, releases podcasts of sermons, and produces web-based news and music videos espousing the church’s theology, reading such texts insulated me from the emotional impact of such messages, which were never directed toward me. In online forums or while reviewing archived documents, I could not witness the delivery of these messages, the haughtiness, passion, indifference, bemusement, anger, callousness, callousness, or humor with which different church members preach their message to different audiences. Without fieldwork, I could not have envisioned the responses of the audience, which frequently included homophobic and misogynist insults that were as vulgar or more vulgar than the words that church members shout and sing on the picket line. Though Westboro Baptists did not target their message at me, when I felt the pain that the church inflicted on people I loved, I became their victim, too—a position in which I was surprised to find myself and that, had I not been engaging church members directly, could have resulted in my missing an opportunity to understand more personally the repercussions of pickets. When we “run aground in the shallowness of the written word” (Robben, 1995, p. 98), field research provides us invaluable and irreplaceable information.

*Lesson #3: Our private pains can help us grow in compassion for others.* Much writing about ethnography addresses the issue of empathy, or identifying with the feelings of research subjects. Less considers the more

specific role of compassion—co-suffering with those we study. While my research focused on the lived experiences of Westboro Baptists, it necessarily engaged the pain that church members created for others, from Kevin Ohlde's parents to the people of my hometown. In joining in their suffering, feeling it as my own, though I did not choose to engage this suffering so much as have it thrust upon me, my appreciation of the consequences of funeral pickets, and, potentially, of my own research, grew.

Verta Taylor suggests that the principle of reflexivity, an “epistemological presumption” in feminist methodology, holds that “who we are. . . is spoken into existence in every aspect of the research endeavor” (1998, p. 368). A corollary is that who we are changes because of the research endeavor. For me, the compassion I could feel for targets of Westboro Baptist Church was not merely a strategy to better understand the feelings of mourners at funerals; it was a gift that re-shaped my “who we are.” Further, while my own feelings around the issue of the threatened Lancaster County picket remain, even today, unresolved to a certain extent, in growing in my compassion for targets of pickets, my capacity to care for Westboro Baptists, without invitation, grew, too.

This was illustrated to me on October 6, 2010, the day that the Supreme Court heard oral arguments in *Snyder v. Phelps*, a civil case brought by the father of a fallen Marine, Matthew Snyder, whose funeral was picketed by the church. Originally, a jury had found for the father, Albert Snyder, awarding him nearly \$11 million in damages, but the appeals court had reversed the decision and awarded court costs to the church. The case, which was decided on March 2, 2011, in favor of the church, had received wide coverage, with Fox television pundit Bill O'Reilly volunteering to pay the more than \$16,000 that Snyder owed the church. Veterans groups and state attorneys general, frustrated with legislative efforts that had not succeeded in curtailing picketing, sided with Snyder, while civil liberties and media organizations, though they recognized the repulsive nature of the church's message, defended Westboro Baptist Church's right to free speech. Matthew Snyder was from York, Pennsylvania, just over the Susquehanna River from Lancaster, and his funeral was held in Maryland, so local interest in the case was strong. Very early on the morning of October 6, I arrived at the Supreme Court to join the blocks-long line of people hoping to hear the case.

The day before, Phelps-Chartered, the law firm founded by pastor Fred Phelps and staffed, after his disbarment from practice in state courts in 1979 and practice in federal courts in 1989, by church members (Eleven of his thirteen children are trained as lawyers, and nine of these remain faithful to the church.) had received a suspicious letter. Paulette Phelps, wife of Jonathan, had unsuspectingly opened the letter, which was filled with a

white powder. The Topeka Fire Department and the Joint Terrorism Task Force investigated, part of the office was sealed, and, although Paulette was not quarantined while the FBI analyzed the powder, her clothing was contaminated (Fry, 2010). The arrival of the letter on the day before the Supreme Court arguments was unlikely a coincidence, but the church members who were picketing outside the Supreme Court that morning, including Jonathan, seemed relatively unconcerned.

As I approached him, Jonathan was busily explaining why church members celebrate all death as God's judgment on evil humanity to a group of students from nearby American University. ("What if your own child was killed in an accident?" one student asked, gesturing toward a young boy who, though too small to hold a sign, was clearly with the church. "That child over there?" Jonathan asked, pointing to his great-nephew. "Well, he's not my child, but he's my nephew, and if he was killed in an accident—or if my own child was killed—then I'd say, 'Thank God,' because everything God does is for His glory and you have to give God thanks for everything." The students were duly impressed by his commitment to his theological position, abhorrent as they found it.) Noticing me, he gave a big smile, and I stepped into the small crowd around him. When the students quieted down, I asked about Paulette's health, wondering if he was as peaceful with his wife's actual brush with danger as he was with his great-nephew's hypothetical death. Was she well? And was he worried about her, as he was so far from home? "Oh, she's fine," he laughed, expressing his gratitude for my concern. "We just need to give her some training in safe mail handling practices." And, no, he wasn't worried—as with all things, if God wanted Paulette dead, there would be nothing he or anyone could do about it, but he was confident that God would keep them safe.

I felt a sense of relief that wasn't due solely to my distaste for vigilante justice. My concern for Paulette, Jonathan, and the other workers (as well as clients) in the law office was sincere, and, beyond that, I did not like the thought of anyone living under threat of terrorism. I noticed my feelings, glad that, though Jonathan had not been concerned about *my* feelings regarding the threatened Lancaster County picket, I was concerned for him. I did not feel self-righteous about my ability to care for someone who did not care for me and my community in the same way I cared for him and his, but I felt relief that one of my worst fears about researching this group was unrealized: I had not become deadened to the pain of others, insensitive to the words of the church or the harm they caused. Indeed, I remained sensitive enough to others that that sensitivity could extend even to church members. "Ethnography is our best way not to tear people apart, to remain humane in our vision of humans," notes Josiah McConnell Heyman (2000,

p. 184), and ethnography had allowed me, even when exposed, for months, to people preaching a hateful message, to remain humane.

Thank goodness, for as I turned from Jonathan, I saw members of Matthew Snyder's family in line a few feet behind me. Wearing pins on their jackets with a photo of Matthew Snyder in his Marine uniform with the words "My Hero" underneath it, they stood stoically as the sun rose over the United States Capital building across the street. *Had they witnessed my concern for Paulette?* I wondered. *Did I look like a sympathizer with the people who have made their loss so much more acute?* I silently asked the family to forgive me if it had hurt them to witness the scene in which I was engaged, to endure my concern for the Phelps, grateful, even now, for that capacity. Approaching them, I introduced myself not as a scholar, but as someone with an interest in the case and concern for their family. "Thank you for being here," I said, glad that I could, in a very small way, understand their pain a bit better.

#### NOTE

1. Two documentary films about the church have been made by KU students. Steve Drain's self-produced *Hatemongers* was released in 2000 and is available at <http://www.hatemongers.com/clips.html>. K. Ryan Jones' *Fall from Grace* was released in 2007. It has aired on the Sundance Channel and is available for rent and purchase through various outlets.

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