

SONG FEATURING LYRICS ‘OH SENOR...’ QUITE A LOT: MAYAN EVANGELICAL SINGER

I used music medicinally throughout my doctoral fieldwork to help raise my mood, to inspire me or to wallow indulgently in feelings of dislocation and ennui. Being 2003–4, this was achieved with a CD walkman, headphones, speakers and a handful of CDs brought with me from the UK, while new additions were bought or burned in the field. As I write this I am listening to Café Tacuba, Turin Brakes, Ricardo Arjona, and Outkast to evoke this moment in my life; I love these songs, they are resonant with experiences, people and feelings. Yet my song choice here was none of these CDs. It is a song to which I was unwillingly subjected, evoking memories of confusion and mild trauma. The story I recite here involves a Mayan evangelical song played in an endless loop, a mouse that became my nemesis, and the hazy madness of my fieldwork insomnia. It is also an account of the embodied process of coming to terms with the dislocating experience of my immersion into research on vigilantism in an emotionally raw field site still recovering from years of violent conflict.

My doctoral fieldwork comprised eighteen months in post-war Guatemala investigating a wave of lynchings that spread across the country in the immediate aftermath of the civil war. The absence of effective state policing had opened the door for communities to take justice into their own hands. Finding a research site to study such a sensitive topic was not easy but eventually I came to Todos Santos, a remote

Maya town in the North-Western highlands. The first person I met off the bus was the head of a local language school. Within an hour I had signed up for top-up Spanish lessons and had found a family to stay with. My Spanish teacher turned out to be my gatekeeper to a town that turned out to be open to discussing local attacks in a way I had not found elsewhere. I had finally found my research site.

In those first few months of fieldwork I gathered diverse narratives of the lynchings in Todos Santos, which focused primarily on two attacks that had happened in 1997 and 2000. The first saw a local youth attacked after he was accused of a series of thefts. In the second, a Japanese tourist and his bus driver were killed after they became tragically entwined in a regional rumour about a satanic child sacrifice. I found myself in at the deep-end of research I had planned for nearly two years. The inherent sadness of talking to people about violence every day, and the gathering of overlapping accounts with tiny, but deeply significant differences, conjoined into exactly the type of over-active brain activity that triggers my insomnia.

The lack of sleep experienced in insomnia lends a fuzzy other worldliness to waking hours. Those early days in the field were divided between hazy conversations during the daytime and sleepless nights in bed. My accommodation during this part of my stay was in a shed-like wooden building that adjoined the main house of my host family. At around 2,500m above

sea level even warm days can have bitterly cold nights. Despite additional layers of clothing I sometimes woke up with frost in my beard.

My shed was functional and contained just a bed, chair, table and light. It also contained a mouse. At first my awareness of the mouse was hazy. I would occasionally see him and occasionally hear him scurrying around. I call him a ‘him’ although to sex a mouse you have to grasp its tail and look at its genitals—which I never did. It may have been multiple mice but at the time I considered him to be a lone mouse as he became my nemesis in the pursuit of sleep. At first our contact was tentative—I would feel him run across my body or graze against my face. Eventually, and I’ve never been entirely sure why, he started to climb across my face. Maybe this was due to the warmth of my face in an otherwise cold room. Maybe I had left food in my beard. All I knew was he was climbing on my face with increasing frequency. The sudden jolt of alertness provided by a mouse on your face is not conducive to sleep and the knowledge that it *might* happen was every bit as disconcerting. Many of the times I was jolted from sleep were almost certainly delirious over-reactions as the result of a blanket grazing against my face yet in the madness of insomnia I lay there waiting for him night after night.

THE SONG

The song I chose for this volume was inseparably welded to the mouse and the insomnia I experienced in the field. The song in question was a Mam-language Mayan evangelical song. Religion in Todos Santos is split three ways between Catholicism, Mayan *costumbre* (often syncretically entwined with Catholicism), and, as with much of Guatemala, an increasingly prevalent population of evangelical Christians. As various small evangelical chapels in the area

sought to spread the word of God, they did so by playing Mayan evangelical music through tinny speakers placed on their outside walls. Songs were played at volume and from very early in the morning until very late at night. Aside from the brief windows when the ad hoc DJs sought their own sleep the music was played loudly and repetitiously.

Other local music tended to be based around the marimba, a low-pitched wooden xylophone-like instrument. Marimba was party music—and I have fond memories. My recollections of evangelical music are less favourable. I do not want to diminish the artistry of those involved—and I accept that my musical tastes and sensibilities are not universal—but to my unaccustomed ear it is typified by plinky-plonky keyboards reminiscent of 1980s’ Casio keyboard presets and the sound of female singing not dissimilar to a cat in pain. The songs were clearly meant to be joyous and full of praise, but for me they evoked mild terror.

The song that haunts me was one with a repeated refrain of ‘Oh Señor’. As the song developed, the ‘Oh Señors’ became louder, more impassioned and more drawn out. By the end of the song they lasted for a whole breath in the same way Latin American football commentators declare ‘Gooooooooooooooooooooooooaaaaaal’ upon a player scoring. This particular song was one song in a loop from the chapel nearest my shed. Like the mouse, it was the foreboding of its coming as much as the song itself that kept me awake. As I lay in bed I would either be awake awaiting it or tentatively asleep only to be jerked from my slumber by a sudden burst of ‘Ohhhhhhh Señorrrrr’.

The discombobulation of the song was amplified by my not understanding the Mam-language verses in between the chorus. I only spoke a handful of words of Mam. Having

already spent months learning Spanish, by the time I found Mam/Spanish-speaking Todos Santos it was time to get on with research rather than time to learn another language. This led to the Mam lyrics' being out of reach. My own particular experience of insomnia is very much linked to my pre-sleep thoughts getting trapped in loops. When I was younger I used to have vague waking dreams of going round and round in circles on a penny farthing bicycle. Later sleeplessness was typified by my brain trying to unjumble sequences of letters or words. In my teens there was a box on top of a wardrobe in my bedroom that had, in its former incarnation, held bananas. The box had a series of letters on it that must have denoted something coherent regarding the fruit's country of origin but the randomness of the letters would burrow into my brain and force me to play incredibly repetitious games of word-jumbles with insufficient vowels to come up with any words. In the field the repetition of the song's chorus, coupled with my brain's redundant attempts to understand the impenetrable lyrics led to a new hybrid version of this cyclical pre-sleep state.

While others doubtlessly found it deeply resonant, perhaps even lovely—I found it torturous. It would play over and over in my head even when it was not playing, infecting my hazy waking hours. If I tried to go to bed early, the song would still be playing. If I got to sleep at dawn, it would start again. The song was the soundtrack to my insomnia. When coupled with the constant playback of the multiple narrativizations of the lynchings and the focus on tiny differences in the accounts and with a mouse who failed to respect my personal space—my thoughts spiralled—days and nights merged into a muddy dreamlike haze. It was the closest I have ever felt to madness.

Having discussed these feelings and experiences with other researchers who have carried

out research in pressurised contexts in the years since, I have come to recognise the fact that I was not alone. In retrospect the mouse and the song were probably not really the epicentre of the little earthquakes that were going on in my head. As anthropology increasingly orients towards violence and other social ills, we get better at dealing with ethical and methodological practicalities of such research (Sluka 2012: 284), but we have less ability to communicate the affective nature of such contexts upon researchers. I now recognise that what on the face of it is a story about me, a mouse and a song I hated is actually a story about the stresses of coming to terms with researching acts of vigilantism that contained echoes of the even more profound violence that had happened in the region throughout the civil war. Yes, the mouse and the song were part of the story, but they fed an insomnia that was perhaps better understood (retrospectively) as caused by a sense of dislocation and being 'in at the deep end' or the shift from books and human rights reports to the grounded realities in which violence and suffering unfold. This does not make the song any less resonant for me. The search for the song for the Fieldwork Playlist conference, even though I did not find it, was evocative in ways I never anticipated. Just listening to similar Mayan evangelical music transported me back to the emotional terrain I was in at that moment of baptism into fieldwork through my PhD.

Drawing from interviews with sixteen PhD students, Pollard found their experiences of fieldwork had left them variously feeling

alone, ashamed, bereaved, betrayed, depressed, desperate, disappointed, disturbed, embarrassed, fearful, frustrated, guilty, harassed, homeless, paranoid, regretful, silenced, stressed, trapped, uncomfort-

able, unprepared, unsupported, and unwell (Pollard 2009: 1).

Begley argues that post-fieldwork support is central to working through these issues:

For doctoral students who return from the field it is especially critical to have open communication, understanding and support from supervisors, departments, the academic institution, and from peers. This is especially vital for anthropologists who conduct research where violence, fear, and poverty are predominant features in the lives of those we study. (Begley 2009: 1–2)

Openness to sharing our own more intangible experiences is certainly a key part in creating a greater understanding of the hardships of fieldwork. Supervisors' stories of fieldwork gone awry and the emotional weight of these encounters need to be discussed with students prior to sending them off into the field. I am quite sure nobody will ever have the same intersecting problems of mouse, music and insomnia that I had but I have personally found it helpful, interesting and reassuring when others have shared their stories of fieldwork meltdown and how they coped with their own unique predicaments. A greater awareness of coping strategies for researchers should be an important part of fieldwork training (Motsaabe and al. 2014). Sharing our coping strategies is equally important. I changed where I lived—moving away from the mouse and the music. I started

to make sure that I was aware of my stress levels and took breaks from fieldwork accordingly. With these little steps my insomnia dissipated, even if it did not completely disappear. My partner, friends and supervisors were an important part of this process. Retrospectively I would also recommend earplugs as a lightweight, but potentially sanity saving, piece of fieldwork kit.

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