On Antifascist Anthropology and the Ethnography of the Alt-Right

Jay Marquis-Manicom

August 2018

Last year, as part of the preliminary leg-work for my research on anti-feminist internet forums, I contacted a man who I knew was associated with a local anti-feminist group, hoping for an interview. To my surprise, he not only agreed to meet, but told me that the group had been transformed from a boy's club – mostly concerned with 'picking up' young women – into a fully-fledged, white-supremacist, 'alt-right' organization.

Though the extreme right was outside my specialization, I couldn't pass up an opportunity for in-depth ethnographic fieldwork with such a group – part of an emergent movement unusually hostile to academics, about which virtually no anthropological research exists, and in Canada, where far-right studies literature is particularly sparse. My supervisor agreed, so I locked it down.

I cut my hair and took out my piercings. I bought some second-hand henleys and button-ups, with long sleeves to cover my tattoos. Trying my best to act safe and neutral, I met my contact in his favourite bar, convinced him I was alright, and got myself invited to a racist conference. I attended in a haze of anxious tension, though this first formal fieldwork experience of my career turned out to be a disturbingly mundane event: a rented hotel conference room, folding chairs, a tenured keynote speaker, a Q&A.

Many months of ethnographic work later, I find myself in the strange position of having become, almost accidentally, an expert on Canada's alt-right movement, during a period of intense far-right resurgence. My story challenges ideas of what anthropology is for, and how ethnography can contribute to the struggle for democracy. As we advance into the crisis-riddled 21st century, research like mine will set the tone for our understanding of the political landscapes in which we live.