

Notes from the Field: Reflections on being white and foreign in Oman

Robin Steiner

School of Anthropology, University of Arizona

When I imagined my fieldwork, I expected to show up in a place and become part of a community. In retrospect, it was a fantasy of disappearance; one in which my difference from those around me, my American-ness, my background, and my native English language would all dissipate and I would become part of a neighborhood's collective wallpaper. A foreigner, yes, but one whose otherness was polished away by my extensive time and effort: my years of work to learn Arabic, my commitment to hanging out and making friends, my genuine interest in hearing stories and trying to understand the character of people's lives and the world they lived in. This was, I assumed, ethnography.

But, as it turned out, in Oman things didn't work that way. My day-to-day experience of life and research in Oman was acutely shaped by my otherness and, specifically, by being white. People would stare at me when I walked on the street; sometimes cars would honk. It seemed like everywhere I went people wanted to shake my hand and call me "sir". On one occasion I walked into a restaurant frequented by Bangladeshi workers, only to have all the patrons stop talking and stare at me. In a silence the awkwardness of which cannot be overstated, the manager came out, introduced himself and sat with me while I ate my chicken curry. On walks through smaller Omani towns, people standing in the street would sometimes stop and tell me that I couldn't go any further: this street is "not for tourists" they'd say.

Although being white was a position of privilege in Oman—a position very different from that of other foreigners working in the country—I found these experiences and others

like them deeply frustrating. Was I doing something wrong? This wasn't the ethnographic process I had imagined. I tried to remind myself that—as a white male living in the U.S.—I had lived my life not needing to go through the sorts of day-to-day objectification that women and people of color have to go through. Is it possible that what was bothering me was the loss of a privilege that normalizes people like me and objectifies others? Yes, certainly. But that didn't make these experiences less frustrating.

Being treated as an outsider in Oman shouldn't have surprised me as much as it did. Oil-funded development in Oman and other Arab Gulf states has involved the migration of large numbers of workers from abroad, leading to significant demographic changes as well as deep-seated concerns among local populations about their cultural and social continuity. In Oman, where foreign workers on temporary visas comprise 44% of the total population,¹ outsiders like myself play a prominent role in the daily life of Omani citizens and the character of the nation's public and private spaces. In this environment, in which so much is at stake in ensuring that foreigners stay foreign, the alienating feeling of just 'passing through' is an important part of the sorts of experiences that I and hundreds of thousands like me have been structured to have in this place.

But my experience wasn't just that of an outsider; it was that of white male outsider. As my research progressed, I began to understand what that meant. With expatriates comprising 87% of Oman's private sector workforce,² many Omanis experience the professional environments of private companies—which the state increasingly hopes to incorporate local citizens into—as foreign, and specifically white. For Omanis, working in the private sector means not only learning

1 Sultanate of Oman National Centre for Statistics and Information, Monthly Statistical Bulletin 26, no. 2 (February 2015): 4, http://www.ncsi.gov.om/NCSI_website/book/mb/Feb2015/Monthly_Bulletin_Feb_2015.pdf

2 Sultanate of Oman National Centre for Statistics and Information, Monthly Statistical Bulletin 26, no. 2 (February 2015): 17-18, http://www.ncsi.gov.om/NCSI_website/book/mb/Feb2015/Monthly_Bulletin_Feb_2015.pdf

and conducting business in English, but also taking up a new professional habitus and set of dispositions specifically linked to “Western” business practice. White people—and Omanis educated abroad—tend to form not only the upper level management of Omani companies, but also a cadre of consultants, trainers, and experts involved in transferring this private sector “work culture” to Omani citizens.

The link between my whiteness and the efforts of many of my Omani participants to embody private sector “work culture” became clearer to me the more interviews I conducted. When speaking with Omani professionals, I quickly learned that beginning an interview in Arabic was often seen as insulting; it was far safer to begin an interview in English and switch to Arabic than to risk implying that an interlocutor may not be comfortable in English—that their worldliness and sophistication were not secure. At the same time, many of my interviews ended with Omani participants asking me for advice about things like self-discipline, time management and goal setting. Other interviews and conversations with Omani colleagues were sprinkled with small asides about how I and other “Americans”, or “white people”, wrote such clear emails, managed our time so well, or were so productive. I began to recognize that speaking and spending time with a white person like myself was doing an important kind of work for many of my Omani interlocutors and friends: it enabled them to demonstrate a valuable proficiency in ‘work culture’ to themselves and those around them.

As an anthropologist studying Omanization—or attempts to promote the employment of Omani citizens—in the private sector, I began to realize that being a white outsider was an asset. So, I stopped trying to fit in, stopped trying to “go native”, and started working to present myself in ways that built on the kinds of expectations people in Oman had about white people. I bought new clothes, which were more formal and tighter fitting. I went to a tailor and had dress shirts made

in flashy colors and patterns. I got a suit. I drank American coffee and met people in chain coffee shops. I started speaking more English. I told stories about my life in the U.S., my family, my background, my education, and my ambitions. I answered questions about self-discipline and time management as if I was an expert, as if I had everything together. And it paid off. My interviews became more comfortable. People began to warm up to me in a way that they hadn't before. And, as I developed a better understanding of the sorts of expectations people had of me, I began to feel more relaxed and at ease both as a researcher and a friend.

The truth is that going about my fieldwork while showing off my whiteness was something I felt deeply conflicted about. Not only did it involve giving up on my ethnographic fantasy of becoming a new version of myself in a new community, it also involved treating as ordinary and acceptable a variety of privileges I had by being white in this setting. As anthropologists, we are researchers in bodies and those bodies have particular kinds of meaning in the places we work. Ultimately, my objective isn't to disembed myself from uncomfortable relations of power; it is to use myself and my resources—my time, skills, creativity, knowledge, experience, and body, along with the meanings it is given in the context I work—to do the best research I can. In Oman, meanings surrounding being white, foreign, and male enabled me to gain useful insights into how Omanis embody and engage with private sector “work culture”. My fieldwork in Oman taught me that being “an insider” is only one of several productive positions I can inhabit as an anthropologist—and it is not always the best one.