

Changing How? Concerns of a Pregnant Anthropologist

*Samantha Grace,
School of Anthropology, University of Arizona*

Quito, June 2015

Last year around this time, I was just starting to really notice I was pregnant. Things smelled funny as I walked from my apartment to the municipal high school where I did my daily participant observation. New hormones amplified an olfactory cacophony in the dust of constant construction, exhaust from fancy cars, and food smells from the international restaurants that lined those two blocks of upper class Quito. Once I arrived, I sat comfortably enough through the morning classes, quietly taking fieldnotes on the mundane negotiations of age-based rights and responsibilities until the bell buzzed for recess. A week before I'd been embarrassed by my own earnest enthusiasm to play basketball with my participants, but now I found myself dropping out, wheezing with exhaustion after only a couple of minutes on the court. These were small changes. Manageable. Still, they were a sign of things to come and they worried me. The world seemed to insist that becoming a mother would change my perspective, my priorities, nothing short of my entire sense of self. I was determined to continue on as I had before, working my way through the fieldwork for a dissertation on age and citizenship, but my normal daily introspection reflected a new concern: who would I become?

As June came to an end I began Phase III of my data collection, which consisted of attempting to live with a family for a month so I could get a more realistic picture of how age and citizenship played out at home. The family I chose had six small yappy dogs that were always threatening to bite me. I felt ridiculous, but I made sure to carry a broom to shoo them away whenever I crossed the yard between the little concrete room where I was staying and the larger room housing the kitchen and the single bedroom where the mother, father, and two teenage boys slept. My informant's uncle lived in another

small building closer to the yard's front gate, but I rarely saw the man. And finally, just to the left of the door to my little building, was the bathroom.

It was after one in the morning when my newly hyperactive bladder decided to insist on its authority. Armed with my dinky phone for light, I ventured into the pitch black yard. I stepped down the single step as quietly as possible, hoping that the dogs would stay asleep while I scampered to the toilet. Instead, they charged before I was entirely through the door, surrounding me, snarling and lunging as I stumbled back, and then jumping up my legs as I fell, biting me as I shrieked in English. The family poured out of the kitchen door at the racket, stomping and yelling at the dogs while I retreated to the room. After a wobbly minute of mutual apologies they bandaged my leg and guarded the yard so that I could pee in embarrassed peace. Hours passed while I lay awake in the dark, and so I was still alert when the uncle returned home, incoherently drunk and with every intention of continuing the revelry right outside my window. He was singing and mumbling to himself in the special language only the truly tanked can produce and although I could not decipher most of his words, I heard when the mother came out and explained that the dogs had bitten me. Unfortunately, I couldn't miss the delight in his voice as he praised them for it. As the night wore on and he sunk into repetition, his indistinct and resentful mutterings were about me.

It was unpleasant, to be sure. But surely nothing too scary for the woman who had taken such pride in managing to do some "real fieldwork" despite living in a place that I'd heard local Peace Corps teachers refer to as "the Posh Corps"? Wrong. My pride had evaporated and instead I was left shaking under the covers with an utterly unexpected and unwelcome terror for the safety of my new pregnancy: could an infection from the dog bite harm the fetus? What if the drunk decided to act instead of simply rambling about me below my window? Could such an attack cause a miscarriage? What would I do the next time I needed to go to the bathroom? A feeling of vulnerability swelled in my throat and belly and I choked on self-doubt. In the morning, I waited until one of the boys was guarding the yard to emerge and make breakfast. By the afternoon, disgusted

with my own fear, I had moved my stuff back to my downtown apartment. Where had the daring extrovert gone and who was this new woman? Could I still hack anthropology if I was such a wuss? If I had already changed so much, who on earth would I be once the baby was actually born?

Only a week or two after that, a quick visit to my husband in California was extended by unexpected visa problems to an eight month hiatus. By the time I was able to head back to Quito, my son was a strong and inquisitive three month old and I had fully recovered from the ordeal of his birth. It was time to begin my fieldwork at my next high school, and my methods and plans had changed to accommodate the new baby. Instead of being separated from my husband for another 9 months while I worked in two more schools in Quito, I would only stay for 90 days. Instead of living with another family for a month, I would just visit a lot. Instead of taking the bus for hours to get around the city, I would work with a driver to get home from my interviews as quickly as possible so I didn't have to go too long without nursing. Instead of living by myself, wholly focused on my work, both my mother-in-law and my mother would leave their homes to live with me, one after another, so they might care for my son while I was out interviewing or observing. No doubt about it, change had come.

A year later I am still changing. My commitment to anthropology, for example, is getting stronger as is competes with parenting for my mental, emotional and physical energy. The vulnerability that waxed with pregnancy has waned again as my body has regained its strength and the angry bite scar has faded to pale pink. The presence of an infant in the occasional interview or visit provides an opportunity for everyone to advise me on what he needs, but the Big Changes in my mode of rapport building, of interview style, even of topical interest have yet to appear. And most things remain more or less the same. The strangeness of my presence for high schoolers who mostly don't know what anthropology is (the guess that I study dinosaur bones is no less common in Ecuador than it is in the United States) is chalked up to my foreignness, and the presence of a baby but not a husband seems to change this assessment very

little. In the end it appears I am still the woman I have invested so many years making of myself: Sam Grace, anthropologist.