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Jesus in America and Other Stories from the Field

Claudia Gould

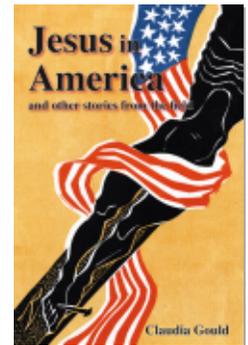
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Afterword

My experience of western North Carolina falls into three epochs. The first, extended but diffuse, was in my childhood. The second was the three years I spent there as an anthropologist, participating and observing with my husband and young family. Finally, in 2000, I took a plunge, short and intense, into the place to refresh my fieldwork and begin writing about it.

I was born in Washington DC, the first northern or the last southern city, depending on how you approach it. It was the city to which my father had come, in flight from small-town life in North Carolina, and my mother from the far west, in retreat from the Great Depression of the 1930s. Once he was away from the place that had stifled him when he was young, my father found a sentimental love for it. That is often the way with exiles. He never lived there again, but he never belonged to another place so thoroughly, and I was enveloped in his large family (he was one of eight children) during summers and fleeting visits at other times. I knew my numerous cousins. I suspect that my mother had no idea of the wonderful freedom we had there, the small-town, unsupervised right to roam. She would have been terrified at the use we made of it. I was never brave enough to walk along the railings of the railway bridge, but my cousin Harvey was, and how I admired him. We were let loose after breakfast to entertain ourselves in the wide world and came home when we got hungry. Nor is this just some artifact of an imagined 1950s innocence. My own children had very much the same liberty when my family lived there during my fieldwork twenty years later.

As a North Carolina child, I attended church and Sunday school (I never went near such a place at home), and I came back at the end of the summers I spent there with a southern accent, a store of Bible quotations, a taste for southern food, and other, less obvious, assimilations. As my father's daughter and, even more, as my grandparents' granddaughter, I was an insider.

When I lived in the hometown of my paternal relations, doing my first fieldwork, I was asked to identify myself by descent: "Now,

who was your daddy?” Even though I had a husband and three children by then, I was placed by whom I had come from. I was welcomed at once, as Manuel’s daughter.

In fact I was from another place. I had grown up in Washington—after my parents parted when I was seven—with my northern mother. She was a westerner, really, not exactly a Yankee, but she was even more foreign by conviction than by origin. She was a principled, unshakeable atheist and she brought me up without what my North Carolina family was sure was the light of Christian truth. When I was with them, I was exposed to as much church as could possibly be provided (though it was no more than the home-reared children had), but it did not take. I reached and passed the age where I “should” have been baptized and never chose baptism. For much of my adolescence, one of my aunts sent me tracts urging me to accept Jesus as my Personal Savior. Later, I kept in touch with my southern family only sporadically. I was never estranged, but I was something of a stranger. For all our “shared bio-genetic substance,” I had become an outsider—or, to borrow Lila Abu-Lughod’s useful designation, an “insider-outsider.”

Annette Khun writes in *Family Secrets* about her sense of recognition when she read Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy*. She and Hoggart, she said, were “both observers of something meaningful that we had left behind, if not quite lost. We shared the clarity of vision of the outsider who understands, because she or he has been there, what is being looked at and put into words...Hoggart’s standpoint suggested I could salvage and put to good use what I had learned from living on both sides of the us/them divide.” I, too, moved back and forth across that frontier.

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If religion was one of the markers of my distance, it was also one of the aspects of southern life that exercised the strongest attraction, the greatest interest. Its influence is powerful, mysterious, and complicated.

In my childhood and on my every visit to North Carolina since, I have been aware of an intense religiosity there and of the way faith lives in the quotidian. I became accustomed to a pervasive resignation to the knowledge that the encroaching forces of secularism, of modernism, and of wickedness are sabotaging the effort of the faithful to build God’s kingdom on earth.

Yet, though many people I knew devoted much of their time and energy to campaigning, arguing, or thinking about the

increasing godlessness of the world, some felt it only peripherally and others, though churchgoers, were not very interested. Then, not everyone was a churchgoer. I knew people who did not go to church at all for one reason or another, many who attended out of habit, others who went and dismissed much of what they heard there but loved the singing, some who were openly skeptical, others who were faithful but troubled. Some people agonized openly about their eternal destination; others appeared never to doubt it. How to represent such diversity? “How can a whole people share a single subjectivity?” Vincent Crapanzano asked in 1986. The answer must be that it cannot. That *they* cannot. And no table is finely enough calibrated to represent the views, feelings, suspicions, sensitivities, and obsessions in even a small, even an apparently homogeneous community, complete with the intensities and distribution of those subjectivities. Milan Kundera has said of the novel what I believe to be true of the short story too, that its spirit is “the spirit of complexity. [It] says to the reader: ‘Things are not as simple as you think.’”

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Twenty five years ago, when I began to do fieldwork in Morganton, North Carolina, I was looking for data. I felt a responsibility to bring back from the field something harder, more countable, than stories. Yet complexity is resistant to hard data, and a story lay at the heart of every one of my interviews, conversations, and experiences in that place.

The short story form was always to hand, because the people among whom I lived and worked tell stories exuberantly and naturally. Everyday life is material for stories; you can hear them growing from simple morsels of information into rounded narratives in the course of a day. Then, like Jesus, people extract parables from mundane experience to serve instructive purposes. Churchgoers are urged to bear witness and to come forward to testify to the work the Lord has done in them; these witnessings and testimonies are stories, some told with drama and great skill. In church on one “Stewardship Sunday,” I listened to a deacon relate how God had led him and his wife to tithe an amount calculated on their gross income when they had previously thought it would be enough to use the net figure. It sounds dry enough in *précis*, but it was a gripping story, and contained the memorable line, “All that dental work was just God’s way of getting our attention.”

I have a close interest in stories; I write stories of my own, and I have taught creative writing for most of my working life. My students, in common with other readers, writers, and critics, demand that a work be believable. Yet they know it is fiction; they want to believe it and not believe it at the same time. This is the same paradox that James Clifford touched on when he said that it is possible “to view good ethnographies as ‘true fictions.’” But can stories represent what we like to call real life? Sometimes my writing students worry that, in making a story of an incident from their own experience, they are being untrue to it by changing it, taking it out of the realm of simple accuracy. I remind them that in fact, the changes have already taken place and have been taking place ever since whatever happened happened. Memory is an irresistible editor; it rearranges, shapes, corrects, sharpens, or smoothes events. By the time we say, “Here, let me tell you what happened...” we have already subjected random events to an editorial process that has given them form.

Ethnographers try to use field notes to pin memory firmly enough to keep it from slithering into untruth. The more rigorous the recording, the more accurate is the account, the more solid the basis for analysis and interpretation. But with every written word the reality of the text grows, the more it replaces the event it records. Simon Ottenberg writes of another set of notes the anthropologist carries away from the field, “the notes in my mind, the memories of my field research...my headnotes.” The inevitable incongruence of the two sets of notes, the way that their outlines almost, but not quite, coincide, like the layers of color in a badly printed newspaper picture, is not so much a failure either of memory or of record keeping, as a representation of the ambiguity of the field experience.

“Unlike historians, anthropologists create their own documents,” Roger Sanjec said in 1990. My stories are the documents I created, based upon notes, sound recordings, printed ephemera, and memories. In *Nuer Religion*, Evans-Pritchard uses a style of reporting that is somewhere between quotation and paraphrase; what he tells the reader about the *colwic* spirits, for instance, is his understanding of the Nuer’s understanding of them. He creates a text upon which to build his interpretation. My created text is this collection of short stories.

Here is where they come from:

Jesus in America

Jesse, like all the people in the stories, is a made-up person. But in 2000 I did get to know a boy who had some of the qualities of his fictional representation: he was sweet natured and troubled, a little young for his age, and he had a conviction, at least for a while, that his destiny was to be a preacher of the gospel. His parents, like those in many of the families I knew, were in a sort of on-off relationship, and he lived in a family of strong, capable, nurturing women. He attended a Christian school at the cost of some sacrifice to his family.

The religious orientation and rules of behavior in “Christ the King School” have been reproduced with great fidelity from interviews I had with parents of children attending the town’s Christian school, with two mothers who had sent their children (all of them sons) for a while before they decided it wasn’t for them, and with the head teacher and the pastor and from their student handbook, “Working Together to Glorify God.”

Cassie Bernall was one of the young people murdered in the Columbine High School massacre. A story began to circulate immediately after the atrocity that one of the gunmen (gunboys, really) asked her if she believed in God. She said yes and he shot her in the head, killing her instantly. The account of that final exchange was refuted very soon after, but the story survived. It is still possible to buy merchandise bearing the words “She Said Yes” or “Yes I Believe.” A play based on the book of Cassie’s life and death (*She Said Yes: The Unlikely Martyrdom of Cassie Bernall*) by Misty Bernall, her mother, was touring southern churches while I was there. I didn’t attend, but I discussed it with a teenager who did, and I wrote in my notes, “I think he is a little envious of Cassie Bernall.”

A Red Crayon

This one is the only one of my stories that seeks to imitate the voice in which I first heard it in the field. Although I have filled spaces in the narrative and added detail, the story of the woman who was alienated from institutional religion when she was a child and never found her way back is essentially the one I was told, leaning against the shelves in the secondhand bookshop, talking about God. The parallel story of the brutal brother-in-law was imported into this story from a conversation with another woman about

her family. The two stories of justice from heavenly and earthly fathers, respectively, converged when I re-read and remembered them together.

The Mountains of Spices

When I was doing my first fieldwork in North Carolina, one of my white Baptist women friends had a seven-year-old daughter. They were a religious family and my friend, Kerrie, aspired to be the best person and the best Christian she could be. She told me that she was trying to raise her daughter free of the racism she had been brought up with. "I don't know," she said, "how I'll feel if she brings a colored boyfriend home one day. 'Course it may never happen, but if it does I'll have nobody but myself to blame. I've taught her to know no difference. But I don't know if I'd be ready for that." She thought. "It may never happen," she said.

Then, when the KKK staged a march down our high street, I asked one of the onlookers whether the Klan, who were merely a source of amusement that afternoon, had done anything destructive in the region in modern times. Several people remembered that a mixed couple (black man, white woman) had been threatened. Some men in Klan robes—nobody knew who they were or where they were from—had burned a cross in the young man's front yard. When I asked what had become of the couple, I was told that they had gone to California. I took that as code for "as far away as they could get."

I made Kerrie's daughter into Ruth and imagined Kerrie's dread come true twenty years on, so as to consider those liberal-minded, moral southerners who know that racism has outlived its time but who cannot, in the moment of test, let it go. The line I give to the woman in the shop, "I don't care how much you think you love him, I don't see how anybody could do such a thing to her mother," is a close paraphrase of what I was told by an elderly woman relating an ancient scandal in her own family. I spoke to several people (all but one of them black) who had a relative who had married outside his or her own race. All the mixed-race couples had moved away.

Personal Storage

This is the most complicated of my stories, but it has the most straightforward genesis. The Sunday school class is as close to the real one as I could make it; the visitor/narrator is like me in intent

and attention; and the prayers, the appeal, the scripture reading, the didactic play, and the Farm Home Administration story are all based on real experience. The narrator's imaginings are purely my own imaginings and are meant to make explicit the role of narrative in religious life. They expose the narrator's addiction to story making, too.

I meant Martha's obsessive hoarding to bear some symbolic weight, as well. Commentators from Mark Twain in the nineteenth century to W. J. Cash in the mid-twentieth, to Joan Didion in the twenty-first have remarked on the southern propensity to make the past its treasure; to hold onto it when it would be more profitable to let it go.

A Moment of Rapture

Not all those who say they expect the end of the world to come according to the chiliastic schedule in The Book of Revelation believe it with exactly the same type and quality of belief. And not all those who await Apocalypse and Armageddon think the Rapture will precede it, to spare them the time of Tribulation. But there are those who do sincerely believe that when the earth has run its troubled course and the end time has come, Christ will come again, not, this time, as a helpless baby, but as a conqueror and that he will scoop up his own, saved people (there will not be very many of them) into heaven, leaving the others to face the war, pestilence, fire, and famine the Bible has promised before the final, conclusive battle between the forces of good and those of evil. Because the saved will be taken up "in the twinkling of an eye," the cars they are driving, the planes they are piloting, the surgical operations they are doing, will all be left uncontrolled. There is very little in the Bible to support belief about the Rapture, and it has always been a minority belief amongst Christians. The very sparseness of biblical description seems to have encouraged an (almost un-fundamentalist) creativity among those who do believe. The sticker that reads, "During the Rapture This Car Will Be Driverless" is sometimes affixed to the car bumper in a spirit of playfulness, but for some, the playfulness exists alongside profound belief.

Laurel, in my story, believes in the truth and imminent reality of the Rapture. What she does not believe in, despite her devotion, is the security of her own salvation. Laurel is made up of course, but her story was told me as a true one, from the barking dogs to the final discovery of the innocent child who could not possibly have been left behind.

Jack at the Mercy Seat

It is possible to join a Baptist church in North Carolina by presenting a letter of transfer from your “home church,” by testifying to your acceptance of Jesus and being baptized, or by returning to your earlier faith with a testimony of God’s work in your life and renewing your promises. The “mercy seat” appears in the Bible’s description of the temple in Jerusalem as the space between the wings of the golden cherubs on either side of the altar; in Baptist churches the phrase is used for the place, both physical (at the front of the church, often by the Lord’s Supper table) and spiritual, where confession, forgiveness, and acceptance occur. One Sunday, when the hymn of invitation was played, an elderly man made his way up the aisle to stand before the congregation, and said this:

I want to take a few moments for a testimony to this church and to the three members of my family who are with me. As I speak you will understand why they are not up here with me. We have had such glorious preaching this morning. Your minister. His preaching was just irresistible to me. How could anyone listen to such preaching and not accept Jesus, not only as savior, but as Lord. Now Jesus has been my savior since New Year’s night in 1945, but he has not always been my lord. In 1945 I came to Jesus because I was in fear for my life and I was in fear of hell. I thought I might have to face my God in the nearest hour. I was not living right, and I knew better. I was raised in a Christian home and I knew that the only way to save my soul and my eternal life was to make Jesus my savior. For that is the offer he has made to us and on that night, when I had been trying to forget my fear with drinking and enjoying myself, I knew in my heart it would never work that way, and the only way I could have blessed security was to take him up on that offer. And I praise Him for putting that knowledge into my heart that night.

But much as I said I loved the Lord Jesus, I took his precious gift of salvation and I did not thank him with my life. After just a little while, I was being unfaithful to all the promises I made that night. I can’t blame anybody else, because I had been told that if Jesus is your savior, then he has to be your lord also. Once you accept Him, then you don’t belong to yourself any more, but you belong to Him. He is your savior and your redeemer because He has bought you with a price. You are His bonds slave and a slave doesn’t have any rights. I was told it, but I was not truly convicted in my heart. But I went on all these years and behaved as if I had no lord. I was saved, but I wasn’t in the center of God’s will for me. And when the blessed opportunity came for me to help another precious soul, I was so sunk in my own sin and my own

pride that I could not share the gift of my salvation and all I offered was blame. Now I can't hardly forgive myself for missing that blessed opportunity, but I know that God will forgive me, for his precious Son's sake.

So now I am rededicating my life to him. We have to know who we are in this life and we have to know whose we are. And we are called upon to speak the truth in love. I have been defeated spiritually in my own life because I spoke the truth in anger. But God does not accept defeat and Jesus Christ will not accept defeat, for He has won the victory for us on the cross. And I thank your minister and I thank you all and I thank the ones that has prayed for me these long years and I thank my Savior and my Lord for bringing me to this place on this Lord's Day.

All the elements for "Jack at the Mercy Seat" appear in this testimony, which I kept as a field note; I made the story by inventing what in Jack's speech was left mysterious or incomplete: his family, his failure to forgive, the circumstances of his early conversion, his return.

I don't usually research the background for short stories, but Jack, who had left so much out, had been meticulous about the date of his encounter with Jesus, as the born again often are, and I looked to see what was going on in the war then (he looked the right age to have been a young soldier at that time). I chose to look at the Pacific theater because that's where my father served, and because Americans were deployed there so late in the war. I discovered that the big offence on Leyte (coincidentally, my dad was stationed there) was launched on January 1, 1945, and that one of the troop carriers in service had been damaged in one of the first kamikaze raids, which had come at the end of the previous November, with 19 killed and 72 wounded. It was rebuilt in record time and relaunched before the new year. So I was able to bracket Jack's awakening between Thanksgiving and New Year's, those great American occasions for national joy, and to give his vision of hell a this-worldly context.

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At first, I meant for the stories to be no more than a kind of elaborated version of my field notes, a way of making available to the reader the text that I made from my research and with which I was thinking about the lived religious life in an environment of fundamentalist belief. But in the course of writing them down, they became stories for their own sake. For the pleasure of the telling them.

They are also an attempt to do justice to the people among whom I worked, who can be reduced to nothing less complicated than their stories. Anthropologists often refer to the people in their research area as “my people.” I claim those in North Carolina as my people in a way that implicates my past as well as my curiosity.

It has been suggested to me that the next time I do research, I should choose people I am not so fond of. These stories are, whatever else they turn out to be, a record of my time among people the insider in me was—mostly—fond of and of a religious life that was sometimes outlandish to the outsider in me, but one that is lived with passionate sincerity.

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Jesus in America and other stories from the field

Claudia Gould draws on fieldwork she conducted, as an anthropologist, in North Carolina, where she earlier spent large parts of her childhood, among a net of paternal relations. From that ethnography and from lifelong observation, she crafts stories that lay open the human heart and social complications of fundamentalist Christian belief. These stories and the compelling characters who inhabit them pull us into the complicated, variable core of religious experience among southern American Christians. *Jesus in America*, a perceptive work rich with cultural insight, is a singular addition to the growing genre of ethnographic fiction.

A collection of very good short stories that, with subtle power and crafted simplicity, provide a close-up of the beliefs and practices of an American regional culture.

—Frank de Caro, editor of *The Folklore Muse*

I count myself fortunate to have had the opportunity to read this wonderfully engaging collection of short stories. Its greatest contribution is to give a sense of the complexity and variety of personalities, attitudes, and relationships to religion that are characteristic of that part of the country still pegged as “Appalachia.”

—Patricia Sawin, author of *Listening for a Life:
A Dialogic Ethnography of Bessie Eldreth*

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