

**Our first-year students did a group project, reading an article by an LSE anthropologist and then interviewing that person. These wonderfully informative and impactful posters are the result; part of a work in progress as we await further submissions. We welcome these new researchers to the ranks of the department and look forward to their future contributions!**

Laura Bear – by Shana Holmes, Annis Popovski-Smith, Jinglan Yao, Claudia Chen, Minami Yashiki

Alpa Shah – by Sehar VEDI, Hassan Kazmi, Flora Cooknell, Francisco Marques-Guedes

Deborah James – by Karoline Hansen, Rachel Ponting, Andriana Boukaouri-Giannouli, Sofia Cicolecthia, Man Yin Wu

Gisa Weszkalnys – by Seren Watson-Hughes, Julia Kuniewicz, Fatima Hussain, Ronit Anand

Yazan Doughan – by Ariana Saettone, Eiman Shahin, Jude Heneidi, Michael Zachariou, Adam Zoromba

Hans Steinmuller – by Ana-Sara Avromescu, Maria Soares, Bukky Olaide

Fenella Cannell – by Lara Arencibia Pender, Amina J'Bari, Anushka Patel, Tara Ryall, Natalie Short



## Navigating the research in Hooghly river

To become a good anthropologist, the ability to go with the flow and to pay close attention to any given situations is essential, Professor Bear says. These qualities are also common to river pilots described in her piece, 'For labour: Ajeet's accident and the ethics of technological fixes in time'. In fact, her encounter with the men including Ajeet and researching about them was something unexpected. As a result of her navigating situation in Kolkata with many modifications from the initial plan (which was to research the effect of the development of the river's waterfront on its neighbours), she found herself working with river pilots who are at the crossing points of different timescapes - where the contradictions of globalisation take shape. Reflecting back on the fieldwork, she enthusiastically tells us how the river pilots skillfully navigate ships on the Hooghly river sometimes resisting the flow. However, her primary focus in the piece is the accidents on the river. In her view, the accidents are both the cause and effects of the shaky and vulnerable position river pilots are situated at. In other words, she considers accidents as the reflection of the contradictions globalisation is generating and points out the existence of workers finding balance at the intersection of differently rhythmmed time.

### Film as a medium

Along with writing a paper, she produced a film capturing voices of river pilots and what they work with - the river. While she says there was no choice not to film when facing the 'extraordinary' scale and location of the river, she remarks that it was also vital to capture the sense of the physicality of that timescape and waterscape which words couldn't tell. Capturing the materiality of the river relates to her argument in the paper that how work and labour generate our sense of self and that of relationship to other people in the world. Another way to enjoy the film, according to Professor Bear, is to find gaps between what is portrayed there and what is written in the paper, and use them to challenge her argument.

Having an art director as her father, she grew up watching and analysing films. Knowing the power of a camera and essentially the process of filming, she says there are no barriers in utilising a camera. In this sense, she is very careful that she only brings her camera into space after cultivating a strong bond with the interlocutors. In recent years, she takes her daughter to her research trips and makes films together.

### As a female anthropologist

Prior to researching at male-dominant workplaces of river pilots and shipyard workers, she was concerned with the potential gender barriers. However, she says being a female researcher from outside the country turned out to be a significant asset for the informants to open up. By working in the male-dominant workplaces and living in societies where men are expected to act strong and stay tough, the fact that she was anomalous to that social structure enabled them to express their vulnerability. In fact, she told us about the time she took her middle-class Bengali husband to the field and how it completely changed the whole dynamic of the space.

### Next steps

For anthropologists, the current situation under COVID-19 is not easy. Professor Bear confesses that she feels nostalgic about the places she has worked before. Yet, the connection with the people from the past research remains tight and is lived today. In fact, the recent project on 'A good death' relied heavily on the past interlocutors and the interviews were embedded in the long series of relationships.

Involving the project in Japan studying how the 2011 Tohoku earthquake has affected some people's career change, she sets learning Japanese as her long term goal. She also hopes to take classes on filming to enhance her skills and to maximise the power of the medium.

# Meet Professor Laura Bear



## Biography

Dr Alpa Shah was raised in Nairobi, Kenya. She read Geography at Cambridge for a BA Honours degree, then trained as an anthropologist at the LSE from where she was awarded both her MSc and PhD. Dr Shah is currently an Associate Professor at the LSE Department of Anthropology and also convenes the “Global Economies of Care” research theme at LSE’s International Inequalities Institute.

Dr Shah is the author of *Nightmarch: Among India’s Revolutionary Guerillas* (2018), which won the 2020 Association for Political and Anthropology Book Prize, was shortlisted for the 2019 Orwell Prize, the New India Book Foundation Prize and longlisted for the Tata Literature Live Non-fiction Award and was a Book of the Year for the New Statesman and History Workshop. In *Nightmarch*, Dr Shah marched 250 kilometres with a Naxalite guerrilla platoon, an alleged “deadly terrorist group”, dressed as a man to reveal why different people came to take up arms to change the world and how they fall apart. She is also the author of *In the Shadows of the State: Indigenous Politics, Environmentalism and Insurgency in India* (2010) and a co-author of *Ground Down by Growth: Tribe, Caste and Class in Twenty-first Century India* (2018). Her research has been awarded major grants from the ESRC, ERC, British Academy and Wenner Gren Foundations.

# Dr Alpa Shah

We were lucky enough to conduct an interview with Dr Shah over zoom!

The following is a short summary of our conversation.

Dr Alpa Shah has been driven by a desire to make a better world’. Initially she was interested in channelling her energies into international development until anthropology showed her other possibilities through the deep immersive grass roots experiences it offers. She believes anthropological research and writing can challenge current inequalities, injustices and oppressions in the world, thinks it is extremely important in current times, and urges scholars to address audiences beyond the ivory towers of the academy. As a take-away she hopes to “demystify our knowledge” by clarifying our thoughts and writings in “decolonizing the discipline.”

## Spotlight!

### ‘Participant observation, a potentially revolutionary praxis’

In this article, Alpa Shah presents an **impassioned defence of participant observation**, the core of ethnographic research, as a revolutionary form of both method and knowledge production. Dr Shah argues that **‘participant observation is not merely a method of anthropology but is a form of production of knowledge through being and action: it is praxis, the process by which theory is dialectically produced and realized in action.’** She outlines four key principles of participant observation as revolutionary praxis: long duration of research, intimacy and estrangement, holism, and understanding social relations of group of people. These, she says, are essential for ensuring that we do not perpetuate ‘theoretical premises that ultimately only demonstrate their own assumptions.’

These four principles, Dr Shah argues, make participant observation an ‘inherently democratic form of knowledge production because it takes seriously the lives of ordinary people in a holistic way’ (52). The **long duration of fieldwork** means that researchers will gain insights ‘based not only on what is said but also that which is left unsaid and demonstrated only through action’ (52). Through **estrangement** the researcher is encouraged to create insights based on new modes of thought, rather than working with people with similar histories, risking a perpetuation of staid method and knowledge, yet the **intimacy** that follows a long duration with strangers ensures original insights that are trusted.

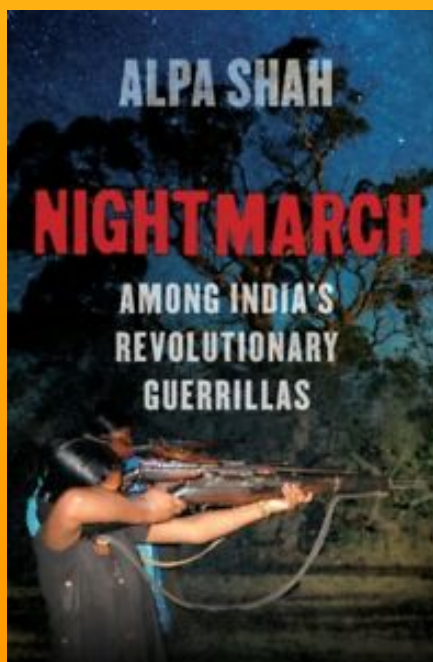
By paying attention to Malinowski’s ‘imponderabilia of everyday life’ through **holism**, researchers recognise that life cannot be categorised into themes - kinship is connected with politics is connected with economics, and ‘we cannot understand one aspect of social life in isolation from another’ (52). The **revelations of a specific group of people and their social processes** are essential for leading the researcher to ‘different physical locations, different sites, exploring different scales’ (53). **These principles together highlight historically marginalised or silenced knowledge, force a questioning of received wisdom, and also produce entirely new knowledge.** Through these characteristics, participant observation has revolutionary potential, and ‘can enable us to challenge hegemonic conceptions of the world, challenge authority, and better act in the world’ (45).

Dr Shah recognises that there are both practical and moral difficulties in the process of participant observation. **In an institutionalised academia, it is increasingly difficult** to pitch research that takes at least a year and a half of immersion, and begins with the premise that ‘we can’t possibly know what we will find or even what the right questions will be’ (46). She points to her own research process, which started out with the aim to study a UNICEF development programme but ended with Shah immersed in the world of Maoist-inspired guerrillas. While highlighting the revolutionary nature of participant observation in producing ‘better theory and action’, Dr Shah offers a few words of caution on activism. She recognises the ‘tension between the democratic commitment to the truth in a holistic sense demanded by participant observation and the commitments of partisanship expected of the activist’ (56). Indeed, she urges researchers to **critique and analyse the theoretical premises of those they sympathise with.** In her work with the Naxalite guerrillas, Dr Shah found that ‘the moral commitments of their activism stopped them from acknowledging some of the contradictions and realities they were faced with’ (57).

Through a sympathetic critique of her interlocutors, Dr Shah was able to recognise the **revolutionary potential of participant observations as a tool for political engagement.** As a nuanced, democratic, immersive and all-encompassing practice, Dr Shah encourages us to take participant observation and ‘reach beyond the university’ (56) engaging with other disciplines, people and mediums to **share the revolutionary powers of participant observation.**

All Dr Shah quotes are taken from ‘Participant observation, a potentially revolutionary praxis’ 2017 | *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7 (1): 45–59

A comic adaptation of Dr Shah’s article was commissioned by LSE Library and made by the artist Karin Rubins



By Sehar Vedi, Hassan Kazmi, Flora Cooknell and Francisco Marques-Guedes

**In a world of growing inequality and entrenched oppression- anthropology must play a role in challenging that and all Dr Shah’s work centres around exploring this in very different ways. For Dr Shah, inspiring the next generation of students is essential. So is the need to reach people who are not just academics, conveying the revelations of our work to wider audiences without dumbing it down. She hopes to blaze new paths for the writing of anthropology for wider publics through her own example.**

# Professor Deborah James

Andriana Boukaouri-Giannouli, Karoline Hansen,  
Rachel Ponting, Sofia Cicolecthia, Vicky Wu



## Inspiration Towards Anthropology

Deborah grew up in South Africa where inequality is visible in every aspect of life. It was also during the heyday of Marxist anthropology where materialism remained the strongest focus in anthropology. However, Deborah's passion for musical performance led her first to complete a PhD on women's migrant singing groups and explore themes such as ethnicity and migration. Attracted to the diversity and opportunities in London, Deborah continues her career and research at the LSE.

## Owing Everyone: Debt Advice in the UK's Time of Austerity

Deborah describes a global phenomenon of people getting into debt. More money is made through lending money than fabricating products. For her, what is interesting is what goes on at a local level, between advisors and their clients. She takes special interest in advisors, providing redemptive character to the whole affair, glimpses of possibility, and escape from the worst.

## Research Methods and Obstacles

Deborah chose to focus her research on the citizens advice bureau as it provided a more accessible entrance point than had she tried to enter the financial market directly. She found that having interests which aligned with what the people at the bureau were doing whilst also having a sympathetic outlook to what they were trying to achieve helped her gather information.

One line of enquiry she would have liked to follow was to track down some of the individuals who had been seeking advice, however due to the confidential nature of the meetings she was able to attend this wasn't possible.



### Day-to-Day Life and Challenges

Deborah James mainly worked with NGO's and charity organisations. She'd contact the agencies and ask for their agreement to a meeting with a person ahead of time. When she'd arrive she would be introduced to the person and would either "scribble notes" of their conversation or be denied of a talk altogether. After the interview she spends a majority of time transcribing.

Even though fieldwork is an exciting experience, it can also be quite intense, since sometimes an anthropologist stumbles upon the routines of the people. This can mean that an anthropologist might need to limit their time on the field and be more selective.

### Ongoing Projects & Future Interests

Currently Deborah James is working on a project regarding a similar topic - indebtedness in South Africa.

In terms of future areas of interest, she expects the COVID-19 pandemic is undoubtedly going to affect all further research, as its effects have been felt in practically all aspects of life, globally.



The article is based around the phenomena of first oil and its relationship with the community of São Tomé and Príncipe (STP). The value of first oil pre-exists the process of extraction and accordingly, the article explores the ambiguity of prospects brought by first oil and why the process leading up to it has been so lengthy.

The making of resources is not an even process and the availability of the resource in São Tomé and Príncipe had become somewhat indeterminate.

## Geology, Potentiality, Speculation: On the Indeterminacy of First Oil

Gisa Wieszkalnys

### Background ethnographic information

- The lengthy timescale of the process benefitted the end result of the research process as it allowed the anthropologist to view the bigger picture.
- The anthropologist's closeness with the urban community was both a blessing and a hindrance. She was able to develop a detailed understanding of how the concept of first oil affects urban communities. However, it is possible that rural residents would have experienced things differently.



The anthropologist's previous anthropological area of interest was in materiality and how resources are made.

It is unlikely that renewable resources will become available as quickly as we both want and need them to.



by Seren Watson-Hughes, Julia Kuniewicz,  
Fatima Hussain and Ronit Anand



DR. YAZAN DOUGHAN

# CORRUPTION IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE LIMITS OF CONVENTIONAL APPROACHES

*aim:*

Corruption must be understood as a problem of distributive justice rather than criminal justice.

*statistics*

82.6 per cent of Jordanians consider wasta a form of corruption

*but*

64.9 per cent believe that wasta is necessary for finding a job

42.8 per cent believe it is necessary for bureaucratic purposes

## Jordan

Understanding of corruption as a problem of criminal justice is insufficient. Evidenced by Jordan's reforms on corruption. In most cases Wasta isn't illegal, so legislation isn't a solution.

## Corruption or Networking?

- Michael Z.



## What is Wasta?

Local practices of political patronage and favouritism. "Organisational life in the Middle East relies heavily on personal relations, in both the public and private sector"

## A problem and a solution:

Widely condemned as a form of corruption but also praised as a modality of attaining justice



## Universal Welfare and Service as possible remedy

Limited resources leading people to resort to using wasta. Doughan proposes universal welfare and public service programs as solutions.



## The Ethics of Irony: Work, Family and Fatherland in Rural China - Dr. Hans Steinmüller

Analysis by Ana-Sara Avromescu, Maria Soares, and Bukky Olaide

Chapter 8, titled *The Ethics of Irony: Work, Family and Fatherland in Rural China*, from *Ordinary Ethics in China* edited by Charles Stafford, is based on data gathered for Steinmüller's PhD research in Bashan, Hubei and concerns itself with 3 main themes: "work, family and the state in rural China". It focuses mainly on describing and analyzing ironic situations Steinmüller experienced in his encounters with particular inhabitants of the village of Bashan, namely the 3 individuals used as case studies: Kang Il, a former gangster turned provincial hard-working family man, Wen Yunfu (Old Wen), a well-respected member of the community, and Liu Dawei, a sickly man trying to rewrite his own 'fate'. The ironies described can be categorized into 2 types: rhetoric and situational. Rhetoric irony is explicitly ironic or sarcastic, while situational irony is that which "may be interpreted and/or found in a situation, rather than being referred to explicitly". However, all ironies arise from "the mismatch between ideals and realities", between 'fate' and 'capability', between the local discourse and the state's official discourse, and between Steinmüller and his position itself.

The first case shows specifically how people in Bashan see "success and failure in terms of family and work", that is, the relationship between 'fate' (ming) and 'capability' (nengli), which are the 2 elements used by the locals to rationalize achievement and failure. While they may seem dichotomous at first, their relationship is not one of opposition; 'fate' and 'capability' are used in combination to explain peoples outcomes. However, the relationship between these elements is ambiguous at best. Kang, a former convict, abandoned a life of crime to settle down in the village, form a family, and work hard to make a living. With a wide network of friends, even though many condemned his past, he was seen as a 'loyal' person and somewhat admired. His past did not determine his 'fate', but his 'capabilities', though morally dubious, allowed him to construct a more 'ordinary' life for himself. In this instance, 'capability', normally associated with hard work, and its relation to fate, a sort of predestined future, is morally ambiguous.

The second case focuses on "the ways in which people relate to the state, its officials and its ideologies", and uses Old Wen and his family to show how 'fate' and destiny often overpower notions of hard work upheld by the Chinese state. After the Communist revolution, Wen's family became 'peasants', narrowly avoiding becoming 'class enemies' due to his father spending habits. Old Wen became a respectable and well-connected member of the community and managed to secure good futures for his children and their families. In his stories, his successes were not the result of hard work, contrary to the state's idea of achievement, but of his manipulation of the "inalterable forces of the state and of 'fate/life'".

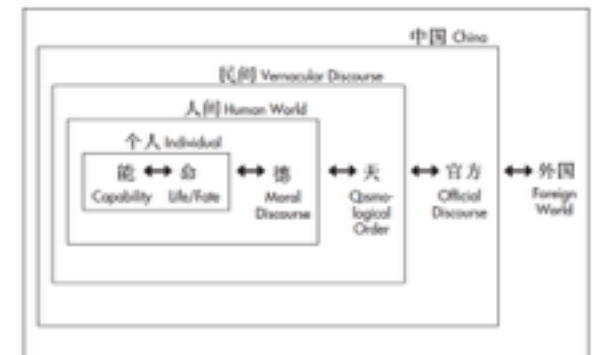
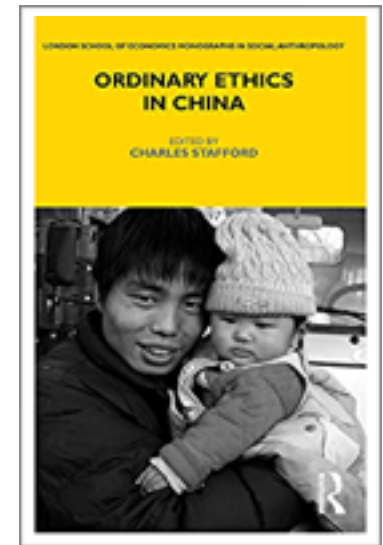
Lastly, Liu Dawei's story further expands on concepts of 'luck' and 'fate', in detailing his attempts to change these forces. After building a house in a position which did not have a very good *fengshui* ("the traditional Chinese practice of geomancy, a popular cosmology that connects astrological signs and cosmological elements with the shape of the lived landscape"), or positive energy, Liu fell ill and became convinced that his house was the reason for his misfortunes. After consulting fengshui experts, he began building another house next to his old one, in order to rid himself of his bad luck, and used his good relationships with people to obtain the finances for the execution of his plan. As his misfortune grew, so did his courage to try and reverse it, leading Liu to take his fate into his own hands. Through this example, Steinmüller shows how local discourses concerning the mismatch between 'fate' and 'capability' are actually related to larger cosmologies and have further levels of meaning. Ming can not only be defined as 'fate' or 'life' but also the life of someone as dictated by wider cosmic forces.

Steinmüller goes on to explain how such notions of 'fate' and 'capability', although central to the village life and culture, are regarded as 'feudal superstitions' by official discourse. He details the historical background behind this opposition and shows how the construction of the village is central to the discourse of modernization in China, but represents another ironic dichotomy in itself - the 'peasant' is both the negative counter image of a citizen (part of a backwards small, feudal peasant-thinking economy) yet also a representative of the roots of China and embody the hard-working mentality preached by the authoritarian government. Steinmüller also details ironies and "issues arising from my [Steinmüller's] own outsider-insider position during fieldwork". Representing a German scholar, a foreigner, a "guest of the people's government", his identity was also divided into multiple contradictions, out of which other ironies arose.

In this chapter as a whole, Steinmüller illustrates different moral frameworks that overlap and partly contradict each other, using them to draw out the ironies "arising in the fissures between them". Ultimately, all of these instances of irony are related to a wider argument about morality and ethics. Irony is important in the way people think about moral ideals - ethics are ambiguous, subjective, difficult to capture and often people are very ironic about them. Steinmüller wants to emphasize that some of these very deep ethical questions often have much to do with irony. Irony is fundamentally ethical because people ultimately act in ironic and sarcastic manners when faced with certain moral conflicts.

### References

Steinmüller, Hans 2013. 'The ethics of irony: work, family and fatherland in rural China', in Charles Stafford (ed.) *Ordinary Ethics in China*, Oxford: Berg, 133-153





## Biography

**“Hans Steinmüller is a specialist in the anthropology of China. He has conducted long-term fieldwork in the Enshi region of Hubei Province in central China, focusing on family, work, ritual, and the local state. The main object of his research is the ethics of everyday life in rural China, but he has also written on topics such as gambling, rural development, and Chinese geomancy (fengshui)”** - LSE



Hans started studying Chinese as an undergraduate student in Munich. Chinese appeared to be the most exotic language around at the time. During a year away in Argentina he became fascinated with learning about other cultures and understanding problems of development and poverty, especially in the countryside. The changing Chinese countryside became his main research interest.

Hans comes from a traditional Catholic background, and while living in a parish in Argentina with Catholic priests, he came to understand that the Catholic church was a middle class church for well-off often very conservative people. There was a kind of cultural aspect to it, many of the white immigrants and colonialists were Catholic, while the poor were Pentecostal. It was liberating to be able to make sense of people from the Catholic church through seeing their cultural background and their history. These kinds of insights, and the idea of being able to understand things from a different perspective, were what drove him to pursue the discipline of anthropology, despite never having heard of it before.

During his fieldwork, Hans faced a lot of difficulties. He was viewed as the white foreigner and it took a long time for people to open up to him. Local party officials were everywhere and there was a tense atmosphere and mistrust between him and the village secretary who was very suspicious of his intentions, not understanding that he was simply there to try and understand the people, so he actually charged him money to live in the village administration building. He was not allowed to stay with villagers, and the officials wanted to control him. In fact, a special file was created where people wrote secret reports on him. Hans was also often confronted with moral and ethical dilemmas: In these villages when you go to a funeral or wedding you pay money. Hans was conflicted on whether or not he should offer any payment, and when he eventually decided to do so, many people made fun of him whilst others were proud of his contribution to the rural Chinese culture. Overall, establishing a repertoire with the various members of the village was difficult, due to problems of communication, mistrust, skepticism, and the inference and omnipresence of the party. He eventually managed to form connections with people, but the bonds and levels of understanding that he established remained fragile.

Regarding perspectives of China, Hans stated that foreigners have very stereotypical ideas of what life should look like and how Chinese people aspire to be, such as having a big family, long life, and prosperity. Some people idealize these expectations and strive to embody them, especially in the countryside. But he found that many people didn't match these ideals, take for example Kang. The way we think about moral ideas is ultimately ambiguous and people are often very ironic about them. Hans wanted to emphasize these fundamental ironies of life. His core argument is that very deep ethical aspirations more often than not have something to do with irony.

Hans has carried out a second project in China, specifically at the border between China and Burma, where he stayed for 2 years, studying the Wa people and their armed rebellion in Burma. His reason from shifting his focus to the border was that he wanted to get away from China and the Communist party and dealing with officials, who made much of his fieldwork a challenge. However, he found that Burma was also complicated in other ways, particularly in this militarized border region where there is a long history of engagement with China. Overall, he found that it was a good combination to study these two areas, with his fieldwork in central China informing his work among the rural Wa people. He has stated that he would very much like to go back to where he did his first fieldwork in Enshi to see how the place and the people have changed, and still keeps in contact with some of the villagers.





# Meet: Dr. Fenella Cannell

## Dr. Cannell: A Mini-Biography

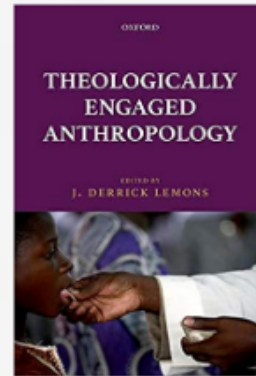


Dr Fenella Cannell is a specialist in Southeast Asian anthropology. She had also conducted research on religion and kinship in the United States. Dr Cannell fieldwork in the Philippines was with Catholic rice-farming people in a rural area on the outskirts of a town. The people she observed were also exposed to urbanising influences from the West, especially America.

Her research explored the ways in which people come to think about "culture" in a post-colonial society. She had a particular focus on women's lives and arranged marriage, spirit-mediumship, saint's cults and religion. She has since carried out historically-based work on the Philippines, especially on education, kinship, and gender in the American colonial period. Most recently, however, she has conducted a two-year research project on American kinship and religion, with a particular focus on Mormonism which took place in upstate New York and in Utah.

## Ethnography: Latter-Day Saints and the Problem of Theology

An ethnography of how Mormon women struggle against exclusion from being priests, and the broader resistance to a leadership that excommunicates them for any insubordination. Even their act of raising women as candidates opened a debate thus a struggle over the very possibility of change from below. This compares to the theological expertise that develops as an alternative pole from which the church can be influenced, especially where scripture is prioritised in Christianity. These feminists argued that early Mormonism had provided a stronger positioning for women in that certain powers now reserved for the priesthood had been given to the women's Relief Society and discussion of these matters was more open. Equally, the history of Mormonism in its emphasis on personal revelations problematised the leadership claiming sole right to determine prophetic meanings. It is in this troubled ground that different ways were found to performatively construct grassroots Mormon authority that contradicted the church authority, and the research focuses much on the specific instances of these challenges.



## Dr. Cannell On: The Highs and Lows of Fieldwork

### Highs

- You are able to hang out with people in fieldwork and have fun. You forget you're doing fieldwork.
- When you understand something new about your fieldwork, it's exciting. "The hairs on your arm stand up when you hear something that really matters"
- It's fascinating and a privilege for people to let you understand things you didn't know before and for people to let you into their personal spaces.

### Lows

- In the first stages of fieldwork it is difficult to make real connections with people and to feel that your end goal is practical.
- The stage before you fully know anyone is embarrassing and it's hard especially if you are introverted. It can feel like you're interrupting.
- It's also hard to balance being yourself and being clear about the project that you are doing. You don't want to sound intrusive.

powered by