

LINDA – Fieldnotes – June 3, 2007

Subject: Mormon Church Service, Fast Sunday

Location: 126<sup>th</sup> and Lenox

Date: Sunday, June 3

Time: 10:45-12:15

Notes recorded June 6, 2007, three days later

These notes are highly impressionistic given my emotional state and the time elapsed since the actual observation.

I dreaded going to the Mormon Church. Friends and acquaintances had offered me horror stories about its racism against black people, oppression of women, attempted colonization of Harlem and the world, etc. (I'm paraphrasing here.) I did not think this was what I dreaded. Of course when I first heard about the Mormon Church in Harlem I was astounded, but once I got used to the idea I figured that the Church provided social support and services in the form of a caring community, even if it were overly prescriptive for my tastes. Going into the service, I thought I was not too concerned with racism, sexism, assimilation, etc., but Varenne and I had joked about the fear of conversion, discussed in an article by Faye Ginsburg.

Now that I have gone to the church and survived, which is how I think of it, I speculate that it was a strong sense of vulnerability. I did not want to go into enemy territory. Stereotypes of Mormons have a stronger hold on me than I'd like to admit; I easily think of Mormons as a group, as fundamentally strange and easily depersonalized. When I think of "them" as a group or as an institution, I cannot imagine their lives or how they think about things except in reductive ways, e.g. they think simplistically, they do what they are told, etc. The emotional subtext is "How can they possibly..." even as I tell myself that I can understand being part of a spiritual and emotional community. One-on-one, as with Karen and Rebecca, I have no problem with approaching people as complex individuals. But dealing with deeply entrenched stereotypes is only part of my sense of vulnerability. I feel a profound sense of threat, that who I am (whatever that is) will be treated as wrong in every possible way. This extreme case formulation, even three days after the event, may be funny to me later when I am better at negotiating my place in the Church.

I wish that I had waited for Rebecca to return. If she had welcomed me and introduced me, I would not feel so much the misleading imposter and so on. Part of my discomfort, then, is the usual fieldwork experience of being strange, not knowing anybody, etc.

I wonder if I would have felt less uncomfortable at another church. I have not attended very many church services in my lifetime, and those times have been with friends. I was by myself at the Mormon Church service, which only heightened my sense of isolation and vulnerability. If Eckson had come, I may have felt better; we could assuage discomfort and re-establish my sense of self as normal with jokes. More importantly, I may have waited until proper introductions could be made.

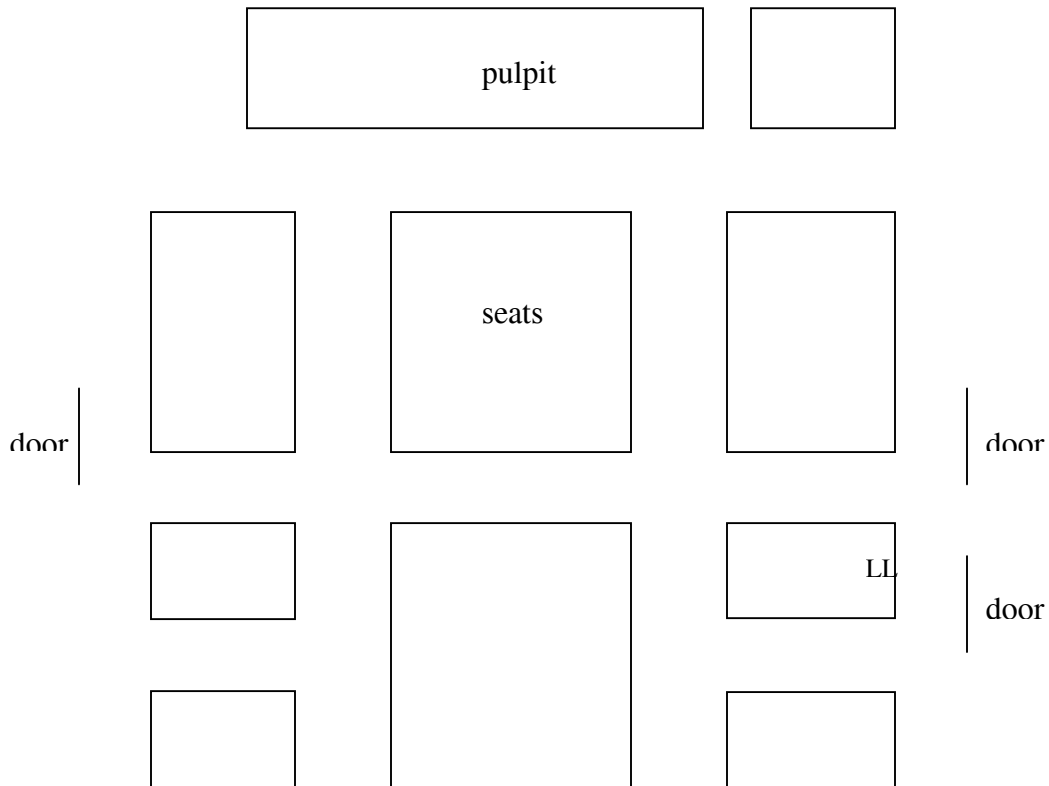
How I need to learn to "be myself" in a place that feels fundamentally threatening opens the question of how people in the Mormon Church negotiate their place as Mormons outside of the church.

I took the bus to the church, a brand-new sparkly red brick building with blue glass doors. I passed Sylvia’s on the way, a restaurant that Eckson and I did not know on our first “ethnographic” walk in Harlem. [added 6.20.07: Later I would find out that this is one of the places where busloads of tourists are discharged. I remember from my websurfing that Sylvia’s offers a very popular Sunday gospel breakfast.]

At the church, two young white men in shirtsleeves and ties were standing at the entrance. They greeted two African American women and a child going in. The older woman wore a dress with a black and white pattern on the bodice and a solid black skirt. The younger woman wore cropped jeans and a white blouse. She held the hand of a small child, who looked about 2 or 3 years old. When I arrive, one holds out his hand, and the other offers a warm verbal welcome. I then shake the hand of the other one. As I go in, I hear one call out to passers-by on the street.

[Interesting to have these two young men as the public face. They fit the stereotype I have of Mormons: earnest, determinedly cheerful. Was there a conversation over who should stand outside? Is it always young men who stand outside? Of what particular rank? As I find out later, most of the Aaronic priesthood appears to be young African American men.]

I follow the women around the corner and into the elevator, and they greet me. I follow them into a large room with a pulpit at one end and rows of padded folding chairs facing it.



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A bald middle-aged African American man, wearing a black-and-white silk shirt and black pants, hands us programs. The room is rather bland, with white walls, reddish carpet, chairs padded in dark pink, and white and gold lamps mounted on the walls. Other than the flowers, there are no decorations, banners, statues, stained glass, etc.

The pulpit has a lectern with a microphone and a row of chairs facing the audience. There is also an organ behind the lectern, which I assume is electric, since there are no pipes visible. Large flower arrangements stood on either side of the pulpit. On the right side of the pulpit (from the audience's perspective) there is an area set up with silver serving dishes with handles.

There are several sections of seats for the audience. I sit in a rear section that has three rows and four seats per row. I sit in the right-most seat in the middle row. There are about 10 or 15 people in the room when I arrive. A middle-aged African American man holds court with tow-headed children and a dark-haired child who could be "Latino."

The African American toddler I saw when I entered tries to play with the tow-headed girl, who whines, "She keeps following me! I hate her!" The grandmother calls, "Kayla!" Kayla continues to run after the tow-headed girl with delight. Eventually the toddler runs out of the room, and after a moment, the grandmother gets up and heads out of the room, calling to somebody out of my line of sight, "Help me find Kayla."

I take out my notebook. [I feel awkward and anxious. I want to introduce myself to somebody but don't know how to go about finding out who I should speak with. I take out my notebook more to show that I am not One of Us and to give somebody an opportunity to ask who I am, more than taking notes. My notes are not very useful or complete.]

People continue to filter into the room. A young African American woman sits in the seat in front of me. She is wearing a burgundy dress. People follow the rule of filling in different areas of the room, spaced out from one another.

Around 10:55 a bald white man in a pink dress shirt and tie sings with the accompaniment of an Asian woman at the organ.

There is a mix of people in the room, including blonde white girls in short spring dresses, two older black men (who I later overhear speaking in a language I don't recognize), and a woman who looks Latina. An older African American man in a suit comes by and greets the two men. He greets another black man as "Brother!"

At 11:03 a man in a long orange suit, pinstriped with black, comes in and shakes hands with everyone in my section and behind me. Other people had greeted people in the front section and the middle rear, which makes me wonder if people are "assigned" to cover certain areas. Orange Suit then later chats with people in the middle rear section. His manner is warm and sociable, reminding me of a politician. [When I first see the orange-suited man, I think "pimp," and more specifically, old-school pimp, but he later sits with

Bishop Pabon on the dais, which indicates to me that he is one of the bishop's counselors.]

I notice that I am not the only Asian person in the room, other than the organist. There is an older Asian man sitting by himself. Another Asian man comes in with a baby in a stroller, who turns out to be the organist's family. A white woman asks the African American woman in my row if anyone is sitting in the seat at the end of her row. The white woman has a stylish very short haircut dyed platinum blond, a sleeveless blouse and knee-length skirt, and heavy makeup with pink lip gloss. Judging by her face I would put her in her mid to late thirties, but three more young white women come in who look to be in their late twenties come in, greet her effusively, and sit with her: one next to her, and two behind. [She could just have bad skin that wrinkles easily.] The three white women are also wearing dresses or skirts, as are most of the white women in the audience. Of the African American women, several are wearing dresses and skirts, others are wearing slacks or jeans. [When I asked, Rebecca suggested that I wear a dress if I had one.]

By 11:07 there are at least 60 people in the room. Bishop Pabon stands at the lectern and greets the audience with, "Good morning, brothers." A pause, and he adds, "And sisters." He explains in a slightly lower tone, "I'm so used to addressing the Elder's Quorum." He welcomes everyone to the ward. He says, "Today is Fast Sunday," which he explains that "we fast," at least for two meals, and that today they will break their fast. He makes a few announcements, including a barbeque. He suggests that people invite whomever they want to the barbeque. When Bishop Pabon starts services I put my notebook away. Two men sit on either side of the Bishop, one the African American man in the orange pimp suit and the other a white man in an unremarkable suit (nothing in my notes or memory).

Bishop Pabon is soft-spoken, and does not impress me as a particularly dynamic speaker. [Perhaps Mormon church services are rather sober anyways?] He wears a light gray suit and tie. He is heavysset and balding.

People keep filtering in. While there is not a severe racial imbalance in terms of seating, more black people sit in the back than in the front section. There seem to be slightly more white people than black.

At 11:10 Bishop Pabon instructs us to sing hymn #7, "Israel, Israel, God is calling." [I missed the import of this line at the moment.] The white woman in front of me to my left picks up the hymnal from the empty chair between herself and the African American woman, apologizes, then gives it to her. I pick up the green hymn book from the seat next to me. The hymns are numbered, with sheet music and lyrics. We sing three or four verses, however many were printed on the page. The organist starts by playing the last line of the hymn. I catch the tune after one verse [but don't pay attention to the words] and sing along for the next couple of verses.

Bishop Pabon leads us in prayer. A moment late, I bow my head, but not before surreptitiously looking about the room. After the prayer, a small knot of people slink into

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room. [People continuously come into the room throughout the service, except perhaps the last 15 minutes.] The program reads, “Invocation” after the Opening Hymn. I am not sure if this prayer is the Invocation.

Bishop Pabon then goes over Ward Business. [I don’t remember what this is.] Next is the “Sacrament Hymn,” #180 Father in Heaven, We Do Believe. Men, mostly teenagers, take around small silver trays of consecrated bread ripped up into small pieces. The person at the end of each row takes a piece, pops it into their mouths, then takes the tray from the young man and passes it down the row. For the longer rows, the young men walk around to the other end when the tray has made it to the other end. For the shorter rows, such as mine, the middle person passes the tray back to the young man. Of the five or six men who pass around the bread (Host?), most are young African American teenagers. One teenager is white. One is an older man, probably in his thirties or forties. I wonder if he is a recent convert in the Aaronic priesthood. I wonder how soon recent converts can go into the Melcheznik priesthood. [Rebecca’s husband is a high priest, but I don’t know how long he’s been in the church.]

[This section added 6.20.07] The first young woman in my row takes the bread, but the second does not. She passes me the tray, and after a moment of hesitation I take it into my mouth. Next the young men repeat the procedure with small plastic cups of water set into trays. Again, the second woman in my row does not take the water. I make a mistake when I drink a cup of water and set the empty cup back into the circular slot. The young man smoothly picks up the cup and drops it into a large rectangular slot in the tray. I watch the young women in the row in front of me drink, then drop the cup in the waste slot. [Without someone to instruct me on what to do I can only rely on watching others. It is difficult to see based on where and with whom I am sitting.]

The Fast Sunday Testimony begins around 11:30. Bishop Pabon gives people about 30 minutes for this. Several people immediately get up and take the empty chairs on either side of the counselors. Bishop Pabon goes first. I am not really paying attention to his thanks to God, etc., until his voice breaks. I am surprised and I find myself listening with a cocked head. [I feel detached in an odd way, like I should be moved but I am not.]

An older black woman goes next. I can’t tell if the accent is Caribbean or African. She gives a short thanks. I can’t remember the order of people who go, but others include

[rest of notes written on Wednesday, June 20, 2007, over 2 weeks later]

Others include

- One of the tow-headed kids, a boy probably between 7 and 10 years old
- The bishop’s African American counselor
- The organist, who cries nearly the entire time
- A black woman who seems to be African American who cries while thanking the church community, the church, etc., in a very emotional display

- A young white man who follows immediately afterward, who seems rather bland by comparison
- A black woman who seems to be African American who gets up to ask for a job
- A French-speaking older black man, who through a young white male translator thunders against sinning
- Another black woman (can't remember whether I thought she was African American, African, or Caribbean)

[I may be forgetting some people. What I do remember, what struck me, was the repetition of the phrase "one true Church." Which denominations/religions must emphasize again and again that they are the one true church? But it is not the Bishop who keeps saying this; in fact I do not remember for certain that he said this phrase. He might have, during his testimony. (Would it make a difference if he said it emotionally, during the testimony, as an "individual" versus when dryly recounting ward business?) Instead, I was struck by the repetition from the people who got up to testify. Am I more surprised because it was the black worshippers who said this? Would I be less surprised if only white worshippers, who look more like "Mormons" (born into the Church, etc.), repeated this phrase?]

[To begin psychoanalyzing myself, I must dredge up my own contentious family history around religion and particularly evangelical Christianity. My parents attended a Chinese Christian service when my sister and I were children. That I have no idea of the denomination speaks to my lack of attention (plus that there were not enough Chinese in our area to create multiple denominations; one was either Buddhist or Christian). Later, my sister joined a Christian youth group. My parents were quite afraid for her, hoping that she joined primarily for social reasons and not spiritual ones. When all of my cousins in the US became born-again Christians, my father was particularly scornful, asking how they could reconcile their intelligence and sense of logic with religious dogma. Particularly as I grew older, I regarded myself as more tolerant than my father, but this experience clearly shows that I too am quite prejudiced against people who practice evangelical religion.]

During the testimony the young woman next to me kept receiving text messages on her phone. She occasionally conferred with the young woman sitting next to her, and a couple of times, got up to leave. When she forcefully shoved open the door behind us, several people looked at her retreating back. She returned a couple of times, then left for the last time before the testimonies were over. Other people kept arriving during the service, until almost the end. Most would wait until the speaker was finished and the next speaker was preparing to begin.

After the testimony, Bishop Pabon got up to lead the closing hymn, #229, "Today, While the Sun Shines." Then he introduced the young white woman who would offer the benediction. She had straight brown hair pulled back into a low ponytail. She was slender and dressed in a modest but trendy skirt, with an a-line cut and mid-knee length. She, too, cried during her prayer. Bishop Pabon got up to close the ceremony. He reminded the

ward that there would be a class for new members immediately following, and auxiliary meetings later in the afternoon. (Presumably, old members would be breaking their fast.)

A little past noon, Bishop Pabon was going to end the ceremony when someone reminded him to ask new members to stand, introduce themselves, and say something about themselves. New members were those who had been to this particular ward three times or less. He wanted people in the back of the room to begin, but we were hesitant. A few brave people introduced themselves. Bishop Pabon encouraged the rest of us by saying that perhaps we would want to introduce ourselves at another time, but by then people were already standing. People introduced themselves as from "Oregon" or "Harlem." I also stood, and introduced myself as from "California." I remember stumbling over my words more than usual. Others included the three young women in what I saw as party dresses.

Afterwards a young white man in a shirt and tie, perhaps one who greeted me at the door, immediately approached me and welcomed me. [This of course had the effect of terrifying me further.] He asked me where in California I was from, and when I responded Northern California, a young woman from the row in front of me asked me where in Northern California. She and her husband were moving to the Sacramento area. She was a teacher (not sure if she said her husband was too), and also responded warmly when I said I was from Teachers College. When I said that this was my first time in a Mormon church she was still warm, but seemed to cool considerably when I explained that I was here to conduct research.

I had already been feeling like I wanted to leave, but especially after this interaction I was desperate to escape. That is, I felt so awkward that this overruled my sense of duty to stay for the new members class.

[Later, I was skimming a book on fieldwork that described how fieldworkers are often marginal in both "their" culture and the "foreign" one, since fieldworkers must be eager or at least prepared to make loads of social mistakes, to endure embarrassment, to feel awkward and out of place, etc. This resonated with me.]

[Reading these notes 2 weeks later is quite amusing. I have been with close family and friends for the past two weeks, leaving me feeling much more grounded and sure of who I am, what I care about, and why I am in New York by myself. I hope that this sense of well-being stays with me when I return to the Mormon Church.]