Chapter 7
A Stranger in the Village: Anti-blackness in the Field

Alexa Kurmanov

Abstract In 1951, James Baldwin visited the remote town of Leukerbad, Switzerland, which inspired his essay *Stranger in the Village*. Baldwin's reflection of himself as a "first" encounter with Black flesh offers a critical reflection on overlooked discussions of the fatigue that accompanies Black researchers conducting fieldwork in (post)socialist spaces. In this chapter, I reflect on the ways my Black non-binary body becomes fatigued at the intersections of blackness and sexuality in the context of contemporary Kyrgyzstan. Furthermore, I address the sedimented representations of blackness that I embody, and the interactions my embodied (mis)representations invite, pushing us to think beyond the physicality of anti-blackness and to consider its psychological effects.

Keywords Central Asia · Kyrgyzstan · Anti-blackness · Black fatigue · (Post)socialist

Introduction

Midway through 2022, I anxiously awaited Jessica Nabongo's book *The Catch Me If You Can: One Woman's Journey to Every Country in the World.* I was a follower of Nabongo's Instagram account and eagerly anticipated reading about her travel as a Black woman through contemporary Central Asia. Her shaved head was important to me, because the combination of my bare scalp and being Black provoked unique and trying interactions with people in Kyrgyzstan. Recently, there has been an emerging genre of Black travel narratives on digital platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram. These accounts show the complexity of being Black and abroad, many times as a way to encourage Black people in America to explore life's possibilities outside

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of the United States. It serves as a digital Green Book[1] that clues Black populations into the scale of anti-blackness and racism they may encounter in particular countries (Klassen et al., 2022). However, before Nabongo and the emergence of digital Black travel narratives, it was nearly impossible to understand the complexity of being Black in Central Asia from a distance.

Before my first trip to Russia in 2018 and then Kyrgyzstan in 2019, I would search YouTube and other social media sites for guidance on how to navigate the social landscape. Often, these searches brought frustration because videos and blogs were limited to white men or white couples traveling through Kyrgyzstan. When I did locate the channels of Black vloggers, their explorations occluded Eurasia, especially Central Asia. Moreover, I could not see a reflection of myself, because many Black vloggers adorned themselves with "loose" wavy curls, braids, sew-ins, quick weaves, twist-outs, and seemed to neatly fit into (mis)representations of Black femininity. Although people are generally aware that blackness is not a monolith, and that race is not biological but a socially constructed reality, in the context of Kyrgyzstan, I embody various symbols of what Black *is* and is *not*. Aside from being visibly Black, I am queer and non-binary, which is at times revealed through my perceived gender expression. I say "perceived" because I am not openly non-binary or queer while in fieldwork, but nonetheless people project their own conceptualizations of gender and sex onto my body due to my shaved head and small physical frame. Thus, my positionality in fieldwork becomes deeply intertwined with inquiries in my research about the malleability and the fixedness of race, gender, sexuality, and their intersections and embodiment across space and time.

While reading Nabongo's short chapter on Kyrgyzstan, I was reminded of the persistence of stereotypes about blackness through the tensions of being a person's "first" encounter with Black flesh. On her walk to a mobile store to pick up a local sim card, she writes:

> I often forget in many places that I stand out like a sore thumb. As Nazira and I walked to the mobile shop, I noticed traffic literally stop and people staring at me. I thought to myself, Oh yeah, I'm Black. I was a rarity in this region. Most people in the country, and especially in the countryside, had probably never seen a Black person in real life. It's a surreal experience to be someone's first. I felt both very aware of the eyes on me and also that the people staring were more fascinated than malicious. (Nabongo, 2022, 233)

I empathized with her experience but also wondered if the stares were a combination of her closely shaved head and Black femmeness, as was the negative attention I experienced on previous trips abroad to Central Asia and Russia. In Nabongo's account, I was reminded of the oscillation between rage and pleasantness in James Baldwin's fatiguing encounters with curious inhabitants in a remote village in the Swiss Alps. Both Nabongo and Baldwin's "first" encounters invited inquiry into blackness as

[1] The Green Book was a publication that offered a variety of resources to Black travelers from 1936 to 1966. Some of these resources included Black-friendly businesses, travel stories, civil rights advocacy, and guidance on safe traveling. Many scholars are (re)thinking and critically examining digital spaces as newer iterations of the Green Book, for instance, digital spaces such as Black Twitter.

both a subject and a question (Rankine, 2016). In short, what chaos ensues when blackness is the centre of inquiry? How did my body either "problematize" (Bey, 2020) or collapse into monolithic notions of blackness more broadly and American blackness in particular? What are the consequences of this ongoing antagonism?

This chapter is an inquiry into the tensions of being someone's *first.* I invoke James Baldwin's (1955) essay *Stranger in the Village* to point to cases of Black fatigue produced by naïve forms of anti-black and anti-gender logic in fieldwork. I engage Mary Frances-Winters definition of Black Fatigue, which she states is the "repeated variations of stress that result in extreme exhaustion and are caused by mental, physical, and spiritual maladies that are passed from generation to generation" (2020, 33). This definition is based on the secondary meaning of fatigue, which involves the weakening of an object through repeated variations of stress. In short Frances-Winters' notion of Black fatigue posits how physically, mentally, and emotionally taxing systemic and everyday racism is for Black people in the context of the United States. Because Frances-Winters' definition of Black fatigue is shaped by the sociohistorical context of colonialism and racism in America, I use Baldwin's experiences to expand her notion of Black fatigue internationally and to reflect on how naivety and curiosity about Blackness can leave "microscopic pinpricks" (Khanga & Jacoby, 1992, 23). Another important concept in the context of Black fatigue is the concept of anti-blackness. Anti-blackness is defined as the "beliefs, attitudes, actions, practices, and behaviors of individuals and institutions that devalue, minimize, and marginalize the full participation of Black people" (Comrie et al., 2023, 74).

I am aware that, by reflecting on Black fatigue and anti-blackness in fieldwork and its consequences, I risk reproducing a particular kind of "discourse of danger" (Heathershaw & Megoran, 2011, 589) in the context of the Black experience abroad. Make no mistake, Kyrgyzstan has become a second home, and in many ways relieves me from the systemic racism of the United States. However, that does not mean that anti-blackness does not exist in the "social fabric" of geographies *peripherised* by Europe and the United States (Baldwin, 1955). My goals in this essay are, therefore, twofold. First, I aim to start a dialogue about being a Black researcher and student in the context of fieldwork in Central Asia. And second, I would like to turn attention to the innocence or "sublime ignorance" Black researchers and students encounter. My hope is that my experiences presented in this essay will not deter academic inquiry into Central Asia but be a tool for future Black researchers to think about their own positionality, at times as One-Third World (Mohanty, 2003, 226), as they navigate fieldwork.

Being One's First

In July 2019, Aliyu Tijjani Abubakar, a 38-year-old Nigerian man who lived and worked in Bishkek as the director of an English language school, was killed on the street near a local shopping centre (*Zum Aichurok*). Aliyu was on a video call with his wife when he noticed a young Kyrgyz man following him around and taking a video.

The two men got into a verbal altercation afterward, which ultimately led to Abubakar being struck in the face and consequently hitting his head on the pavement—he died after being in a coma for a few days (Djanibekova, 2019). When I heard about Aliyu Abubakar, I had been in Kyrgyzstan for less than a month on a program funded through the US Department of State. Upset by the news of Abubakar's murder, I reached out to my in-country program coordinator to discuss my anxiety about latent racism. She responded, using the logic of color blindness embedded in former nationality policies like *Korenizatsiia* (indigenization) and other policies like *druzhba narodov* (Russian term for "friendship of peoples") during the Soviet period. "There is no racism here. Kyrgyz people are not racists," she said.

I had heard a similar remark from in-country coordinators and instructors while abroad in Russia and Cuba. I was often accused of imposing my "American" view because the concept of race (for them) simply was non-existent in those spaces; thus, so were racism and anti-blackness. What struck me and upset me about Abubakar's death was the moment that led up to it. It was impossible for me to read it as anything other than a fetishistic curiosity and inquiry into the Black body, which resulted in Abubakar's assertiveness in protecting his personal boundaries. And, although his death sparked a tense debate about the existence of growing racist sentiments in Kyrgyz society, which reified the idea of racism as a foreign import, the sedimented experiences of Black fatigue that I had already experienced in the moments of "first" encounters left me unconvinced that his death was a random occurrence. July is the hottest month in Kyrgyzstan, especially in Bishkek, and even more so on the corner of *Shopokov Ulitsia* and *Chuy Prospekt*—tensions are running high. Abubakar lived in Bishkek for more than a decade. No doubt this was not the first time that someone had followed him around with their camera phone erect or snapping a photo, which to me solidified Abubakar's position as always and forever a "stranger" or as a "wonder" (Baldwin, 1955, 166). Although these exoticizing encounters can be seen as innocent and (at times) endearing, at their core, they are dehumanizing. In Baldwin's encounters with the people of Leukerbad, their curiosity about his physical characteristics, which were the source of much pain in the context of America, saw these as both infernal and miraculous but never human. He recounts their comments about his hair as the "color of tar" (Baldwin, 1955, 166) and its texture like wire or cotton. While these comments were a basis for genuine wonder, they misrecognized Baldwin's humanity. "I knew that they did not mean to be unkind and I know it now; it is necessary, nevertheless, for me to repeat this to myself each time I walk out of the chalet" (Bladwin, 1955, 166). Black Fatigue is present in Baldwin's "first" encounters with the people of Leukerbad. However, Baldwin felt that he could not hold them accountable for "what history is doing or has done" (Baldwin, 1955, 168). His oscillation between pleasantness and rage points to an active but slow fatiguing, an exoticizing of the Black body through gazing, naming, and touching.

Similar to Baldwin, my fieldwork was and continues to be filled with a variety of contentious "firsts" and the performance of "pleasantness" that involves carrying within the body the awkward weight of representation. Although the people of Leukerbad were aware that he was American, his Black body remained inevitably

tied to a distorted image of Africa. "Everyone…knows that I come from America—though they will never really believe: black [people] come from Africa" (Baldwin, 1955, 165). Inquiries about my "real" birthplace have previously reopened wounds and reminded me that I am indeed a "stranger"—even in Africa. "Where are you *really* from?" I am from Chicago. Yes, but where are you *from*? This question, in particular, is loaded because it requires undoing the idea of Africa as a monolith—a continent seen as devoid of complexity. At times, I have had difficult but fruitful conversations that have come out of inquiries about my African heritage. For instance, on a taxi ride to Bishkek from the mountains, a couple inquired about my birthplace, and after giving a condensed lecture on the Atlantic Slave Trade, the husband then asked why I felt it important to travel to Kyrgyzstan when I should be traveling to Africa and help my African brothers? Although I took that opportunity to debunk the stereotype of Africa as "primitive" and "depraved" and soon shifted the conversation to his own views of colonial practice in Central Asia, I exited that conversation mentally and emotionally exhausted. Like Baldwin, I was aware that I could not hold him responsible for what he had unconsciously inherited (Baldwin, 1955, 168). Not only have historical processes of racism and colonialism deployed "thousands of details, anecdotes, and stories" about blackness, it continues to do so on a global scale through various forms of digital media and the consumption of blackness as a commodity.

Black Fatigue and Anti-blackness

Often the entwinement between blackness, gender, and sexuality redresses my body as unintelligible. This is because I simply do not embody mainstream representations of Black femininity, which make Black women's bodies legible. My shaved head (i.e., gender expression) betrays me, making me unable to live up to Black femininity—which is tied to hair—and all its excess. The reactions I get as a result of my hair and other parts of my body in fieldwork show just how paradoxical blackness can be. Suggestions about my inherent ability at physical activity, good sex, dancing, and singing are present in everyday conversations with complete strangers. My hair, which carries the particular weight and trauma of white supremacist logic in the context of the United States, frequently causes confusion about my gender. I do not "look" like the mainstream representations of Black women—Naomi Campbell, Beyonce, or Cardi B. I am flat-chested, short, and bald, but have been called some of these names because of my being both American and Black. Simultaneously, I have been called a gay man on the street. I have been both laughed at and complimented while walking with friends and family. Through the years, these instances have revealed to me that for many of the people I encounter in fieldwork, there is an inability to recognize my humanity. I am a reconfigured variant of a "controlling image" in highly marketable Black popular culture where ideas about Black sexuality are consistently "reformulated and contested" (Hill, 2004, 121.) However, like Baldwin,

I feel that I cannot hold them accountable for what history is doing and what it has done.

The experiences of being seen as a stranger are not unfamiliar to many Black people in America. And despite experiences that manifest in a variety of forms, such as microaggressions, overt racism, and systemic racism, that many Black Americans are subject to every day, whenever I tell someone that I am going abroad, they ask me if it's safe for "us." Meaning "Us" as in us Black people. My family usually tells me, with genuine concern and care to "be careful" and "stay safe" because of what they've heard about other global contexts. These interactions are not unique. Other Black scholars who do research in (post)socialist spaces have had the same conversations with family (St. Julian-Varnon, 2020). In fact, the inception of the blog *chernyy kleb*[2] (Russian for 'black bread'), a site created by Imani Crawford, was made to ease her family's anxieties about her safety as a Black woman abroad. She has since repurposed her blog as a pedagogical tool to help dispel "discourses of danger" pertaining to anti-blackness and racism that reproduce the idea that the United States is safer for Black people than other countries. Jessica Nabongo's use of Malcolm X, invites us to consider how white supremacist logic enmeshed in "discourses of danger" continues to affect the mobility of Black bodies:

> American propaganda is designed to make us think that no matter how much hell we catch here, we are still better off in America than we would be anywhere else. (Malcom X)

The fear of anti-blackness elsewhere has stopped many Black Americans from traveling abroad, and this includes Black researchers and students. The anxiety about anti-blackness and racism abroad is also coupled with systemic racism at "home" through access to privileges of travel. I did not receive my first passport until I was 26 years old.[3] And, similar to so many other Black researchers and students, when I finally traveled abroad, I rarely received adequate emotional support. Often, cohorts for study abroad programs were predominately white. The discussions at the orientations, both stateside and in-country, were a reflection of the cohort and was undergirded with the assumption that the experiences of students and researcher were universal—which meant White men/women. Furthermore, I found that, although I was physically outside of America, some students had carried a particular grain of American racism with them abroad, which was evident in their interactions with me and with the local community. Black fatigue was not only caused by interactions of inquiry about my body in the field but also by the complex makeup of the American cohort I was with. Moreover, this is compounded by the inability of the academic institution to recognize anti-blackness beyond the physical, as a practice that operates through a variety of other modalities, including academic institutions and state-funded programs that applaud themselves for being "diverse."

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[2] For more details please visit the following website: https://blackbread.org/.

[3] The only way I was able to access a passport was through the CIEE passport caravan that came to the University of Pittsburgh in 2018. The caravan's mission was to support students who have been historically underrepresented in study abroad programs.

Conclusion

While the context of Baldwin's 1953 essay, set in the remote village of Leukerbad, Switzerland, is vastly different from that of contemporary Kyrgyzstan, in this essay, I find commonality in his encounter with the local population. The differences are not only temporal but also racial, ethnic, historical, and cultural. Leukerbad is a predominately White Swiss space, and Kyrgyzstan is a multi-ethnic (post)socialist and (post)colonial country. For me, this makes the question of *how* and *where* anti-blackness appears even more pertinent. What I like most about Baldwin's analysis is that his status as a "stranger" in the village, which serves as a critique of White supremacy, does not essentialize racism in one context over another but blurs the geographical boundaries of anti-blackness. In other words, he is not only a stranger in Leukerbad but also at home in America. This point is key. One can thus step out of the racial matrix of the United States, perhaps in a search for a moment of reprieve, and still find that the "markers" that overdetermine their body follow them to other contexts, even in places with a history of "anti-racist" and "anti-colonial" policies (Spillers, 1987).

As a Black researcher who embodies various "markers" and who constantly questions and criticizes how race is discursively constructed and reified (Hall, 2017), I find that academic institutions are still failing to identify Black fatigue as an outcome of mundane encounters in fieldwork. Moreover, anti-blackness is not only limited to people of African descent in the United States or Europe but is prevalent in global contexts through logics of colorism, which privileges proximity to whiteness. Anti-blackness is not always explicit but can be practiced implicitly in the everyday. My hope is that my reflections presented here will draw more attention to how we *all* (not just Black scholars and scholars of color) can be equipped to be more supportive in cases in which anti-blackness is not always evident. Similar to others, I believe that we are on the right track toward supporting emerging Black scholars, but many programs and institutions overlook elementary forms of White supremacy that take place in fieldwork or study abroad.

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