Field Notes / Observation

I never thought I’d ever go to a ping pong wreck center to attend an atheist meetup. But here I on the 6 train hurtling towards my destination with a tornado of thoughts swirling violently inside my head. I’m slightly nervous of what’s to come. The ping pong wreck center is very deep in Manhattan around 23rd street where I don’t go often. The meeting is also specifically, a Black atheist meeting so I’m not sure if I’m even allowed to attend. I assume by the photos that they’ll all be 20 and over while I am a mere freshman, at 18 years old. I feel a little intimidated because I’m younger and I have this assumption that they might be strongly opinionated if they find out I’m religious. Worse case scenario they’ll even be defensive or hostile and not welcome me.

Because of this I haven’t decided whether to reveal myself or conduct a participant observation. I just feel that it’s not right to lie; I don’t like doing it. I would also feel guilty being a religious person and taking part in the skepticism, which I had no actual arguments for.

On my way out of the train station, I spotted a small entrance with the word “SPIN” in bright white lights over a small black backdrop. It seemed okay from the outside. I opened the glass door entrance and two hispanic females walked out. They seemed to be a few years older than me which reassured me of the locations safety. Passed the entrance was a very small lobby like space, that lead to stairs to a lower level. Directly in front of me and to my left, were beautifully decorated walls. There were bright abstract colors and shapes in the midst of what looked like a collage.The collage contained images such as 3D sideways pyramids and cylinders decorated with multi-colored swirls; on one of the pyramids there is a silhouette of a person sitting on the ledge. Aside from the shapes there is an assortment of game magazine pages overlapped with graffiti designs, and two animated women; one resembled an east asian with short black hair and the other caucasian with red hair and blue eyes. As I walk passed the wall art I am thrown off by a NYC transit like sign, directly above the stairs, that says “Ping Pong 23rd st station SPIN” in grey, yellow, and red colored circles much like the train designs.

When I went downstairs I spoke to a man at the check in desk. He was Caucasian, with dirty blonde hair, strutting a shaggy goatee and a connected trimmed beard. He wore a black cap, white t-shirt and black jean shorts. I hesitated for a few seconds moving my lips while sound failed to come out. I then nervously told the man that I was here for the black atheist meeting. He responded with “Kevin or Kevon right?” I nodded “yes” he then said “well he hasn’t reserved a table yet and I think not many people are coming so you can go right ahead and wait inside. He’s probably still at the bar.”

I entered a dim spacious area with with warm yellow lights hanging down over rows of ping pong tables. As I walked further in, to my left there was a beautifully drawn woman in black and white with a cap on, who looked to resemble Rihanna. Aside from that painting the place was decorated with art on every wall, some with bright vibrant rainbow colors. In this painting it looked to be a woman with a scarf over her entire head except her eyes and nose staring at a bird. At the center of the rows of ping pong tables, there was an area isolated by see through curtains where two rows of booths were located for the restaurant portion. I sat in one of those booths to briefly take some notes and contact kevon to tell him I had arrived. While I waited I saw that there were mainly Caucasian family’s / friends there with a few minority groups such as Hispanic, Brown, Asian, and of course my black atheist group. As I sat there, a tall, voluminous, dark skinned lady passed by as we mutually smiled at each other. The music playing in the background I assumed was old because of its unfamiliarity and funky beat . It was upbeat but the vocalist was always soothing, with occasional acoustics.

After an hour of waiting, since I arrived at 7:30, for Kevon to answer I asked the man at the desk to direct me to Kevon. I was led to a long couch with smaller seats surrounding a coffee table of snacks where a good 7-8 people were gathered. When I got there I immediately locked eyes with the woman I had smiled at earlier. She reiterated that we had seen each other when she first came in and her and kevon quickly apologized for having me wait so long. Kevon shook my hand, offered me a seat and introduced me to Koretta, the women I met earlier. Koretta had long curly hair, and wore a red fitted dress with black knee high boots. Kevon was a tall toffee colored man, rather slim, and bald; he had a broad smile with soft kind eyes, although flustered, and awkward at times. He wore a brown and orange checkered flannel with dark jeans. After I settled down and shook everyone’s hands, Kevon asks “So what brings you to our meeting? What made you decide to come?” I stayed quiet for a moment however my face was very telling of my unease and contemplation. They looked at me confused and suspicious of my response. Finally I decided to come clean and explain to them that I’m not really an atheist. I explained how I was conducting a field study and that I prefer not to lie. They seem like nice people and they’re diverse despite their title as “Black Atheists”. Koretta expressed her appreciation for my honesty and then asked if it’s common in college to get this assignment. I told her it was for my social science english class but I chose my topic. She said she was curious because another girl interviewed quite a few of them for a journalism final, so she was intrigued by the coincidence. I also shared how nervous I was, about not being sure if I’d be allowed to stay, because I wasn’t black. Koretta reassured me that it was okay and joked that they could be my test subjects. I then exclaimed “ oh noooo that’s exactly how I didn’t want you to feel. That’s why I was contemplating being a participant; I didn’t want you to feel uncomfortable.” I could tell that she was friendly but for some reason a felt a hint of negative emotions emitting from her. Her body language was stiff, she didn’t make much eye contact, was slightly avoidant, and although she said she understood I could feel that it was only to be agreeable. I think that she may have resentment for religious people, which was giving her discomfort. It’s as if she wanted to give me the benefit of the doubt but in the back of her head there was an unpleasant encounter with religion.

Shortly after my introduction, a guy who was stout with blond hair and circular glasses, named Andrew, began to address how they are accepting of everyone seeking atheism. He then rambled about how the group is very open, that there are a lot of ignorant white people who don’t know about minorities and their struggles , bragged about how he graduated with a triple major (mainly business and computer engineering), and then explained how he achieved this. He explained that he gained all his gen ed credits by excelling in his AP’s in high school. I say he rambled because he talked the majority of the time, but to be fair, I did ask him how he achieve his triple major. The more I talked to him I noticed that he had very strong eye contact; which I’m not sure if it was due to the confidence gained through bragging about his three majors, or if I just felt that he was creepy. I was finally freed from that very lengthy encounter when a new member (to me atleast) arrived.

After some time Kevon rented a ping pong table. While everyone entertained themselves and ordered some food, Kevon took a seat next to me. I had ordered a peach tea and he asked me if it was good. I responded with “eh It could use some sugar but other than that it’s okay. He then said “what is your religion? If you don’t mind me asking”. “oh no of course how could I ask and not respond” I said. “technically I’m evangelical, but evangelicals are not supposed to drink or dance yet I’ve done both”. Kevon continues with “how can you be sure that your religion is the right one, if there are so many other religions ? So all the others would be wrong then and they’re all going to hell”. I then say “ well I’ve thought of the same thing because there’s no way of knowing. But the reason why people are affiliated with their designated religion, is mostly because they’re primed by their parents or caregivers. I’ve also thought of what if I had been born into a different religion. Then I would be in the group of ‘people going to hell’. I’ve also thought about what if all these religions worship the same god but practice it differently”. Kevon follows up with ”there are also so many contradictions” I then explain “ yeah ik like for example the Roman Catholic Church; many of their practices are alterations of the Bible for their gain and manipulation(priest are not able to marry as to not split up the land) also the culture of being so hard core and strict with their beliefs. (premarital sex not eating swine )I believe as times change so should the exceptions to the Bible”. Kevon:“ But times have changed but the Bible hasn’t and it’s not supposed to right?” At this point I can’t really argue because I have no concrete evidence. “This is where I can’t really counter because I myself are not a strict believer it’s as if I made my own religion like I picked and chose what I wanted; which is hypocritical, but my opinion is that you should just be an overall good person and establish a relationship with god”. Kevon sighs and says “Yeah I’ve noticed that the people who stray the most from the original practices of their religion tend to be the best people”. “why are you interested in studying us in particular”As I answered these questions I thought it was funny and ironic that I was being interviewed, rather than him since I was the one conducting the study. I continued with “For me I was primed at a young age because my grandmother was heavily religious and would take me to church often. When I was younger I believed because I was told to, but I had a few experiences that became proof for me. I also had a friend who went through something very traumatic. I helped her through it and convinced her to get therapy. I also feel blessed to have never gone through any servere struggles and I always felt it was because of my grandmother praying for me. But that leads to why I want to be a therapist I feel that because I’ve been so blessed I should help others. So religion for me gives me hope and helps me through whatever is thrown at me so I’m just curious as to what keeps you going and who do you reach out to for support if not god”. Kevon then ends our conversation with “people of course and that’s why I made this group”