

# THE FIELD AS HERE AND NOW, NOT THERE AND THEN\*

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*I would emphasize in all of this, the success of the fieldwork hinged not so much on a determination to ferret out “the facts” as on a willingness to leave some stones unturned, to listen to what my informants deemed important, and to demonstrate my trustworthiness by not prying where I was not wanted. . . . It may be precisely by giving up the scientific detective’s urge to know “everything” that we gain access to those very partial vistas that our informants may desire or think to share with us.*

—Liisa H. Malkki, 1995

Fieldwork is at once a political, personal, and professional undertaking. It provides crucial reference points and evidence upon which knowledge claims are made. Careful consideration, though, is required of one’s own assumptions about the field, especially boundaries between here and there. I make three related arguments: that, as a researcher, one is always in the field; that by being in the field one changes it and is changed by it; and that field experience does not automatically authorize knowledge, but rather allows us to generate analyses and tell specific kinds of stories. I underscore the importance of field research as a basis for developing accountable analyses and theory with the caveat that the field is separate from the everyday spaces of home.

In this essay I first examine essentialized notions of the field as bounded by time and place, drawing on the work of feminist geographers. With a clearer understanding of how the field may be conceptualized, I draw on my fieldwork to illustrate political and practical considerations. Finally, I illustrate how I have become part of the fields I purport to study and contend that, as field-workers, we are always in the field.

## INTERROGATING THE FIELD

Gillian Rose has argued that fieldwork represents geographical masculinities in action (1993). Although the masculinist biases in geographical method and the production of geographical knowledge are well exposed, argument that fieldwork is inevitably a masculinist exercise is problematic (Moss 1993; D. Rose 1993; G. Rose 1993; Nast 1994; Sparke 1996; McDowell 1997). Insights from fieldwork provide a basis for constructing accounts of processes, places, and social relations. Fieldwork is a site “to critique, deconstruct, and reconstruct a more responsible, if partial, account of what is happening in the world” (Hyndman 1995, 200). As Margaret Walton-Roberts commented after reading an earlier draft of this essay, “It is important to consider the return to the empirical after the excesses of the cultural turn [in

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geography] where arguably there was no truth. . . . It is arguably a more masculinist practice to pontificate from on high than to plant oneself in the field and wring one's hands about the politics of doing so at the same time" (personal communication, 29 September 2000).

Fieldwork potentially offers grounds for a more accountable theory, but it does not automatically generate geographical knowledge. There is no question that fieldwork embodies a politics of representation. It also serves to ground theory in power relations and political, economic, and cultural locations other than our own (Nast 1994).

What constitutes "the field" is contentious: Is it merely a physical location, conveniently cordoned off from the life of the researcher? That conception is insufficient. "The 'field' is not naturalized in terms of 'a place' or 'a people'; it is instead located and defined in terms of specific political objectives that (as such) cut across time and space" (Nast 1994, 57). My own research recasts the field as a network of power relations in which I am a small link. My focus in the project I analyze here is the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and its humanitarian operations at its headquarters in Geneva, one branch office in Nairobi, and one suboffice in Dadaab, which administers three refugee camps in northeastern Kenya. The UNHCR is a complex organization defined by policies, processes, and practices that stretch across space to offices and camps in more than 100 countries. This fieldwork, couched as an ethnography of political, cultural, and geographical processes with material outcomes, aimed to avoid fixing the agency in static space or time. My decision to study up, to analyze and theorize the institutions, organizations, and bodies that govern human relations rather than the governed themselves, adapted work by geographers and anthropologists before me (Abu-Lughod 1991; Pred and Watts 1992). This redirection of the academic gaze attempts to subvert some of the neocolonial power relations involved in studying refugee populations by inverting power relations between the researcher and the researched.

Where power differentials between the researcher and the researched are acute, "the field" is a term deployed to normalize differences and to buttress existing sociopolitical hierarchies. The assumption that a field-worker is an outsider and that this position authorizes a legitimate space from which to study and record "the field" is epistemologically and politically suspect. The power to invoke such distinctions is potent, and researchers can expect resistance to such moves. As Isabel Dyck has argued, power differentials can be—and are, in her research—resisted by research subjects (1997). Although I rarely experienced hostility during my visits to and walks through the refugee camps, I was once facetiously asked by an elderly Somali man whether I was a tourist like all the other foreigners working in the camps. I nervously laughed off his comment, acutely aware of warnings "against a form of theoretical tourism on the part of the first world critic, where the margin becomes a linguistic or critical vacation, a new poetics of the exotic" (Caren Kaplan, quoted in Visweswaran 1994, 111). Another day, a young Somali man grabbed me by the collar and angrily shouted something that the male interpreter accompanying me, a camp

elder, refused to translate. My presence was clearly not welcome. Notions of consent become moot in conditions where power disparities are so great, where people have been geographically displaced and dispossessed of their livelihoods. Do not assume that people want to cooperate in our exercises of power, as modest and carefully executed as such exercises may be.

Even when cooperation is forthcoming, what we record is not all that took place: “The event is not what happens. The event is that which can be narrated” (Feldman, quoted in Malkki 1995, 107). In the case of refugee camps, what is recorded as field notes and what one leaves out have crucial implications for later compilations of what happened. My written analysis of UNHCR operations had to be edited to protect the UNHCR employees who had disclosed a great deal about power relations within the organization (Hyndman 2000b). To write at all about certain issues would risk uncovering identities and even jeopardizing careers. I was grateful that the employees had the courage to speak frankly, and I took their trust as an indicator to use judiciously the material they gave me.

The framing of findings is critical to meanings created and responses evoked. Speaking of the politics inherent in humanitarian action, the former president of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) stated that “language is determinant. It frames the problem and defines response” (Orbinski 1999). When the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) considered whether to bomb Serbia under the rule of Slobodan Milosevic in 1999, it presented the Western world with two options: either take “humanitarian” action and bomb Milosevic’s military strongholds or let Kosovar Albanians perish at the hands of soldiers under Milosevic’s command. Certainly more than two options were possible, but so convincingly was this argument framed that NATO secured the backing of its members and went ahead. For MSF, such intervention was not “humanitarian,” because civilians on both sides of the ethnic divide were “accidentally” killed in the attacks. The feminist Cynthia Cockburn, who protested both the killing of Kosovar Albanians by Milosevic forces and the NATO bombings, calls for a neither/nor approach, which castigates false binaries and limits political futures by the way they frame the problem (2000).

How researchers frame the field has no lesser quotient of representational and political implications. Cindi Katz noted that in order to see “the field,” the field-worker usually undertakes acts of self-displacement, from home turf to elsewhere (1994). Dislocation allows the field to be framed, invoking a shift from ontologically grounded understanding of the world to the Cartesian “world-as-exhibition” (Heidegger 1977). Timothy Mitchell borrows from Heidegger to make a similar argument based on his own research in Egypt (1988). To understand the field, Mitchell contends, one has to engage with it and the people who populate it at a primordial level, where common language and shared cultural capital avoid acts of self-displacement and the framing of the world-as-exhibition. Mitchell draws on the Arabic language, the Islamic faith, and Egyptian literature as proof of his “primordial” conception of the “world-not-as-exhibition,” “an order without frameworks” (p. 55). The demarcation of home and field is a device that makes

possible the world-as-exhibition. The field-worker decenters herself or himself to enframe, to borrow Heidegger's term, the field.

In practice, fieldwork is less primordial-versus-Cartesian metaphysics than an exercise in communication, trust, and timing. Through language acquisition, extended stays, and a painstaking building of trust and rapport, researchers become part of the field. Despite the intellectual, sociocultural, and economic baggage that field-workers take along, they never return "home" quite the same. The field-worker, like the travel writer of the past, is changed by exposure to new places and insights, and she or he returns to a changed place (Blunt 1994). The field, then, is both here and there, a continuum of time and place.

Researchers are always in the field, at home or away. To borrow Katz's often-cited phrase: "I am always, everywhere, in 'the field.' . . . This task requires recognition that as an ethnographer and as a woman my subject position is constituted in spaces of betweenness, a place neither inside nor outside" (Katz 1994, 72). Kamala Visweswaran suggests that "field and home are dependent, not mutually exclusive. . . . The lines between fieldwork and homework are not always distinct. . . . Home once interrogated is a place we have never before been" (quoted in Sparke 1996, 229). Several feminists, geographers among them, have analyzed the home as a field site (Gilbert 1994; Oberhauser 1997; Samarasinghe 1997). By inverting assumptions about home and field, these authors challenge the oversimplification of discrete public and private spheres and the taken-forgrantedness that the field is always somewhere else.

By contesting its boundaries, what counts as the field is subverted and recast. The call to study up destabilizes and recasts field research as relational. Transnational studies represent another approach, whereby the field is not a place nor a people but a dense social network of migration, money, goods, and information that crosses political borders (Goldring 1996). Feminist research and political practices go farther, connecting people across differences rather than essentializing them as immutable (Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Anderson 1996). Another way to unseat the oppositions of here and there, home and field, is to interrogate the subject of analysis: to study, for example, the "sociopolitical effects of the refugee camp as a technology of power," rather than the refugees themselves (Malkki 1995, 52).

#### EXPERIENCE

Just as the field is sometimes construed as a space separate from home, so fieldwork is used for knowledge production. The findings of fieldwork about a particular place or people risk becoming part of a foundation of facts about the research subject(s) based on a researcher's insider experience. I do not wish to imply that fieldwork is a dubious undertaking, or a lesser approach in the universe of geographical methods. But "experience" in fieldwork cannot simply stand in for knowledge. Fieldwork is mediated and messy. There is value in working through the messiness, engaging in fieldwork in a careful manner, rather than writing it off as too fraught with difficulties and dangers. Imperfect engagement is better than no engagement, or a paralyzing angst.

The experience of being there does not in itself produce knowledge and expertise about a place and people. As Joan Scott contended,

When the evidence offered is the evidence of “experience,” the claim for referentiality is further buttressed—what could be truer, after all, than a subject’s own account of what he or she has lived through? It is precisely this kind of appeal to experience as uncontested evidence and as an originary point of explanation—as a foundation upon which analysis is based—that weakens the critical thrust of histories of difference. . . . They [these studies] take as self-evident the identities of those whose experience is being documented and thus naturalize their difference. (1992, 24–25)

Scott noted that the unifying dimension of experience also serves to exclude whole realms of other human activity that are not counted as experience. Cindi Katz’s analysis follows Scott’s approach (1994). They set aside experience from its ontological perch, offering a more precarious and subversive position in which the researcher is an expression of experience in the world. “Experience is at once always already an interpretation *and* is in need of interpretation” (Scott 1992, 37). Just as Scott accounts for experience without essentializing identity, feminists doing fieldwork recognize their findings as partial, in twin senses of that word: at once incomplete and selective, findings reflect the interests and circumstances of the researcher.

The sociologist Dorothy Smith’s work on this front is invaluable. She argues that facts are an aspect of social organization, a knowing that employs categories familiar to the knower but not necessarily to the known. It is a practice that constructs an object or person as external to the one inside the organization or, for the purposes of this argument, the field.

For bureaucracy is *par excellence* that mode of governing that separates the performance of ruling from particular individuals, and makes organizations independent of particular persons and local settings. . . . Today, large-scale organization inscribes its processes into documentary modes as a continuous feature of its functioning. . . . This [produces] a form of social consciousness that is the property of organizations rather than of the meeting of individuals in local historical settings. (Smith, quoted in Escobar 1995, 109)

The findings of the field profile the external culture from its own perspective. “The various agencies of social control,” wrote Smith, “have institutionalized procedures for assembling, processing, and testing information about the behavior of individuals so that it can be matched against the paradigms” (Smith 1993, 12). Smith cited particular purported facts that are read in selective and institutionally normalized ways, ways that say as much or more about the researcher as about the subject of research. Likewise, “*sequence and causality are both moral and metaphorical constructs*” (Feldman, quoted in Malkki 1995, 107; italics in the original). Fieldwork legitimizes the basis for claims of knowledge, but the findings of fieldwork, especially the sequence in which the claims are pieced together and the meanings attached to them, are all mediated by researchers. Field-worker receptivity to in-

quiries about the field are shaped by academic norms, intellectual training, and the political leanings we bring to our task.

Where fieldwork findings are presented as immutable facts, readers beware. Not only is the experience of fieldwork an insufficient condition for certain knowledge, one's findings in the field never capture the whole picture. In fact, no whole picture exists. Donna Haraway insisted that researchers must "situate" their partial knowledge, avoiding the view of everywhere and nowhere at once (1991), while James Clifford warned that "there is no longer any place of overview . . . from which to map human ways of life, no Archimedean point from which to represent the world" (1986, 22). Fieldwork should hedge omniscient representations, grounding its findings instead in social relations of institutions, practices, and processes of research from below.

My research into UNHCR operations involved dozens of interviews with people working within the organization, archival work on the evolving policies and practices of the agency, and ongoing meetings and observations in refugee camps, branch offices, and headquarters. But some of the most telling insights came from interviews with refugees whose daily routines were shaped by the geography of services in the camps and the kinds of food they received on a bimonthly basis. Their stories illustrate the impact of UNHCR policies and practices on their daily movement through the camps (Hyndman 1998). Their lives are, to a large extent, an expression of UNHCR planning and practice in the camps. Just as refugees are an expression of conflict, violence, and displacement, so their experience of the camps is partly a function of security measures, legal protocol, and available services and resources. Fieldwork can identify the patterns and processes that place refugees in particular social and geographical locations. Context is crucial.

#### NEGOTIATING THE FIELD

Like the links between home and field, the fates of the researcher and the researched are connected. In the course of my research, I became involved in a number of activities strictly unrelated to fieldwork. My politics and priorities as a public person could not be filed away during my fieldwork, so I found myself embroiled in heated debates about whether refugee camps were war zones, communities, or neither. I empathized with junior frontline staff who lived and worked under difficult conditions, not always with requisite support from their superiors. I was and still am implicated in the social relations I wished to study and in the political outcomes of my research. The geography of one's positionality is called into question, and a politics of engagement becomes critical for researchers doing fieldwork (Nagar 1997).

When I returned to the Horn of Africa for the first time as a researcher, in 1994, I was keenly aware of the hierarchies that existed among expatriates, nationals, and refugees, between refugee men and women, and across racialized lines within the refugee, national, and international groups present. My decision to study up created opportunities for analyzing pervasive issues of gender and cultural politics within a Western organization (the United Nations), but this approach did not change

the incomparable social and political spaces occupied by a field-worker from North America and a refugee from Somalia (Escobar 1995; Razack 1996; Hyndman 2000b). It was in the informal settings—over lunch, tea, or instant coffee, most of which took place in a common dining hall—that the greatest rapport with both the refugees who worked for the UNHCR and the agency's staff grew. Where space was shared, so were conversations and exchanges of all kinds.

During the course of my research in the Dadaab camps, I was asked by junior staff to voice their concerns, as a third party, to the deputy representative at the UNHCR in Nairobi. Dadaab, situated close to the Kenya–Somalia border, is a “non-family duty station” because of its perceived danger and intense isolation.<sup>1</sup>

These conditions, combined with long hours, took their toll on junior staff, many of whom were on short-term contracts. As an arguably more neutral player in camp life, I became involved in these politics because of my solidarity with the frontline staff posted to Dadaab (Hyndman 2000a). Only a year before, I had been working for the same organization in Somalia under similar conditions.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, my access to the Dadaab camps was predicated on my previous affiliation with the UNHCR, underscoring the in-betweenness of my position as researcher, of being simultaneously inside and outside the project (McDowell 1992). My fieldwork also involved spending several months in the Nairobi branch office of the UNHCR, where I could examine the ways in which information, operations, and personnel were coordinated in “their” fields.<sup>3</sup>

Responsibility for accommodating me was delegated to the social services officer in whose section I was assigned a temporary desk. To fit in and make my presence less of a burden, I offered to answer telephones or fill in if the need arose. Between my interviews and archival work, assistance was sometimes solicited; sometimes not. As my rapport with the UNHCR staff increased, more interesting tasks were passed my way: Would I like to review and comment on this evaluation report on women survivors of violence? I accepted such opportunities with enthusiasm, but I realized that in so doing I disrupted any clear-cut notion of “researcher” and “researched.” The terms of my participation changed my research, my access to information, and the trust accorded me.

Before I ever left for Kenya, I had abandoned the idea of discovering or revealing “truths” about refugees or humanitarian operations, based on my exposure to feminist theory and politics. The art of navigating across social, cultural, and geographical locations, however, remained elusive. Upon arrival, the lesson of ascertaining how and when not to ask questions was quickly learned. Listening and probing proved more insightful than any of the interview schedules I had circulated to the research ethics committee prior to my departure. By engaging with people on their terms, doors were opened and invitations extended. At UNHCR headquarters in Geneva, the Kenya desk officer introduced me to an unexpected tribalism: He put me in touch with other Canadians in senior management who might be sympathetic to my cause and refer me to others. At the UNHCR branch office in Nairobi, the social services manager hooked me up with another employee who was looking

to share a house. The opening of these doors had important implications for my research, yet each encounter was serendipitous.

Just as research takes turns and tacks that are not premeditated, so fieldwork has intentional and unintentional impacts on the people and places that constitute the



FIG. 1—Jennifer and Fantu in Vancouver. (Photograph by N. Schuurman, November 2000)

subjects of study. As academic researchers, we are always in the field, never mere spectators or scribes of others' practices.

#### ALWAYS IN THE FIELD

A separation of home and field, I have argued so far, is untenable. Instead, as researchers who study the processes, patterns, and peopling of the world, we are al-



ways in the field. Furthermore, field-workers are involved in the politics of any place we study. I recall arriving home to my apartment in Vancouver one day, recently returned from seven months of fieldwork in Kenya. The telephone rang, and I picked it up, only to recognize the voice of one of the refugees I had come to know in Dadaab: "I am calling from Vancouver," Fantu said, "I moved here from Ottawa because you are the only Canadian I know." I was decidedly shocked, and I took his locational decision and phone call as an indication of his expectation that I could help. Could I? He told me he needed a job and that I was his only friend in what amounted, for him, to a new social, cultural, and political environment (Figure 1). This was a dimension of fieldwork I was unprepared for, yet I became acutely aware that I had fallen prey to an illusion that fieldwork was something geographically and temporally bound, something periodic and over there.

Fieldwork affects the people we come to know. I befriended a number of refugees in camps in northeastern Kenya, near the border with Somalia. Hearing their stories over the months, I became involved—along with others in the camps—in promoting their visibility to immigration authorities at the Australian and Canadian High Commissions. My letters and meetings highlighted the situation of this particular group of Ethiopian refugees, most of whom had languished in Kenyan camps for five years or more. I requested that the group should receive no special treatment but that an immigration officer of these high commissions should at least explain what, if any, possibilities existed for resettlement to countries like Canada and Australia. Were there none, then the refugees needed to hear this and plan accordingly. If there were some, they needed to know their chances and how to approach the application process. Through interviews at the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi, I ascertained that by 1995 the United States had already ruled out any further selection of Ethiopians as refugees. By the end of 1996, Fantu and others from the Dadaab camps were in either Canada or Australia. Their new beginnings testified that a researcher can influence the field. Through the efforts of various people inside and outside the UNHCR, a few refugees in the Dadaab camps found more permanent residences. The field came home.

After working in the United States for several years, I have returned to Vancouver. Fantu and I have kept in touch. He recently acquired Canadian citizenship just as I gave up my green card. He still works at the health-food distribution company where he took a job five years ago, though he aspires to running his own business. We connect over coffee and talk about others with whom we are still in contact from our days "in the field."

#### NOTES

1. In U.N. parlance, Dadaab is rated as E on a scale from A to E, with A representing a post in locations such as Geneva, Washington, or Ottawa. Even Nairobi was an A duty station, until serious security issues and the murder of a U.N. representative forced it to be downgraded to a B.
2. I worked for CARE in a Kenyan refugee camp in 1992 and, based on this experience, was hired by the UNHCR in 1993 to work in Bardera, Somalia, where I was a field officer.
3. For UNHCR employees posted in Nairobi, places like Dadaab constituted the field. For UNHCR employees working at the agency's headquarters in Geneva, Nairobi was the field.

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