

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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