

PROTECTING PRIVACY IN FOREIGN FIELDS

GARTH ANDREW MYERS

The one by whom the object exists is thus a deject who places (himself), separates (himself), and therefore strays instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing. . . . Necessarily dichotomous, somewhat Manichean, he divides, excludes, and without, properly speaking, wishing to know his abjections is not at all unaware of them. Often, moreover, he includes himself among them, thus casting within himself the scalpel that carries out his separations.

—Julia Kristeva, 1982

*And you may find yourself in another part of the world
And you may ask yourself, well, how did I get here?*

—Talking Heads, “Once in a Lifetime,” 1980

Privacy is an ambivalent and multifaceted question when fieldwork is conducted in Africa by a non-African scholar. Assuming that the researcher makes a conscious and political choice to live among the people whose thoughts, lives, and cultural practices are being studied, the first great difficulty appears to be protecting private space and a sense of self. Shortly, though, additional questions arise about the privacy rights of others in our conduct of research and our writing about it. Each side of the privacy issue is complicated. In this essay I examine privacy questions that I experienced on various projects in Tanzania and Malawi from 1991 to 2000, most of them in the city of Zanzibar. I start, as does fieldwork, by examining myself.

A number of geographers have become captivated by the opportunities opened up to humanistic geographical inquiry by various modes of psychoanalysis (Pile 1993; Bondi 1999). I do not wish to sidestep these opportunities entirely, but I also do not want to make this essay entirely about what goes on in my head, as Julia Kristeva does in the lead epigraph, mainly because I hope I am a better storyteller than a psychoanalyst. Still, fieldwork for Western-trained academics is foremost a private, inner exploration. Kwame Anthony Appiah distinguished the general strategy of Western fiction writers from that of African writers, suggesting that westerners engage in a “search for the self,” whereas African writers embark on a “search for a culture” (1992, 74). His conception, generalized though it is, also works to differentiate the Western field-worker, as bourgeois intellectual individualist, from how he or she appears to the surrounding city-dwellers or villagers, as a new player in a social collective.

Selfishness is inherent in individuated Western fieldwork in non-Western settings, an arrogant assumption that somehow one person develops explanatory powers. One quickly learns that selfishness must give way to a sharing, an open-ended

✪ DR. MYERS is an associate professor of geography at the University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas 66045.