

RESEARCHER, INFORMANT, “ASSASSIN,” ME*

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Nothing in my academic training prepared me for the methodological challenges I faced while conducting fieldwork in a setting of war. No graduate seminar had schooled me in “methods in the field of battle”; no workshop offered “techniques for researchers, terrorists, and native Others.” In this essay I examine methodological challenges inherent in being assigned a criminalized identity and labeled a terrorist assassin.

Working from experiences in an environment of violence engendered by war, I argue for methodologies that recognize the researcher as an informant. Fieldwork can no longer be constrained to discovery and the study of an exotic Other. Trained as an anthropologist, I am acutely aware of that discipline’s historical and continued efforts to reconcile its colonizing past (Asad 1973; James 1973). Social science researchers are participants in every ethnographic moment that constitutes fieldwork, and no longer can anyone claim the status of objective observer. Our experiences, subject positions, and complicated identities are integral not only to research but also to the interpretive process of analysis and representation. In viewing the researcher as an informant, we make visible the motivations, experiences, and perceptions that inform ethnographic data. I am not suggesting that our voices as researchers be trusted above the words of those whom we interview in the field. I do, however, believe that revealing the pathways of our analyses as we represent others is an important step toward integrity in research. Critically examining our motivations and experiences in researching particular peoples and communities is part of respectful scholarship based on equity and integrity.

A Tamil woman, I was born in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, and raised in North Borneo and Minnesota. Identity is central to my research and writing on the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a social and political movement that works to advance the Tamil nationalist struggle in northern and eastern Sri Lanka. As an expatriate/transnational field-worker and academic, I became a subject of interest and suspicion. As a researcher, I look physically authentic, with dark skin, curly black hair, and wearing—by choice—the symbolic markers of a Hindu-Tamil woman: a *thilakam* or *pottu*¹ and a nose ornament that map Tamil identity onto my body. This authenticity is reduced if a suspicious interlocutor questions my objectivity as a native, my distance as an expatriate and immigrant to the United States, and my Otherness as a Tamil academic working from within the politicized spaces of nationalism and violence in Sri Lanka.

* At Syracuse University I studied with Naeem Inayatullah, a professor of political science who insisted that every student question her/his motivations for any argument presented in analysis and writing. I am indebted to him for this lesson, which I apply here to the process of ethnographic fieldwork and writing.

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