Post-field Positionings

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Fieldwork is frequently viewed as the sine qua non of the discipline of cultural anthropology, a rite of passage for its students who anticipate moving into their professional identities as full-fledged scholars after returning from the field. In broad strokes, the three stages of this rite are: 1) a willing separation from the familiar, consisting of a move out and away; 2) a liminal period in which the scholar approaches and explores, often as a neophyte, some previously unfamiliar cultural or sub-cultural phenomenon; and finally 3) a return, bearing marks euphemistically known as fieldnotes, that culminates in a “write up” process facilitating reaggregation and professionalization. This tripartite process has been theorized, interrogated, attacked, defended, and well documented. The cultural scholar’s relationship with his or her field – initially as chosen proving ground, and subsequently, if the famed “ethnographer’s magic” works, as domain of professional expertise – does not, however, end with this practised three-step. Not only does experience tend to exceed anything one might make of it, it also resists containment in pre-selected beginnings, middles and ends.

In the spirit of moving beyond such tidy analytic models, then, and into a discussion of the kinds of real-life interpersonal effects fieldwork actually generates in our lives, this August 2006 issue of the NFSC newsletter is dedicated to reflections on the active presence of “the field” in the ongoing lives of scholars engaged in cross-cultural study, whether in India or from an Indian starting point. No longer the sole purview of anthropologists, scholars from a wide range of humanities and social science disciplines now use the methods of intensive fieldwork, sharing a view of social and cultural life as a field of human affairs that deserves direct study. These include linguists, historians, psychologists, sociologists and folklorists as well as scholars of theater arts and gender studies.

What can the experiences of a group of scholars willing to reflect honestly on the “post-field” effects of extended periods of ethnographic fieldwork on their personal and professional lives teach us about the nature of intense cultural and cross-cultural encounters over time? In this post-field phase of our careers, have we found ways to address social inequalities revealed in our fieldwork? Do we maintain relationships with those who became intimates and collaborators in the field, and if so, how have these relationships transformed over time? Do we continue to speak, or write, or teach about people and places that at a certain period we knew so well and cared about so intensely?

The authors of the essays presented here each have their own way of approaching such questions of how the field remains active in their post-field lives. I have solicited reflections on the realities of how the give-and-take inaugurated in the field between ourselves and the subjects of our research lives on, beyond the canonical fieldwork period, to affect us post-field. These essays are first takes, really; there are many angles from which to approach this topic, one that seems to deepen at every glance and touch a different emotion at every juncture. None of us has gone as far as we might in tapping into the uncertainties of the post-field period: How do we ever repay people who have given us something as valuable as new ways to understand life? Can we maintain the open, questioning, vulnerable quality of fieldwork while also meeting the demands of expertise and authority that characterize the academic career? Who might we consult on these questions if they are rarely and publicly discussed? The post-field phase of our scholarship is generally longer than the fieldwork period itself. Yet to date, the post-field effects of fieldwork have garnered very little scholarly attention. The topic is difficult to write about; it demands deep questioning of one’s self and one’s commitments. (The generally anecdotal passages published in previous collections of reflective essays on anthropological fieldwork, while welcome, still treat periods of fieldwork itself as their primary objects of contemplation [Brettell 1993; Golde1970; Kulick & Wilson 1995; Lewin & Leap 1996]).

I asked contributors to make the sequelae of fieldwork in their lives the focus of their attention. Those who rose to the challenge
are a diverse group who from a range of disciplinary homes: Dr. Vijaya Nagarajan works in Religious and Environmental Studies; Dr. Phillip Zarrilli teaches and trains actors in Drama; Dr. Hanne de Bruin took her degree in South Asian Languages & Civilizations and now runs a school for theater artists in Tamil Nadu; Dr. Bernard Bate and Dr. Chandana Mathur trained and teach in Anthropology; and I am an anthropologist now teaching in Communication & Culture. We represent an equally wide range of personal identifications with India and Indian culture. The post-field relations we maintain to our prior field sites range from the close intimacy of marriage to the distance and alienation of communicative failure, and suggest an inspiring array of creative alternative outposts in between.

I see Bruin’s and Mathur’s essays, then, as defining the two extreme poles of closeness and distance, respectively, that anchor the continuum of post-field relations discussed by these authors. Each set of relations seems, as well, to crystallize around and develop from a primary, particular relation: husband/wife for Bruin; mother/daughter for Nagarajan; guru/sishya for Zarrilli; Tamil family/U.S. family for myself; his own and other scholars’ viewpoints for Bate; and the incomprehensible strangeness of “white working class men from the family/U.S. family for myself; his own and other scholars’ viewpoints for Bate; and the incomprehensible strangeness of “white working class men from the American heartland” for Mathur. Each of the resulting essays deserves a further word of introduction here.

For Bruin, her post-field life and the goals of her ongoing applied work in Tamil Nadu is inseparably entwined with that of her husband, the theater artist P. Rajagopal, who was her principal informant during her original fieldwork. Bruin has chosen to leave her natal home in Tamil Nadu is inseparably entwined with that of her husband, the theater artist P. Rajagopal, who was her principal informant during her original fieldwork. Bruin has chosen to leave her natal home in Tamil Nadu to live permanently in her fieldsite, applying her academic skills to advocate for the cultural and economic rights of professional, rural Kattaikkuttu performers, making their goals her own.

Nagarajan finds her fieldsite – the artistic practices of women who draw the kolam – itself drawing new lines of connection, growing plural, reduplicating and replicating to match her own sense of having gained a double home through a life lived back and forth between India and the U.S. As a journey of reinscriptive practices, Nagarajan’s post-field reflections circle back again and again to the artistry, voice and vision of her own mother, while as a mother herself she is simultaneously introducing her own daughters to this cultural field.

With an intensity that only the most devoted of students ever experience, it is Zarrilli’s love for his guru and guide, Gurukkal Govindankutty Nayar, that animates the rich life of theatrical, professional and pedagogical accomplishments he documents and discusses in his essay. Together he and his guru established the first “traditional” earth-floor kalari (place of training for Kerala’s martial art) located outside of Kerala—the Tyn-y-parc C.V.N. Kalari in Llanarth, Wales, a fully functioning counterpart to his own kalarippayattu training grounds at the CVN Kalari, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. Zarrilli writes of the “two-way traffic” between Kerala and himself wherever he is living/working that makes his post-field life one of “constant immersion in Kerala culture” even on the far west coast of Wales.

Equally ongoing and alive, my own post-field experiences center not on a single personage, but on a family. Ours has been a set of highly adaptive and malleable relations that is perhaps most interesting for the ways we have simultaneously held multiple murai (kin ties) – I have been many people and taken on many roles in my Tamil family – teaching me that it is possible to live-into-being familiarity. This is the first lesson the post-field years brought home to me: that living it makes it so. The second lesson has more to do with the possibilities new media has opened up for the continued growth of my Tamil consciousness, by which I mean both the thought processes and linguistic skills that buttress a growing sense of myself as a relational being, some of whose primary relations are now Tamil.

Bate offers us a wonderfully excruciating, honest essay in which he recounts what he calls “a story about one of the least felicitous papers I ever delivered.” What he makes of his brief humiliation before a mixed audience of Sri Lankan Tamil Canadians, college students, university professors and senior scholars – a community about whose opinions he cares deeply, and with whom he is engaged in ongoing dialogic-learning – is an example of the kind of attentive devotion to scholarly practices and processes that make our post-field lives lively; the learning he does here unravels some of his prior lessons, and reveals them as encumbrances. The field, he concludes, is fluid, and he must himself continually reassess his trained, ethnographic eye to allow it to better take in its movements.

Post-field, Mathur finds herself sitting uncomfortably with a sense that the promise of an empathetic model of ethnography has failed her, and perhaps us, in failing to provide a way to understand viewpoints with which we continue to deeply disagree, and thus from which we distance ourselves. A South Asian woman, she worked with American working class men who seem to have remained foreign to her throughout both her field and post-field reflections. Mathur’s essay reminds us that not every field experience ends happily, nor should we expect that all would: Some political realities in the world are true obstacles to interpersonal communication. While Mathur’s essay thus demarks the far end of the close-distant post-field relational continuum, it is clarifying to see how distance itself can serve as a necessary defense in these political times of true communicative trouble.
In all their range, then, the processes of post-field positioning to which these essays attest are clearly as dialogically engaged as the richest periods of our fieldwork. And they are ongoing. For not only does experience tend to exceed anything we might make of it, it also resists containment in pre-selected beginnings, middles and ends.

If indeed our interactions in the field were as intimate and interactive as we now realize they must be for any real transformations of knowledge-through-experience to occur, and again if these transformations continue to be the ground to which we return again and again in memory and meditation to fashion the magical stuff of our best works, then the field extends into the lives we continue to live as scholars post-field. Indeed, as these essays make clear, post-field relations and practices are a critical aspect of the full story of cross-cultural encounter and exchange. May this issue then serve to encourage further scholarly discussion, and ever more critical exploration and valuation of the post-field period of our cross-cultural relations.

References


Endnotes

1 “Fieldwork” here is conceived as a period of intensive, direct engagement with the people whose lives bear meaningfully on the particular arena of social and cultural life a scholar has chosen to study. In such usage the field is a highly malleable and conceptual entity, rather than a geologic or geographical one, created anew each time a scholar delineates its contours for the purposes of a given study.

2 These three stages derive from a general model for rites de passage developed by Arnold van Gennep, a Dutch ethnologist, at the turn of the twentieth century (Van Gennep, 1909). “Separation, liminality, reaggregation” are Van Gennep’s terms.

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