

Redefining the field: auto-ethnographic notes

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The geographers' field has in the past two decades been redefined both through a series of theoretical innovations and the encounter of a series of new situations *in* the field. The latter can still be today the bounded place of traditional ethnography but also a more complex multi-sited, virtual space of investigation peopled by non-human and human entities, and approached through poly-sensorial, mobile or emotional forms of analysis.

How do new theorizations in geography and the immersion in new field situations redefine the field and thus the categories and practice of fieldwork? This is the question addressed by the authors of the two pieces put in dialogue in this section.¹ The first text, by Augustin Berque, apparently deals with a traditional situation: a researcher approaching a society quite different from the one in which he has been socialized. Yet, his encounter with Japanese ways of thinking the society-nature relation led him to an epistemological conversion. Lin Weiqiang's and Brenda Yeoh's text regards transnational (im)mobilities of Singaporean migrants and thus phenomena that radically challenge canonical ways of defining the field and doing fieldwork in geography. They discuss the personal and methodological implications stemming from actually experiencing transnationality in the field.

In this brief introduction, I will first situate these two contributions in the discussion about the 'ontologies' of the field and the practice of fieldwork in geography and, second, comment on how each of these short and incisive contributions redefine the field within geographical research.

Problematizing the field: an old story ...

As Augustin Berque reminds us in his text, the development of spatial analysis between the 1950s and the 1970s led as a consequence to a retreat of geographers from the field. David Ley evokes, for instance, how awkward it had become in the early 1970s to do fieldwork, as he did in the inner city of Philadelphia.² At the time, he had to convince the faculty members in his department of the validity of 'going out there' for his PhD dissertation. Seen from our present standpoint, this episode corresponds to the early years of a return to the field that really came into its own in the 1990s.

Not only has fieldwork developed again in geography, but reflexive discussion about this research practice has become by now an established genre within geographic writing. This reflexivity has, since the 1990s, revolved around three major questions: the shape and spatiality of the field, the contingencies of doing fieldwork and the translation of field experience into words, images and texts.

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First, ethnographic fieldwork has not only become more common, it has also become much more multifarious. As a consequence both of an interest for new phenomena, such as transigrations, and of discussions about the limitations of traditional definitions of the field, the spatiality of the field has been subject to transformations. It has become in many cases a series of spatially disconnected sites, instead of a bounded singular one,³ defined as movement itself (of people, generally, but potentially also of goods, ideas and capital) in approaches related to studies of mobility,⁴ or mapped into transnational studies.⁵

Second, there is a continuous production of papers on the relations between the contingencies of fieldwork and the construction of geographical knowledge. Recent work has dealt in particular with the process and the importance of learning a vernacular language;⁶ with fieldwork as technologically mediated through the use of cell phones, internet access, etc., and therefore as a time during which the researcher is no longer cut-off from his usual everyday spaces;⁷ or where researchers have to frequently handle relations with development organizations and rural communities.⁸

Finally, discussions about issues of positionality and writing which started in the 1980s and early 1990s⁹ continue today, addressing fieldwork as a gendered genre¹⁰ (with for instance reevaluations of women's experience of fieldwork in physical geography¹¹), or questions related to the personality and emotions of the researcher.¹²

In sum, these debates have led to a redefinition of the field as 'a region which is always in the process of being constructed, and not in the eye of the beholder; and "field-work" as necessarily involving a variety of spatial practices – movement, performance, passages and encounters'.¹³

The pieces in this section address the two first questions as they look at how theory, on the one hand, and fieldwork on the other redefine what we conceive as the field. They do so by narrating experiences in the field. The aim of these texts is, however, not to provide further reflexive theorizations on fieldwork but rather to use autobiographical accounts as a means of documenting and understanding contemporary transformations of what is considered to be the field in our discipline.¹⁴

The geographical field: encounters, expansions and engagements

Redefinitions of the field occur through encounters with theory or field situations and consist both in the expansion of its shape and in the elaboration of new research stances or forms of engagement in the field. Berque's paper deals with his encounter with Japan in the late 1960s where he was confronted both with new forms of theory, especially Watsuji's non-Cartesian philosophy, and with apparent incongruities of his field: the cultivation of rice in the cold northern parts of Hokkaidō. Lin's and Yeoh's conception of the geographical field is shaped by encounters with theories on transnationalism and cosmopolitanism as well as with the everyday life situations of Singaporean migrants in the US.

These encounters lead to different forms of expansion of what we define as the field. Instead of being a place out there, the field, be it in Japan or elsewhere, became for Berque, after this foundational experience, the in-betweenness of society-nature relations: Watsuji's *fūdosei* that Berque translated into French as *médiance*. In order to encompass the long distance socio-spatial relations encountered in theories of transnationalism and Asian migrants' daily lives, Lin and Yeoh show the necessity to stretch the field of geographical investigation and to redefine it as a topological space made of circuits and 'constellations of connections'.

Finally, these encounters and redefinitions are related to different research stances. Berque proposes an unambiguous plea for hermeneutics or, in other words, for the possibility of understanding the Other through an 'emic' perspective. Geographical knowledge for Berque, though possibly

‘situated’, is not condemned to remain entrapped in the researcher’s original frame of mind. The price to pay however is, as Berque’s autobiographical account tells us, a long immersion in the field and often a series of rather shameful experiences.

Transnational migration studies as advocated by Lin and Yeoh entail a different form of engagement on the part of the researcher in the field. She/he is less confronted with the slow domestication of a collective Other than with developing strategies to make sense of the motivations, attachments and dilemmas of individual transmigrants. This does not mean that the challenges of hermeneutics disappear but that they are rescaled at the level of individual lifeworlds. What eventually moves Lin’s understanding of his field beyond beaten tracks is the creation of an intimacy with his informants and his personal experience of transnational situations.

The two following texts can also be read as a dialogue between different generations of geographers. The first is centered on the field experiences of a French geographer in Japan in the early 1970s. The second on those of a Singaporean graduate student in the US in 2007–2008. Their juxtaposition tells us of course much about the continuous expansions of geographers’ fields: one may wonder if the field – etymologically a flat expanse of ground, as Berque reminds us – still is an adequate term to describe the whereabouts of geographical research and if geographers in their 60’s and 20’s still practice the same discipline. However, if the definition and practice of the field have spectacularly changed, these two texts share the same horizon - the understanding of our spatial condition - and a common research ethics – a careful attention to the ‘voices’ of the field.

Notes

- 1 These papers are the result of a doctoral conference organized in Switzerland in summer 2008 entitled ‘Questioning the field’. Many thanks to the large group of colleagues and doctoral students with whom this conference was organized.
- 2 Oral communication, from ages ago...
- 3 See S. Freidberg, ‘On the Trail of the Global Green Bean: Methodological Considerations in Multi-Site Ethnography’, *Global Networks*, 4, 2001, pp. 353–68; ‘Being There...There...and There!’, *Ethnography*, 4, 2003, pp. 201–16.
- 4 L. Watts and J. Urry, ‘Moving Methods, Travelling Times’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 26, 2008, pp. 860–74; M. Buscher, J. Urry and K. Witchger (eds) *Mobile Methods* (London: Routledge, 2010).
- 5 See Lin and Yeoh hereafter.
- 6 E. Watson, ‘“What a Dolt One Is”: Language Learning and Fieldwork in Geography’, *Area*, 36, 2004, pp. 59–68.
- 7 A. Fraser, ‘Coded Spatialities of Fieldwork’, *Area*, 39, 2007, pp. 242–5.
- 8 W. Moseley, ‘Collaborating in the Field, Working for Change: Reflecting on Partnerships between Academics, Development Organizations and Rural Communities in Africa’, *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 28, 2007, pp. 334–47.
- 9 Inspired by postcolonial and feminist studies, Cindi Katz for instance called for an ‘expanded field’ including the practice and politics of our doing fieldwork. See Cindi Katz, ‘All the World is Staged: Intellectuals and the Projects of Ethnography’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 10, 1992, pp. 495–510.
- 10 J. Sharp, ‘Geography and Gender: Feminist Methodologies in Collaboration and in the Field’, *Progress in Human Geography*, 29, 2005, pp. 304–9.
- 11 L. Bracken and E. Mawdsley, ‘“Muddy Glee”: Rounding Out the Picture of Women and Physical Geography Fieldwork’, *Area*, 36, 2004, pp. 280–6.

- 12 See E. Chacko, 'Positionality and Praxis; Fieldwork Experiences In Rural India', *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 25, 2004, pp. 51–63; S. Moser, 'Personality: A New Positionality?', *Area*, 40, 2008, pp. 383–92.
- 13 F. Driver, 'Editorial: Field-Work in Geography', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 25, 2000, p. 267. For work on the cultures of field knowledge see the special issue of *cultural geographies* on 'field cultures', 10(3), 2003.
- 14 For a more general use of autobiographies as 'fruitful ways to access the process of building a discipline', see P. Moss, *Placing Autobiography in Geography* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001), p. 1.

Biographical note

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