

BETWEEN PURITY AND DANGER:

FIELDWORK APPROACHES TO MOVEMENT, PROTECTION AND LEGITIMACY  
FOR A FEMALE ETHNOGRAPHER IN THE SAHARA DESERT

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‘What truly distinguishes anthropology [...] is that it is not a study *of* at all, but a study *with*. Anthropologists work and study *with* people.’ (Ingold 2011: 238)

**Introduction**

Although Mary Douglas (2002 [1966]) led the anthropological study of ‘purity and danger’ to explore the meaning of dirt in different contexts, it is a revealing lens to apply to another taboo – the erotic subjectivity of researchers (Kulick and Willson 1995). Of relevance here is Douglas’ starting point: what is regarded as dirt in a given society is ‘matter out of place’. Most human beings have an interest in sex, and anthropology has long studied sex in both distant and home field sites.<sup>1</sup> Yet the sexual life of researchers during fieldwork remains a consummate example of ‘matter out of place’, a matter complicated by idiosyncratic sexual sensibilities. I reflect upon this ambiguity as sexual absence – or rather, as *asexual* presence – compelled by the authoritative imperative for scientific ‘purity’ (integrity). In this scenario, sexual relations between researcher and researched are seen as dangerous, polluting anthropological data as ‘dirt’.

This article explores a debate in a small body of scholarship concerning sex[ual danger] in the field. In it I argue that this ‘matter out of place’, instead of jeopardising the integrity of the research, has the potential to offer rich ethnographic insight, hence it should be written up rather than written out. I suggest that, to understand what types of sex[ual danger] the researcher may encounter in the field, an anthropological ‘sex education’ prior to fieldwork would be helpful to comprehend both one’s own and others’ cultural perceptions and practices of sex. This raises important questions: ‘whose’ sex and ‘which’ sex (whose danger and which dangers) are being discussed, prepared for, observed and mitigated during fieldwork? Next, I discuss a body of anthropological scholarship that contests the purity of asexual scientific authority by exploring the rich ethnographic data that sexual accounts of life during fieldwork can yield. Finally, I draw on ethnographic fieldwork to demonstrate

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<sup>1</sup> See Rival 2007.

how I negotiated ‘matter out of place’ in both my fieldwork and the resulting written research, and how I minimised the sexual danger I encountered during fieldwork by paying attention to customary (local) practices regarding movement, protection and legitimacy.<sup>2</sup>

### **SEX BEFORE FIELDWORK**

One of the most taboo and silent matters in anthropology (and certainly in all other academic disciplines) is ‘sex in the field’, a subject rarely explored in ethics and methods training, or discussed in published research. Paradoxically for a discipline that has studied sex in its *locus classicus* of kinship, to my knowledge no anthropological society or institute has yet incorporated guiding principles about sex in the field. Whilst the American Anthropological Association has produced a Briefing Paper (dated November 2000) on sexual relations, this appears to remain marked ‘for consideration’ and has not yet been integrated into the formal Code of Ethics.<sup>3</sup>

Correspondingly there is little ‘sex education’, other than introductory coursework on kinship, for postgraduates prior to their first doctoral rite of fieldwork passage. Early anthropology tended not to focus on sex *per se*, but prudishly circumnavigated it from the taken-for-granted benchmark of European normative heterosexuality (Maksimowski 2012).<sup>4</sup> The different concepts and practices of ‘primitive’ sex (Mead 1935) and the ‘sexual life of savages’ (Malinowski 1929) were analysed through the theoretical lenses of kinship, such as genealogy, marriage, inheritance and the incest taboo, spawning cultural evolutionist models for privileged family forms (Lyons and Lyons 2011).

The advent of the second (1960s) and third (1990s) waves of feminism, women’s studies, and feminist and gender anthropology began to engage not just in further detailed ethnographic studies of the diversity of human sexual behaviour, but also in its more intimate experiences, feelings and meanings. Most especially, it began critically to dissect the category of ‘normative’ sex and question what it actually constitutes: ‘whose’ sex and ‘which’ sex? Analytically understanding what ‘sex’ is seems to me to be a prerequisite to determining ‘whose’ and ‘which’ danger one might encounter in the field site. For this there

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<sup>3</sup> *Briefing Paper for Consideration of the Ethical Implications of Sexual Relationships between Anthropologists and Members of a Study Population*, AAA Committee on Ethics, November 2000.

<sup>4</sup> See also Foucault’s (1980 [1976]) classic treatise on the history of sexuality.

is no better source for pre-fieldwork sex education than feminist bodies of scholarship on sex and gender.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, discussion about sexual dangers in fieldwork should not just be confined to a perceived unilinear threat of the ‘other’ to us: it should also consider the dangers we might pose and expose our interlocutors to. There are many types of ‘others’ to encounter in the field, including fellow research peers. Interactions with the latter’s (sexual) behaviour and its legacies can have political repercussions, sometimes resulting in reciprocal sexual danger for the next researcher to arrive, a ‘matter out of place’ I encountered during fieldwork and discuss below.

Who has sex with whom can have research implications, and not just in ethnographic data content.<sup>6</sup> The term and practice of ‘entering a fieldsite’ is awkwardly related to historical ‘colonial penetration’ and the emergence of academic disciplines on the coat tails of power.<sup>7</sup> Interlocutors may have diverse understandings and memories of it, and the subject matter still attracts new scholarly studies.<sup>8</sup> How researchers enter, stay and leave requires methodological consideration, related to an interrogation of what the researcher’s ‘authoritative’ intentions are and to a trained grounding in what ‘sex’ actually is. Anthropologists tread delicate lines of in-betweens, such as insider/outsider, participant/observer, *being* social scientist and *going* native. These dichotomies and their tensions reside in the now well-worn us/them dialectic of human relationships.<sup>9</sup> We are also a ‘them’ to their ‘us’ and an awkward fact remains that ‘they’ rarely get the chance to publish how ‘we’ behaved in the field site. As Scheper-Hughes reflects: ‘If we cannot begin to think about social institutions and practices in moral or ethical terms, then anthropology strikes me as quite weak and useless’ (1995: 410).

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<sup>5</sup> A good summary can be found in Carsten 2014. A brief sample of leading feminists interrogating ‘sex’ include: Butler (1990); Moore (1998); Caplan (1987); Ortner and Whitehead (1981); Cameron (2007); Sanday (1981); Ardener (1978). See also the growing scholarship on masculinities.

<sup>6</sup> For new directions in the anthropological study of sex, including transactional sex, female erotic power and postcolonial views on sexuality, see: Arnfred (2007); Cole (2004); Groes-Green (2009); Hunter (2002).

<sup>7</sup> I draw the term ‘colonial penetration’ with its sexual metaphor from historical and postcolonial studies about imperial expansion, for example Said’s classic treatise on orientalism (Said 1978).

<sup>8</sup> For example, see Stoler (2002) and McClintock (1995) on gender, sexuality, race and colonialism. Scholars of North Africa such as Fanon (1965 [1959]) interpret the history of the French colonial ‘unveiling’ of Algerian women as erotically politicised rape enacted in order to emasculate Algerian resistance.

<sup>9</sup> Although not about sex, Lecocq’s (2002) paper offers an honest discussion about another hidden realities and dangers of fieldwork – how doing research can be difficult, miserable and lonely, creating negative emotions and how these field realities are written out of the final ‘authoritative’ text. Another scholar to challenge what is ‘written out’ is Fine (1993).

### **SEXUAL CREDIBILITY VERSUS ASEXUAL ‘SCIENTIFIC AUTHORITY’**

The idea for this JASO special issue on sexuality and danger is to add our voices to the call for honest analytical treatment of sex and danger in the field, the formulation of better methodological training and clearer ethical codes of conduct for research fieldwork. The self-reflective nature of anthropology’s ability to tackle awkward, uncomfortable topics makes it well positioned to contribute to discussions about the safety of both researcher and researched, and the integrity of ethnographic output.<sup>10</sup> Research integrity is one of the most common concerns voiced by those few authors who break the taboo on sex (and other field site complexities). Authoritative credibility (scientific ‘purity’) is ultimately at stake, but until the taboo is resolved, ‘an authoritatively written book (are there any other??) makes sure to conceal these dilemmas. Most do so successfully [sic]’ (Lecocq 2002: 281).

In my own exploration of the topic during preparation for doctoral fieldwork, I found a small body of scholarship helpful to begin thinking about the complexities of sex(uality) in the field. These texts complement the idea of pre-fieldwork sex education drawn from feminist scholarship on sex and gender. I now share this scholarship before turning to discuss my own fieldwork experiences in the next section.

A ground-breaking book about sexual relations between researchers and researched is Kulick and Willson’s (1995) *Taboo: sex, identity, and erotic subjectivity in anthropological fieldwork*. This edited volume challenges our asexual and genderless presence (sexual absence) in the research we produce. The contributors offer ethnographic insights into the various gendered ways in which interlocutors perceived them in the field site, and the sexual dilemmas they had to negotiate ‘live’ during fieldwork.

Similarly, Markowitz and Ashkenazi’s (1999) *Sex, sexuality and the anthropologist* charts the historical creation of the passive, asexual anthropologist (alongside the colonial missionary) and issues a strong call for a grounded theory of sex[uality] in the field. Little known outside North American anthropology is the confessional chapter by Karla Poewe, who had previously written under the pseudonym of Manda Cesara in 1982 about her marrying a key interlocutor in order to obtain ethnographic data.

More recently, Cupples (2002) summarises debates between geography and anthropology by exploring the idea of ‘falling in love with’ a field site, the ‘landscape of sexual desire’ that seduces the researcher. Groes-Green (2012) offers one of the most recent accounts of a male researcher encountering local expectations of having sex in an HIV-

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<sup>10</sup> See Gidley’s (2009) reflection on the colonial awkwardness of anthropology.

endemic community. Like Cupples, he illuminates the complex position of the ‘seduced seducer’, which raises important research questions. How to experience a field site that is sexually dynamic, dangerous, or active in different ways to our own cultural notions of sex and sexuality, in which we do not want to participate? How do we write up or omit that sex?

As precursors to these ground-breaking studies of sexual subjectivity, two edited volumes represent preliminary introductory texts. Whitehead and Conaway’s (1986) *Self, sex and gender in cross-cultural fieldwork* offer insights into gendered experiences in fieldwork, but without the synthesis of sexual self-reflexivity and feminist epistemology. Its discussion of female researchers’ enforced prudishness and male researchers’ sexual encounters follows the gendered restrictions in conventional fieldwork stories. It offers insights into Euro-American researchers resorting to sexual conservatism in order to negotiate stereotypes of sexual liberalism, but highlights how prudishness can be overcome in the example of two contributors who experienced increased rapport with female interlocutors following admission of sexual knowledge. Likewise, Hastings and Magowan’s (2010) *The anthropology of sex* takes a thematic approach to the experiences, feelings and meanings of sex across and within cultures, synthesising anthropology’s study of sex buried in a century of ethnographic studies.

This small collection, containing some of the most compelling ethnographic analyses of sex in the field, test peer silence and criticism by laying authoritative ethnographic accounts of sexual positionality and encounters on the table. They also demonstrate how methodological detail (‘honesty’?) offers as much rich ethnographic integrity as a conventional ethnography that writes it out. These texts were crucial in providing me with a feminist/anthropological sex education *before* going into the field. Furthermore, they suggest an interesting approach: methodological discussion as a way to present sexual positionality in the field site and draw out a very different richness of data *after* fieldwork. This approach might be a way to resolve the danger (‘deceit’?) involved in being expected to present authoritatively *asexual* research purity, and instead achieve sexual research purity without endangering authoritative credibility.

#### **NAVIGATING PURITY AND DANGER IN THE FIELD**

In this section I share an ethnographic sample of fieldwork experiences from 2007 to 2014 among Sahrāwī nomads and refugees dispersed across the western Sahara Desert and North Africa. The Sahrāwī are a conservative Muslim society in which heterosexual marriage and reproduction are the customary norm. As a ‘normative’ heterosexual female, I fitted quite

plainly into the role of a good, modest, marriageable woman from a conservative family. In this role, I encountered minimal direct sexual danger in the field. Nevertheless, there were good reasons to be prepared for the field context – being in a sentient war zone, a male-dominant and politically turbulent region, did not preclude me from encountering various types of danger. As a scholar, I had set about reading feminist and gender anthropology prior to fieldwork in an endeavour to understand cultural distinctions of patriarchy and violence in general. As a woman, this scholarship inadvertently served to prepare me for the *gendered* and multi-directional distinctions of ‘danger’.

I attribute this minimal experience of sexual danger to the range of pre-fieldwork readings outlined above, but most especially to learning ‘live’ during fieldwork about customary practices of mitigating danger. These are summarised using three terms that have local and interwoven cultural meaning: movement, protection and legitimacy.

### *Movement*

To clarify, I encountered little direct sexual danger in the ‘home’ location of my fieldwork, that is, the desert heartland deep in the ‘vast’ and ‘lawless’ desert through which the nomads move. If any particular site gave me most concern, it was not in the desert *per se* but other spaces of movement in which one might expect some lawfulness: urbanised areas such as airports and cities in the nation states surrounding the Sahara, where I encountered male state security forces, theft, being followed and watched with intent, sexual harassment in tightly packed areas such as in buses and queues, and either oblique or pressured requests for sex or marriage from ‘strangers’. Key to this is positionality – or orientation – meaning analytical awareness of how researcher and researched perceive each other, but likewise how the various ‘others’ across the research horizon perceive each other. The desert can be a dangerous place when it is an ‘outside/periphery’; my safety depended upon whose centre/periphery I was moving through and residing in.

I have been studying *with* the Sahrāwī nomads for seven years now, and during these long periods of fieldwork, Ingold’s methodological point quoted at the beginning came to the fore in several ways. Whether one is familiar with a field site or not prior to the start of research, only so much careful thought and planning can be done beforehand.<sup>11</sup> Entering and leaving the field site; ‘surviving’ alone in a place of ‘strangers’; making (and breaking/losing) friendships; the human need for succour and companionship; deciding whether and how to

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<sup>11</sup> Such as my pre-fieldwork studies of feminist scholarship about sex and gender.

maintain or break post-research contact off entirely with the field – these are some of the many issues that may need to be negotiated live in the field site.

At a ‘higher’ level, the Sahara desert is shaped by what I can only summarise here as regional military securitisation. This includes war, ‘terrorism’ in all its analytically questionable forms, regional state-complicit il/licit flows and the Arab Spring uprisings. The Sahara Desert has long attracted the romantic notions of foreigners, but also of assumed dangers and their consequential negative connotations – of ecological severity in a vast, uninhabited and uninhabitable desert, political insecurity and the lawlessness of war, landmines and hostage taking, irregular migration and refugee crises. Not one of these imageries should escape the quotation marks of stringent analytical interrogation in determining their reality, but in the Sahara their multifaceted palpability creates restrictions of movement for visiting foreigners through and between the open desert, conventional urban settings or refugee camps. It is for the safety of these visiting foreigners that Sahrāwī nomads/refugees carry the burden of accountability.

At an ‘on-the-ground’ level, the Sahara desert is shaped very much by notions of correct forms of customary circulation (cultural movement and behaviour). Nomads rarely live or travel very far alone for reasons such as political security, gendered divisions of labour for group survival or religio-symbolic movement for the social cohesion of a widely dispersed population. It is only with this degree of customary movement – in the diachrony of anthropological immersion – that a researcher can also begin to acquire corresponding degrees of legitimacy and protection.

To move through the field site, I could have done what a few researchers and many humanitarian visitors do: short-term, multi-sited, time-pressured formal interviews and so forth. Instead my approach to the field carried a primary methodological rule: to avoid ‘probing’ questions, digital recorders and formal structured interviews. This rule specifically stemmed from my disquiet about the humanitarian phenomenon and to avoid those few past researchers’ choice of entry that resulted in curtailed movement or being told to leave.<sup>12</sup> Sahrāwī nomads/refugees have long been questioned, filmed and photographed by foreign visitors, and are obliged to respond in acquiescence. The result of this external hypercritical scrutiny has been circumspection and stock responses to protect privacy – which are ironically and complexly expected of them by the very act of putting digital recorders under

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<sup>12</sup> In response to one of this edition’s topics: we all make mistakes, anthropologists learn from *faux pas*. What I mean here is how interlocutors (and their society as a whole) may be affected or impacted by prior visitors’ behaviour. There is no such thing as a ‘pristine’ field site.

their noses – to protect themselves against the never-quite-certain outcome of a foreigner’s intentions.<sup>13</sup>

Thus I did not arrive with humanitarian aspirations, or follow the chosen path of those few researchers who could only rely on formal interviews or study from multi-sited ‘outsides-looking-in’, or be methodologically restricted to questioning politically inexperienced young people as representative of a ‘whole’ society. These methods would have elicited further frustration related to different customary notions of time, conversation, hospitality, morality, and those past experiences with foreigners.

Instead, in apposite anthropological practice, my research intention was to feel and live ‘life as lived’ (Abu-Lughod 2008 [1993]: xi). I followed the field site, letting it take me where it wanted to go, giving ‘space’ to the nomads and refugees to tell me what they wanted to share with me in their own time.<sup>14</sup> Over a long research time-frame, and with personal principles of research diachrony and integrity, I earned legitimacy through lineage association with a maximal socio-linguistic group, and then through deeper (or ‘on-the-ground’) association with specific families with whom I could begin to move, through ever-increasing circles of both matri- and patrikin. The idea I am trying to convey here is conceptually moving *with* people, and not just through an abstract human geography that is formally interrogated.

### *Protection*

The customary importance of family meant I experienced fictive and milk kinship, took on their duties, and began to sit around less like a visitor, instead becoming drawn into private family matters like a daughter, learning at the same time how to be a cousin, niece and granddaughter (Abu-Lughod 1998). Crucially, as a female, this removed sexual interest among a wide circle of men. And, increased by additional layers of milk-kin and necessarily close unrelated men, this then enabled the provision of an even more important (and customary) wider circle of menfolk’s security against ‘absolute strangers’ (men’s explicit ‘others’).<sup>15</sup>

The result was not just immersed participation in the daily life of one large extended family, but protection through them extending across a large desert territory. I began to experience the rhythm of nomadic movement, the intimacies of private family life, and the

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<sup>13</sup> See critical refugee theory and the anthropology of development in works such as Horst (2006), Fairhead and Leach (1996), and Kappler (2013).

<sup>14</sup> See Maurice Bloch 2001, Chapter 6, ‘What goes without saying’.

<sup>15</sup> Bourdieu’s ‘practical kin’ (1977: 37-8) and Boissevain’s ‘friends of friends’ (1974).



everydayness of sex and sexuality. After the digital recorders have gone, government officials become unassuming affectionate grand/parents, voting registration cards are accidentally drawn on by children, love songs and poems replace political ones, and the social life of aid rations is transformed into a wiser economic logic than their commercialised foreign origin. Over time one may find oneself being the unobserved observing the observers: not just a simple ‘insider-looking out’ but a curious in-between as a foreign researcher having ‘gone native’ enough not to be discerned by fellow foreigners.

The meanings and sources of protection can be confusing, as in this example. Local taxis across the Sahara are usually of the ‘service taxi’ type, which seat up to twelve people and drop them off at their various desired locations. On one such journey, a young man began to display cloying sexual behaviour towards me. As this behaviour worsened, I eventually turned to the women passengers to ask for help, assuming I could appeal to them. Not only was I surprised at the sudden cacophony of the women’s confrontation of the young man, but on hearing me, the other men in the taxi immediately took suitable action (throwing the young man out of the taxi), but were quite cross that I had not appealed to them. They had remained silent, unsure of which side of the perceived cultural sexual frontier I stood – stereotyped Western promiscuity or ‘good’ girl. I use this event to convey the danger of [mis]reading danger, and not being familiar with customary resolutions and uncertainties about ‘foreignness’.

Not fully appreciating the subtle values of this event, I related the story to a host family. In what I thought was a separate experience, I then began to worry that a milk-brother was becoming enamoured of me due to his persistently accompanying me outside the familial tents. When I anxiously enquired among womenfolk, again I found that I had misread sexual risk and vulnerability. Reacting to the taxi incident, he had simply been taking on his milk-kin duty to protect me by over-displaying familial proximity with an increase of cultural ‘in-group’ signals to ensure strangers (explicit ‘others’ and non-kin) got the message. I could have damaged my presence and reputation with misunderstood accusations, breaching [host]-familial incest taboos or sliding off the customary register as a foreign ‘seduced seducer’ (Groes-Green 2012).

Protection in terms of sexual safety required understanding cultural practices and learning about customary expressions of sexuality. For instance, I never saw host parents expressing or physically displaying romantic love in front of even their intimate kin, not even sitting closely or holding hands. Men and women do not touch when they are of sexual or marriageable age; sexual ‘danger’ is heightened for the other person as much as for oneself,

and sexual distance is maintained even among aunts, uncles and cousins. Platonic love, on the other hand, can be fully displayed between children, siblings and the very elderly. These rules extend along complex gradients of who is 'safe' with whom, weighed against numerous variables. Romantic love between young adults is sentimentally expressed with respectful *distance* even if they are holding hands or formally engaged.

Sexual 'danger' can also have other characteristics of peril. A couple of times I received enquiries about my availability for marriage, which were always directed via a host mother in customary fashion. She conveyed the opinion that she did not consider the enquirer to have very good economic prospects and would be vexed about how to explain such a marriage to my own mother. Despite customary ideals of attaining a love marriage, often expressed in very romantic songs and poems, such a match still needs to be economically practical and protective.

### *Legitimacy*

Despite social conventions of protective sexual 'distance', sexuality can also be displayed for reasons of legitimacy. As one illustration of this, in the intimately private and female-only gathering around a bride in the hours between the public tent ritual and evening celebrations, when she was partially unveiled to change into fresh clothing and redress her hair, a male cousin of the bride effusively entered, closely embraced and held his hand on her bare shoulder.<sup>16</sup> This behaviour, which in a different context would be understood as sexual proximity, was a legitimisation of her sexuality and new biological life stage. A similar suspension of 'rules' occurred when a male friend proudly showed me a small portrait photo he kept in his wallet of a similarly 'undressed' bride, one of his closest school, neighbourhood and family (but unrelated) friends. She had her portrait photo taken to give copies to her closest female and male friends, aunts, uncles and their wives. Her new husband likewise had his photograph taken and circulated, but fully veiled in male nomadic custom to display *his* new biological life stage.

Women in a field site may well be intermediary gatekeepers. This latter point was especially relevant for me: as a female ethnographer becoming rooted in private family life, I did not need to negotiate through official males or live in the public infrastructural space of refugee camps as most short-term visitors do. This did not result in disengagement from the

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<sup>16</sup> Across the Sahara, women wear a type of 'veil' that is more like a full-body scarf wrapped loosely around body and head. Important celebrations, especially a wedding, attract the use of a *nilé* fabric, a sheer muslin dyed in indigo, considered to give women (and men) the utmost beauty.

political context, for it is at home that political sentiments, economic histories and ‘matters out of place’ are intimately discussed by families (a place unlikely to contain foreigners with interview questions and digital recorders). As men are often away from home for long periods, women not only accumulate considerable information for men, but their opinions and sentiments can hold considerable sway in determining who and what is legitimate.

There is another aspect of legitimacy that relates to the topic of sexual danger during fieldwork, but which turns the unilinear gaze from the researched to the researcher. I encountered this more often, and it not only caused general and political difficulties (‘pollution’) to move through a community during research, but involved the possibility of reciprocal sexual danger to myself as the next researcher/foreign visitor to come along.

First, interlocutors face their own perceived sexual dangers in their encounters with visitors. A host uncle asked me to read aloud a short poem he had painstakingly crafted on his mobile phone to text to his bride-to-be. To a full room of some of his intimate female kin, nieces and nephews, I struggled to read his shorthand texting script and innocently misread one word of incredibly rude sexual connotation. So much so, that this uncle still finds it embarrassing to speak to me in the four years since, and he is never present on my social visits to his wife. A few days later, after an appropriate period of my earnest contrition had passed (and the uncle had left to return to his home), the host womenfolk broke my mortification with sympathetic jokes that I should avoid men’s text messages in future. Grandmother never fails to quietly ‘Tsk’ if someone passes their phone to me, as a reminder of such a terrible customary breach and culturally inappropriate sexual error.

Far more serious in my fieldwork experience has been the encounter with what some in the study population, already under hypercritical scrutiny as refugees, perceive as another form of colonial penetration – the sexual/erotic subjectivity of visitors with some developing romantic expectations. Unlike some other disciplines’ methods, I did not develop research questions that needed to stake an authoritative claim on ‘formal’, ‘structured’ interviews, conducting surveys or using a digital recorder. My approach (because of epistemological caution about ‘entry/penetration’) sought to be perceptive to things that are customarily ‘out of place’ in the field site. What I had not foreseen prior to fieldwork was how some visitors’ sexual comportment, behaviour and relationships had ‘burned’ customary propriety.

Such improprieties left varying types and degrees of feelings such as anger, embarrassment and defilement in their wake. Foreshadowing my arrival, and coming to light deep into fieldwork, a few of these past incidents exposed me to their residual wakes. Paradoxically, the more common occurrence is of female visitors developing a romantic

interest in Saharan men. This is due to the politicised/militarised nature of the region and the greater daily contact with men in their official capacities. Encountering these residues meant I encountered a few men who had come to assume that future Western females would subscribe to the same Western sexual interests (liberties?) as others had. But most men simply chose to avoid female visitors altogether (or kept an austere guarded distance) – an outcome that, for me as a researcher, meant analytical access to those parts of male society was protectively slammed shut. When academic researchers share a field site, ‘love’ with interlocutors may be fine when it works out well, but it can be problematic when it does not, creating difficulties for a wider circle of people than the two individuals concerned.

Consequently, I chose not to engage in relationships other than platonic ones. While some say that one cannot control the destiny of attraction, I chose to be a ‘dutiful daughter’ in all respects and to steer clear of moral and ethical complications. For me, to do otherwise carried too much research risk. Consider the very subtle moment when, in a public (official) dining hall specifically reserved for foreigners, a lead nurse of a small Spanish medical NGO removed her short-sleeved top in front of the few Sahrāwī staff (male) so as to sit with her upper torso naked except for the modesty of a bra. My field notebook records this several hours later from the perspective of a displeased conversation between the male staff, who, nonetheless, had not reacted visibly to her. The Sahrāwī are not a society that takes the breast lightly, its important cultural significance being reflected in the dual practice of blood and milk kinship. In contradistinction to the ethnographic insight above on the ‘undressed’ sexual matter *in* place of brides, the foreign nurse’s breasts became sexually deviant matter out of sexual place, on display for no purposeful (biological or breastfeeding) reason.

In fact, I *had* to be a dutiful daughter in order to be a ‘good’ researcher and do ‘good’ research inside the boundaries of customary sensibility. Not being one would have meant working outside those boundaries; but being one also gradually enabled some of those shut-off parts of male society to open up. In locating the customarily appropriate place of sexual matter, new insightful data emerged when my unmarried but ‘dutiful’ position illuminated women’s intimate conversations and strategies about sexual and reproductive life and fitted well with the customarily selective marriage choices of many Saharan women.<sup>17</sup>

As a few previous researchers have learnt, interlocutors are not stupid: they can sense alternative agendas. ‘Getting along’ with people is, in any society including our home ones,

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<sup>17</sup> I do not intend a generalisation here on Saharan marriage – much depends upon personalities, individual and group aspirations, expectations and pressures. But women are often very selective and strategic about their choice of husband.

where we find succour and protection (Goldstein 2014: 8). This is why I approached my research from the perspective of conscience and integrity, with the minimum risk to both myself and my research.

## CONCLUSION

If there is one lesson I learnt during fieldwork, it is one of conscience. Can I maintain a good, moral conscience (and research integrity) for what I have done, said and written about and among my interlocutors?<sup>18</sup>

I set out to achieve what a few researchers had not: long-term access and less curtailed movement across society and the region. This required the careful negotiation of political and economic sensitivities and the endeavour to build trust over a long timeframe. I found degrees of trust could only be achieved if one's intentions were not perceived as dangerous or harmful to that society – Douglas' 'matter out of place' – and that trust enabled the move from 'being in the field' to acquiring enough longevity to 'live the field'.

I did, however, omit the sexual life of fellow foreign visitors. This body of ethnographic observation may, one day, not be too dangerous to write up, thus offering greater contextual insight into Saharan society. In the meantime, I follow convention. My original ethnographic study in the Sahara Desert had not intended to research kinship, sex and marriage. I initially set out to study a fraught political landscape and had assumed that desert society would be stereotypically 'patriarchal'. It was my pre-fieldwork reading of feminist literature concerning what sex might actually be, together with the few publications on 'the sexual life of anthropologists' (Kulick and Willson 1995), which prepared me to observe and experience a very intimate and sexual world in the Sahara. Other researchers will explore the Sahara's sexuality in different ways, and it is hopefully by addressing these themes that we can continue to resolve the historic tensions of 'colonial penetration' and a/sexual scientific credibility. Fears and dangers about the taboo of sex might be diminished with methodological and ethical training, and the sexual life of anthropologists could offer an otherwise written-out source of rich ethnographic insights.

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<sup>18</sup> See Howell (1997).

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