DANGEROUS LIAISONS: RISK, POSITIONALITY AND POWER
IN WOMEN'S ANTHROPOLOGICAL FIELDWORK

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Introduction

That social realities are constructed through, and mediated by, interpersonal relationships is a truism for most anthropologists. Yet when it comes to assessing the realities of risk and danger in our own fieldwork, we are less adept at applying this basic premise to the world we inhabit. In the preparation of new fieldworkers, most anthropology schools treat fieldwork risk as external to anthropological theorising. For inexperienced, female ethnographers, this can have problematic implications not only for our research but also for our well-being in very real ways. In this article, I draw on my own lived experience of fieldwork in Nigeria to illustrate how gendered risks arise from research relationships and the expectations of exchange that structure them. These risks were partly produced by men's responses to intersections of my identities, as well as by my own assumptions regarding 'good' ethnography and reflexivity. To prepare women (and others) better for the lived experience of fieldwork, therefore, I argue that risk assessment should be integrated into anthropological teaching so that a social constructionist approach to risk and danger can engage anthropological theorisations of positionality and power.

Risk, reciprocity and reflexivity

For new anthropologists about to embark on fieldwork, risk assessment procedures form an integral part of methodological considerations. University safety offices and travel insurance companies, however, tend to conceptualise risk in realist form as being something external, lurking in dangerous environments (e.g. conflict zones or regions rife with exotic illnesses) and ill-intentioned strangers (e.g. kidnappers, muggers or scam artists). Yet for many fieldworkers, the more serious dangers we encounter emerge out of relationships formed with people in the field. These relationships themselves mediate, mitigate and accentuate risk. In the case of anthropologists, for whom the lived experience of relationships *is* our data, the interpersonal construction of risk has profound effects on the research process itself.

Research relationships in fieldwork are often mediated by expectations of exchange and reciprocity. As Mauss (1954) would undoubtedly have acknowledged, taking something from someone – be it research data, life stories, time or assistance in accessing field sites – forges a

relationship structured by debt, and some form of reciprocity is expected. The actors involved may well have differing ideas about the size of the debt and the norms of reciprocity surrounding it, making these expectations of exchange murky terrain to navigate for inexperienced fieldworkers.

Navigating this politics of exchange and reciprocity involves acknowledging the potentially exploitative nature of ethnographic research and the power dynamics involved in research relationships. Since the reflexive turn in anthropology, promoted by the 'new critics' in the 1980s (e.g. Clifford and Marcus, 1986), such acknowledgement has become mainstream in the discipline. Today any 'good anthropologist' is acutely aware of the inequalities that structure research relationships, and he or she attempts, wherever possible, to level the playing field. We actively strive to forge more egalitarian relationships by attempting to minimise our own authoritative voices and creating space for the voices of those we study. Part of this involves responding to and fulfilling expectations of reciprocity and 'giving back' where we are able – hence the debates regarding activist and applied anthropology (Farmer 2013, Scheper-Hughes 1995, Stanford and Angel-Ajani 2006).

It is in this critically self-aware anthropology that I have been schooled. I began studying anthropology as an undergraduate student at the University of Cape Town in South Africa in 2004, almost twenty years after *Writing Culture* was published (Clifford and Marcus 1986). I am thus one in a generation of anthropologists for whom self-critique and reflexivity have always been a part of the discipline as we know it. Long before I set out on my own fieldwork experience, I was thus well equipped with ideas of the 'good anthropologist', sensitive to the exploitative potential of anthropological fieldwork and to my own empowered position as a researcher.

When I finally did embark on long-term fieldwork for my DPhil in Anthropology, however, my experience proved to be somewhat less than empowering. Below, I outline two examples of research relationships I encountered in order to demonstrate how the expectations of exchange that structure such relationships, when combined with the sort of self-critique that characterises contemporary anthropology, construct risky and dangerous spaces for inexperienced fieldworkers. In my own fieldwork experience, such spaces were gendered ones where sexual harassment and violence constituted the dominant danger.

Gate-keeper and informant relationships in fieldwork

From 2012 to 2013, in pursuit of my DPhil in Anthropology, I conducted thirteen months of ethnographic fieldwork on the borderland between Nigeria and Cameroon. In order to

examine the politics of place-making and cross-border mobility, I located myself in the Bakassi peninsula, having gained some experience of the region in 2008 from working nearby as a consultant. This peninsula has been the site of oil conflict since the 1970s, with both countries claiming ownership of the territory. However, following the intervention of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), Cameroon was granted sovereignty in 2002, despite the fact that borderland inhabitants identify strongly as Efik Nigerians. When I started my fieldwork, the deadline for Nigeria to appeal against the ICJ verdict was fast approaching, and sensitivities were increasing, as was general insecurity around the peninsula.

According to the British Foreign Office, therefore, my field site was classified as a 'no-go' zone. As such, I had to demonstrate to the university that I had considered and prepared for all possible risks by participating in several pre-fieldwork safety workshops and writing a detailed risk assessment. Kidnappings, protest unrest, shootings, muggings and other stranger-dangers were all potentialities I was prepared to encounter. What I was less prepared for, however, was the manner in which the dangers of this external environment shaped, and were shaped by, interpersonal relationships and day-to-day negotiations of them.

Gate-keeper relationships were the most obviously affected. Conducting fieldwork in a high-risk environment accentuated the role of gate-keepers, granting them additional leverage in political plays of reciprocity. In order to gain access to my field site and gather data unhindered, I had first to secure permission from the administrative authorities and military personnel, all of whom were men. In Nigeria, where the patrimonial state filters right down into intimate client-patron relations, these 'Big Men' were not about to offer their assistance without expecting something in return. Since I evidently had little to give in terms of power and wealth, what they demanded was sexual. For example, one senior administrative official, the man who granted me access to my field site, once invited me to a meeting in a distant city (over two days journey from my actual field site), which turned out to be no 'meeting' at all. He had booked a hotel room for the two of us for the weekend and had simply expected, without any doubts, that I would spend the nights with him in gratitude for the role he had played in my research. I managed to wriggle out of this uncomfortable situation by playing extremely 'dumb', talking excessively about my fiancé and feigning another appointment in the city.

One month after this incident, I refused the sexual advances of a high-ranking military man who, unused to being denied, became angry and, as pay-back, insisted that I have twenty-four hour military protection due to the instability of the region. His insistence was unnecessary since my actual field site itself was relatively safe. Undertaking ethnographic

research with armed bodyguards, however, is less than ideal, and the only way to rid myself of them was to appeal to the military man's superior, who was none other than the senior administrative official who had booked the hotel room the previous month. This official was happy to intervene on my behalf, but then I had to negotiate repeated declarations of love and invitations to spend the night with him for the rest of my year in Bakassi.

Succumbing to the sexual advances of gate-keeper 'Big Men' was never an option for me. At the same time, however, outright rejections of them – like the one I attempted with the military man – had consequences for my research itself. As such, I spent the year ducking and diving sexual encounters, massaging bruised egos and trying to keep in the good books of powerful men whose expectations of exchange I was not willing to fulfil.

However, it was the gender dynamics embedded in my everyday interactions with male informants that turned out to be even more exhausting and risky. My research method of in-depth, life-history interviews and participant observation meant meeting the same people regularly, talking about their lives, 'hanging out' and forming relationships. As a researcher, I had ulterior motives which went beyond a need for mere friendship and intimacy – I wanted their lives and stories as data for a thesis that would benefit my own career as an academic. Schooled in post-1980s reflexive anthropology, I was acutely sensitive to the exploitative potential of the situation. I often felt like a vampire, sucking stories out of my informants, living and feeding off the blood of their lives. Thus, when informants demanded something of me in return for their participation – money, a small gift, help with finding a job, assistance with their child's education, etc. – I was often relieved. Fulfilling expectations of reciprocity, I naively felt, helped equalize the relationship somewhat and represented a willingness on my part to enter into the relationship on their terms.

With male informants, however, my desire to fulfil reciprocity expectations placed me in a position of vulnerability. Many men made it quite clear what they wanted in return for their participation. Some made physical sexual advances, others were verbally explicit, while some restricted themselves to hints and allusions. In my own cultural setting, these would immediately be labelled as 'sexual harassment' or unwanted sexual attention, and I would have had no qualms in enforcing my boundaries and, if necessary, voicing anger or offence. In the field, however, this was not so easy. I felt paralysed by my desire to be a 'good anthropologist' – one who actively deconstructs her own authority in an attempt to minimise the power she exerts over social situations. Thus, I hesitated to respond from within my own ethnocentric conceptions of gender relations and definitions of 'harassment'. I doubted myself. Was I reading the context right? Was my experience of this encounter – and the

feelings it engendered – really legitimate? Immobilised by navel-gazing, I responded to these sexual advances by politely smiling, sweetly declining, joking or mildly chastising, not wanting to cause offence. Such responses, in the murky landscape of cultural translation, might have been misread as uncertainty rather than the clear 'no' that I instinctively wanted to voice.

On one occasion, these awkward dynamics resulted in very real danger. One of my Nigerian informants (let us call him Chimandu), whose story formed a key case study in my research, also became one of my research assistants. Over time, he started to become 'touchy-feely', holding my hand, putting his arm around my shoulder, giving my knee a squeeze, etc. Judging the lines between flirtation and friendship in one's own cultural environment can be a challenge, let alone in a foreign one. What is more, in Nigeria, physical acts of intimacy are common among friends, so not wanting to misread this Eurocentrically I let it be. When it reached the point where I was certain that Chimandu's actions were 'more than friendly', I produced my usual squirms and soft declines with polite smiles. Then, one afternoon, after I had been interviewing Chimandu about his participation in the Bakassi conflict, I found myself pushed up against the wall of my living room, my face forcibly held and Chimandu attempting to kiss me. When I resisted (without any politeness this time), I was even more forcibly held and groped. Things turned violent and I shouted at him. He pulled away and I ran out the door.

Barring this incident, I rarely felt in danger of physical violence or rape. Yet the constant sexual objectification and the feelings that came with it resulted in emotional and psychological strain for which I was unprepared. This state rendered me more vulnerable in a high-risk region than I would have been otherwise.

Co-constructing risk, power and identity

While my extensive engagement with pre-fieldwork risk assessments and safety workshops had prepared me for an externally dangerous environment, it had not prepared me for the interpersonal construction of risk in daily relationships. Such risk is produced through the interplay of identities. The sexualized risks I experienced in fieldwork were partly produced by men's responses to my own identities as a white, foreign, female researcher, as well as my own feelings about these identities and their place in anthropological research. Indeed, not all women, not all foreigners and not all researchers might share my experiences.

On the one hand, Nigerian women *do* regularly encounter demands for sexual favours in exchange for services. At the University of Calabar, for example, this was visibly evident.

It was common, even expected, for young female students to exchange sexual favours for passing grades from their male professors. Indeed, many of my female friends and informants admitted as much. On the other hand, however, my identity as a white foreigner accentuated these expectations. A young, unmarried woman, travelling alone without a brother, father or husband to account for her, was unusual. It marked me out as belonging to a different cultural space, where women are supposedly more liberal and sexually loose and thus even more likely to engage in such exchanges. Yet, not *all* foreign women experience the levels of sexual harassment that I did. In remote, post-conflict Bakassi, people had encountered white women almost solely in humanitarian roles such as UN personnel and NGO workers. These women, however, were seen to be bringing something good to the community, whereas as a researcher I was *taking* something by asking for assistance, time, participation and stories. Other foreign women were thus not bound to the same expectations of exchange. The gendered risks that emerged for me during fieldwork were therefore not simply the result of my being a woman, *or* a foreigner, *or* a researcher, but *all* of these at the same time.

What is more, sexual dangers were a product not only of how people perceived me, but also of how I felt about my own identities in the context. I was uncomfortable with my whiteness and foreignness, which I felt automatically placed me in a position of power. I was also uncomfortable with my identity as a researcher and the exploitative potential embedded within it. Wanting to be a 'good anthropologist', therefore, I actively sought to minimise my power in social interactions. This put me in a vulnerable position, in which sexual harassment and violence posed a far greater risk than they might otherwise have done in a different context, or had I been a different person.

In part, my own feelings regarding my intersectional identities were the result of unquestioningly internalising the arguments of the 1980s 'new critics' and the reflexive turn (Clifford and Marcus 1986, Geertz 1990, Hymes 1974, Rabinow 1978, Ruby 1982). While the navel-gazing agenda of the movement has itself been criticised as simply a new form of authority (see Fardon 1990), what is less acknowledged is the male-centric perspective it has rendered mainstream in anthropology. In particular, Clifford and Marcus (1986) and others tend to assume that the researcher is automatically more powerfully positioned than the people *he* studies; that *he* is in control of the research process, that *he* is the authoritative voice, the privileged subject. Hence the ethical imperative to level the playing field.

But to assume that the anthropologist automatically occupies a powerful position is problematic. Perhaps most significantly, it denies the real agency of the people we study. What is more, it is simply not always the case. We can think, for example, of female

ethnographers working in patriarchal societies; of gay researchers studying in African countries where homosexuality is outlawed; or of black researchers working in white racist communities. In such contexts, the ethnographic research process might itself be fraught with risk and vulnerability, rather than being necessarily empowering. To the extent that the ever-present threat of violence structures what can and cannot be done, accessed, spoken or heard, the researcher is *not* in complete control of the research process. In such contexts, the anthropological norm of self-critique as an attempt to reduce ethnocentrism is not just an intellectual exercise, it can result in an entire de-stabilisation of the self.

As anthropologists, we are well versed in the study of power and its complex positioning of subjects. We can be nuanced in our theorising of power, agency and subjectivity when applied to the people we study. In studying women's coping strategies in West African war zones, for example, Mats Utas writes that 'agency is no longer something you possess or do not. Rather, it is something you maintain in relation to a social field inhabited with other social actors. Agency is thus highly dependent on specific social situations' (Utas 2005: 407). Indeed, agency and power never exist *a priori* in an encounter, but are constructed through relationships and are situationally dependent. If anthropologists frequently apply this sort of theoretical nuance to the social worlds we study, then we should be able to apply it to the ones we inhabit as well.

Implications for preparing new fieldworkers

In the training of new anthropologists, the risks and dangers of fieldwork are rarely integrated into the theoretical and methodological teaching of the discipline itself. Such considerations are peripheral and usually outsourced to university safety officers, self-defence experts and others. Safety workshops are generally interdisciplinary and hosted at the divisional level, making reference to specific disciplinary theory and unique methodologies challenging. On the whole, the outsourcing of risk assessments treats risk as being something external to the research itself, conceiving it in realist form as existing 'out there' as the product of a risky environment. Soon-to-be-fieldworkers, for example, are taught how to protect themselves from potential muggers on the street, who to call when they contract malaria and how to select hotel rooms least likely to go up in flames. When the 'lone female researcher' is addressed, it is usually to advise women to wear culturally appropriate (i.e. modest) clothing.

While such considerations are important and do make for safer research, if my own experience is anything to go by, the risks anthropologists are most likely to encounter will emerge from the relationships forged during the research process itself. Such risks will be

produced in complex interplays of identities, power relations and emotion. As I have attempted to demonstrate here, anthropological theories and methodologies are themselves culpable in shaping risks. Pre-fieldwork risk assessment training for new ethnographers, therefore, cannot be effective without engaging with the anthropological discipline itself.

If we conceive of risk as socially constructed, then we must acknowledge that types of risk and how they are experienced will be particular to individual researchers, their identities and research contexts. One might argue that this particularism is too difficult to deal with *en masse* in a course-based setting. What is required, however, is not a systematic identification of all possible risks and action plans, but getting students to think through risk as a product of positionality. A small-group approach might encourage students to consider the intersections of their own identities, deconstruct their pre-formulated ideas about the 'good anthropologist', and anticipate some of the dangers that might arise from within their fieldwork relations. Furthermore, anthropological theory itself has a lot to offer risk assessment, specifically in its approaches to subjectivity, agency and power. Hosting internal departmental safety courses or including risk assessment in methodological teaching, as opposed to outsourcing it, might therefore be more effective. Had I participated in such a workshop prior to my own fieldwork, perhaps I would have been better prepared for the gendered risks I encountered and more empowered to assert my own cultural understanding of personal boundaries in the moments when it mattered most.

Anthropological fieldwork requires researchers to be deeply immersed, for long periods of time, in cultural contexts that differ from their own. When local conceptions of gender or other aspects of our own identities restrict the things we are able to do in the field, the people we can speak to and the kinds of data we can access, these cultural differences can be highly frustrating. In such cases, determining the line between ethnocentrism and 'going native' is not simply an intellectual or ethical academic pursuit for female ethnographers, but a complex assessment of risk, vulnerability and power, with significant implications for personal safety and well-being. I have argued here that a revised understanding of risk and the way it is assessed and discussed in the preparation of early career anthropologists – risk as interpersonally constructed rather than externally present – might go some way towards managing the 'dangerous liaisons' of fieldwork.

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