Transnational Homework

Home Turned Fieldsite

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Cet essai explore les complications inhérentes au travail de recherche universitaire alors qu'on étudie une communauté locale. L'auteure remarque que les enquêtes sur le terrain et la recherche universitaire sont connexes et que les deux côtés sont affectés.. L'auteure ajoute que celles qui s'engagent dans ces enquêtes dans le Tiers-monde en travaillant chez elles s'engagent dans un travail transnational

Este ensayo explora las complicaciones de hacer investigaciones en el país de origen de la investigadora cuando esta trabaja en las universidades del 'primer mundo'. El artículo enfoca las conexiones entre familia e investigación y las influencias que se penetran cuando el trabajo de campo se hace en casa.

In this essay I explore and narrate my experience as a transnational researcher; having been born and raised in Guatemala and working as a professor at a U.S. institution. My experience of moving back and forth between the first world of academia and the third world in which my family lives is part of a diasporic model in which individuals move to and from Central America with frequency and ease. The U.S. National Intelligence Council states that Central America is the second largest source of undocumented migrants to the United States (Council 818). In addition the growing number of Central American immigrants working in the U.S. and Canada contribute to the survival of their home countries economies by sending remittances to support their families and stay connected. The Inter-American Development Bank estimates that Central America received U.S. $7.8 billion through official channels in 2004. Guatemala and El Salvador were the two countries that receive the largest proportion of this money. I grew up in Guatemala City in an upper-middle class family. I first came to the United States to attend college and later on stayed for graduate school and a job. I am a *ladina,* a term commonly used to describe those who are of mixed racial backgrounds (generally Indigenous and European).[1]

Here I write about research and family and the relationship between them. I argue that those of us that engage in "fieldwork" at our homes in the third world engage in transnational homework. The fact that our academic lives develop in the first world, greatly affect the knowledge we create and this knowledge is molded by family in the home country turned research site. My experiences, then, are a window to a larger theoretical and practical issue in research of this growing population.

Doing Fieldwork at Home—Transnational Homework

Feminist researchers have explored the power dynamics embedded in ethnographic research and have encouraged a new generation into reflective practices exploring one's positionality in relation to the research subjects. A number of authors have explored the issue of doing fieldwork at home, or with people with whom one shares a racial, class, and gender characteristics (Kenny; D. Wolf; Blee; M. Wolf). For instance, Diane Wolf's book *Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork* seeks to contextualize feminist dilemmas in fieldwork with a focus on women of color in the west that do research in their own racial group and on third world women. She concludes that even though a feminist researcher may seek to equalize the power relationship with her subjects, she, at the end, will get to leave and go back to a place of comfort. Kathleen Blee (97-101) faced a similar situation in her study of white women in supremacist groups in the U.S. South. Even though she attempted to explain to her subjects that she might not agree with their ideas, she still had the privilege of leaving and avoiding her subjects at the end of the study.

Returning to the fieldsite and openly discussing one's research

brings a layer of collaboration to the research often encouraged by feminist methodology. This practice can reduce the power differential between researcher and subject, and yet the fact is that the researcher continues to hold an identity as researcher. Yet when a researcher turns home into a fieldsite this situation becomes complicated as the researcher holds several identities and will be held accountable as a member of the community, this can create a dilemma between the choices one makes during the time at the research site. Lorraine Kenny addresses this dilemma in her work *Daughters of Suburbia: Growing Up White, Middles Class, and Female*. She studied girls in the school she had attended as a child. Her parents still lived in the community and she had old friends living in the area. Unlike Wolf and Blee, Kenny could leave but still had to come back to visit family, therefore faced a level of accountability that those who get to leave, and not come back, often don't face. Kamala Visweswaran and Naheed Islam engaged in fieldwork with communities of the third world that they belonged to. They were forced to construct identities as both intellectuals and as members of a community that had expectations of their roles and behaviors. In addition they dealt with family.

These writers, to a different extent, speak about home as a research site. Often home is for the field researcher the place that is safe, comfortable, and away from the challenges of data gathering. For those of us doing research at home this is not true. The complications of dealing with family, and at the same time having to make decisions about data gathering all take place in the same location.

Lorraine Kenny argues that by engaging in research at home we engage in homework. I argue that those of us that engage in homework that crosses borders beyond our universities engage in transnational homework. We attend or work in universities and institutions (generally) in the first world, while we research our home communities in the third world. This position shapes the knowledge we create. The research experience is deeply influenced by the presence of one's family, cultural expectations, and connections to the community.

My Family—*Mi Familia*

Field researchers engaged in ethnographic work use everyday interactions as a source of data to help understand social life at the field site (Gutmann; Kenny; Williams). Everything is data. Early on in my research I made the decision that I would not collect fieldnotes from interactions and social events that I attended with my friends and family even though many of the conversations would have made great field note material. In other words, I decided not to turn my friends and family into research subjects. By writing about my friends and family I could potentially endanger some of these relationships. These relationships became critical to sustaining me during my time in Guatemala. This became particularly true as I dealt with my mother's long illness and subsequent death. As this shows the interactions with family and the struggles to negotiate the personal with the research agenda, shape the final product in the research process. During my research trips there is a constant negotiation of identities and "fitting into" my own culture.

One of these areas of negotiating identity is the ability and willingness to fit into the roles that are ascribed to one's social class, gender, sexuality, age, and race. I feel intellectually uncomfortable fitting back into expected gender roles because "the feminine conceals histories of exclusion, disavowal, betrayal, and domesticated violence" (Kenny 76). However those same roles provide an emotional comfort since they allow me to fit in with my family. At the same time my research is "limited by the complexities of my position in the community and therefore by the kinds of access I had" (Islam 39). Therefore the fact that I am Guatemalan does not automatically grant me access to all spaces.

This is another space where I, as the researcher, need to negotiate my position within society and family. Identities shift and change as one moves geographically from North to South and South to North. These identities are not always chosen "but are in fact constituted by relations of power always historically determined" (Islam 8). These identities live in unison, conflict, and are influenced by the history that led to my movement to and from the third world. In Guatemala being an "out" feminist, that is, someone who self-identifies as a feminist, has been the source of much pain. Feminism is still considered a "bad" word by many men and women at home. I have been taunted, picked on, and set up in arguments where a roomful of people is against me in order to challenge my gender equality ideology.

Both men and women tell me, that my attempts to question gender inequality are a direct result of time spent in the United States. My economic independence, challenges to sexual double standards, and my educational attainment have created other forms of conflict. Few women attend and finish college in Guatemala, many times I am faced with been the person with the most education in a group setting.[2] Education is important for women but only to a point. Women in the upper class are expected to attend college—an undergraduate degree is acceptable but beyond that it becomes questionable. I have to admit that my attempts to challenge gender inequality have often proven to be more detrimental than helpful. Because I have the ability to come and go from the United States, my actions and the consequences of these actions tend to fall on my sisters' or my parents' reputation.

Dealing with my family, who lives at my research site, has proven to be a challenge. My family had some serious doubts over my research interest on post-civil war violence in Guatemala. Some members felt that I was endangering myself for asking questions about violence and safety, particularly in the context of the post-civil war political instability of the late 1990s and the rise of criminal violence. A close friend advised me not to talk to anyone that I did not know well about the reasons why I was interested in issues of violence, fear, kidnappings for ransom, and military dictatorships in Guatemala. His concern came from the fact that my explanation could be constructed as an ultra-left project that could endanger me. I took his advice. Even then I was constantly reminded and teased that I was going to become "the next Myrna Mack." Mack was a Guatemalan British trained anthropologist, who researched the Guatemalan internal refugees and their living conditions. Her murder in 1990 was used as an as an example for other educated *Ladinos* to deter them from investigating matters that were believed to negatively affect the image of Guatemala (Jonas).[3] This is an (un)conscious reminder that I have stepped outside of my class boundaries. It's a threat in disguise. Those of us who choose to step beyond the accepted class/racial/gender/sexuality lines endanger our survival. By survival I mean not only the actual loss of life, but also our survival in the social world that we exist in.

Negotiating family and social life while engaged in research has proven to be a challenge. There is little written on this topic. Kamala Visweswaran briefly addresses the topic of doing research at home in the introduction to her book *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*. Being interrupted, not been able to live by yourself because it is unacceptable, dealing with expectations from your family are all important for those that engage in transnational homework. These issues will have a great impact in the development of the fieldwork as well as the final product that comes about from the research.

My mother's illness is the best example of the ways that family life takes a toll in the ways that homework, is shaped by family and home culture. Shortly before I was to leave the United States to do homework my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. When I arrived she was going through treatment, and as the only single child and having recently arrived home, I was responsible for much of the organizational work of my mother's treatment. I accompanied her to the doctor, reminder her of the medications she had to take, scheduled treatment, researched treatment options, and dealt with getting the help she needed. Because most people around me could not understand that I was doing research at home, it was assumed that I was there exclusively to take care of my mother. The fact that my stay in Guatemala was for research purposes was secondary to my role as the eldest and single daughter. My siblings helped out but I felt that my mother's treatment was in some ways my responsibility. My research, then, took place in between doctor visits, chemotherapy treatments, running errands, and worrying about my mother's health. I scheduled interviews during times that would not conflict with the chemotherapy sessions; often times I wrote fieldnotes on my laptop while at the hospital with my mother. The doctors got so used to it that they often joked about it. The fact that I had (and continue to have) familial responsibilities has affected my research. The ups and downs of my mother's health shaped the time I had to engage in interviews and field observations. The time she was in remission constituted my most productive research time. When my family found out that the cancer had come back I stopped gathering data. I was struggling with getting enough data to write a dissertation and at the same time trying to spend enough time with my mom.

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I was fortunate enough to spend all of my field time with her. Three weeks after I came back to the United States to finish my degree she passed away. Yet, dealing with her illness allowed me to understand her desire for me to do certain things the traditional way and my time at home gave me the opportunity to grow a close relationship with my siblings. How do we account for these circumstances when doing field research? Little is written about the influence of family in research and we must begin to have these conversations. This is particularly important as more and more people from third world communities start doing research on their own communities.

Related to the issue of dealing with personal dynamics of one's family are the gender roles that one

is expected to fulfill. Issues of reverse culture shock after spending long periods of time in the United States and then returning to countries of the South need to be dealt with. How does my experience in the United States as woman affect the ways in which I conceptualize research in my home country? How can transnational researchers learn to negotiate the identities that are such as questioning cultural norms around marriage, sexuality and sexual practices, and discussing class and racial stereotypes.

In the *Sociological Imagination,* C. Wright Mills argues that as researchers we must depersonalize the personal by placing individuality in the social context. Yet this task may prove to be difficult for a transnational researcher since we are is done. This is a critical issue to examine especially when your critiques are directed towards groups that you belong to. How about accountability towards your family? What happens when the research may threaten the safety of family members? What about threatening the social position of family? In places where businesses are based to a great extent of the reputation

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inscribed upon us as women, people of the south, academics, people of colour in the United States, and transnational elites?

Why Does Transnational Homework Matter?

One of the challenges of doing transnational homework, and for that matter any fieldwork in a site where you play other roles, is that it is almost impossible to separate the insider/outsider status, given that both roles are played simultaneously. This is complicated by the fact that been an insider or an outsider occurs in different ways and may shift in time.

As someone engaged in transnational homework my insider status is often assumed yet, as there are ways in which I have become an outsider in my home. This process happens at different levels but is triggered by having lived outside of the home for extended periods of time and may be a result of changes that are part of the process of moving from one place to another. Some of the markers of becoming an outsider may be as subtle as embracing new costumes that may be perceived as a form of acculturation into western culture or more political ideas at a greater danger of "not seeing" certain aspects of home/turned field site. Assuming certain privileges without questioning the source of privilege is problematic and at the same time difficult to see because some of these privileges may seem a part of everyday life. For example, because of my racial background I am, if not welcomed, tolerated in a wide variety of social spaces yet these same spaces are often times closed to Indigenous and poor Guatemalans. Because I feel comfortable in these spaces I have often failed to see the segregation that exists in Guatemalan society. The question remains, how do we learn to see these aspects of social life when they are part of what makes life at home familiar and comfortable? There is a difficulty in expressing into words what seems normal and part of everyday life, and at the time of writing the research results coming to realize that these explanations are necessary to provide the context of your work.

The idea of accountability is explored at various levels in methodology literature and works. Nevertheless these discussions often leave out the accountability of having to return to your field site as a member of that community after the work of your family these issues need to be considered when evaluating field research. Writing is a dance—being critical and yet providing criticism with respect to the groups that you engage in research with. It's easy to criticize a larger social group or events—such as the slow response of the Bush administration to devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, yet it's more difficult to do the same when talking about a progressive group of individuals that have opened the doors to their group for you and believe in your research project.

In the evaluation of transnational homework we must consider several issues. It may take longer to gather data due to familial responsibilities. Family responsibilities take time away from the field experience and yet they enrich the experience, family members may be asking important questions and engaging in critical conversations. People close to you at home may assume you are in some sort of extended vacation, therefore expect your time to be available. For instance my family would drop by on a regular basis with kids, noise, expected food and attention that distracted me from writing and yet their company was always welcomed. During one

of these visits my nephew, Diego, found some crayons and painted on my fieldnotes imitating my endless writing on pieces of paper and notebooks. Today I still laugh every time I review these fieldnotes, a reminder of the marks that family has on field research.

Conclusion

Researchers who engage in transnational homework face similar issues as the ones here outlined. We have a variety of identities that shift with time and depend on the place that we stand. The increasing movement of people to and from different places in the world makes it critical that we face the possibility that transnational homework will increasingly become more common. The ways in which we are taught field methodologies will as a result need to shift to include discussions of family and research, reverse culture shock, and other topics related to transnational homework.

When doing homework, our racial, class, political, gender, and national identities will shape our research, particularly when engaging with research subjects that will make assumptions based on the ways we are perceived. At home, fieldwork is complicated by familial responsibilities that will shape, shift, and at the end will collaborate to create knowledge about our homes. At the end of doing homework we may realize, as Kamala Visweswaran came to realize that "home once interrogated is a place we have never before been" (Visweswaran 113). Once this interrogation begins I found that family added a layer of richness to the field research that can only be achieved while doing transnational research.

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[1]Estimates of the total Indigenous population today range from 45 percent to 55 percent, with most of this population living in rural areas.
[2]In Guatemala the national illiteracy rate is thirty two percent. Of every ten illiterate Guatemalans, eight live in rural areas, six are Indigenous, and six are women. Literacy rates are measured on the ability of a person to read and write in Spanish. For the majority of the Indigenous rural population Spanish is a second language.
[3]It is estimated that one million Guatemalans were displaced and up to 200,000 crossed the border to Mexico to become refugees during the 30-year civil war, which officially ended with the signing of Peace Treaties in 1996.

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