DISPLACING THE FIELD IN FIELDWORK

Masculinity, metaphor and space

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[A] point that needs to be emphasized here is that certain spatial metaphors are equally geographical and strategic, which is only natural given that geography grew up in the shadow of the military. . . . Field evokes the battlefield.

(The editors of the journal Hérodote, in Foucault 1980: 69)

[O]ur relationship to the ‘field’ itself must be problematized; that is, we must recognize that the field is constructed through power relations that define academics and the people and places we study.

(Staeheli and Lawson 1994: 97)

'The principal training of the geographer’, once declared Carl Sauer (1956: 296), ‘should come, wherever possible, by doing field work.’ Numerous other famous men in the discipline have said the same. Moreover, as Gillian Rose has recently argued, they have said so simultaneously lauding it as a tough and heroic activity, as ‘a particular kind of masculine endeavor’ (1993: 70).

All the while work in the field has been sanctified as a character-building rite of passage into a world described as real, the field itself has been feminized, cast as a seductive but wild place that must be observed, penetrated and mastered by the geographer who, having battled with it, revelled in it, and, in the end, triumphantly risen above it, returns to the academy his education complete, his stature assured and his geographical self proven, definitively, his. Such a sentence, though, however lengthy, summarizes the masculinity of fieldwork rather too roughly. To be sure, its exclusively masculine pronouns, heroes and assumptions are commonly announced with authority by the father figures of geography. However, there are also multiple, concrete examples of how its seminal logic has become disseminated, which is to say, performed and thereby transformed by other, less manly, geographers. As Jennifer Hyndman (1995) has argued, ‘many feminist and other geographers do fieldwork precisely to critique, deconstruct and reconstruct a more responsible, if partial, account of what is happening in the world’. There are, then, possibilities for renegotiating fieldwork for the better, and my aim in this chapter is to trace the complex web of practices and metaphors which, while consolidating the field as a site of masculinist work, have begun nevertheless to be rearticulated as a politicized location for endeavours with more emancipatory promise.

An apologist for traditional fieldwork might well dismiss my initial outline of a critique by arguing that the metaphorization of the field as feminine proves nothing. In the first section of the chapter I seek to address such criticisms by connecting my discussion with some of the more general debates currently circulating about spatial metaphors. In particular, I draw on writing by Cindi Katz (1993) and Neil Smith, who argue that spatial metaphors become politically problematic when they introduce a fixed and limiting notion of absolute space.2 Masculinist geographical imaginations of the field as a feminized, separate and containable space, work with, or so I will argue, just such a dehistoricized conception of absolute space. It is also a conception which, to recall the argument of the French geographers interviewing Foucault, owes a great deal to the strategic geo-politics of the military. It evokes the battlefield; and, just as military conceptualizations of space are connected directly with the violence of war, so too do masculinist formulations of the field of fieldwork have quite literal implications.

Yet it would be ridiculous to assert that every plan for a field trip somehow amounts to a virulent call to arms. Care is required in distinguishing between the overarching dynamic of disciplinary violence and the heterogeneous ways through which different fieldworkers renegotiate its influence. For this reason, the later sections of this chapter move beyond the question of militarist masculinist metaphors in order to take up the substantive task of problematization outlined by Staeheli and Lawson (1994). Their suggestions, along with the other feminist discussions of fieldwork published in a special methods section – ‘Women in the Field’ – of The Professional Geographer (46 (1): 1994) move the debate on to how to actually think and do research that avoids inflicting violence on those who are researched. In doing so, they not only problematize the masculinism of fieldwork, but simultaneously displace the meaning of the field itself.

Ultimately, the displacement of masculinism raises a question about the geographers who generally find it easiest to take masculinity for granted: men, and, in particular, straight men. For those like myself who would like to contribute to, rather than take over, attack or otherwise oppose feminist work, it means at the very least more self-reflexivity. More generally, I feel that the lessons of feminist critique demand of men a willingness to read and discuss a whole range of critical work in a spirit of responsibility. Learning from feminist work in this way means that self-reflexivity need not, indeed, must not be limited to bold identitarian announcements of the ‘as a straight white man’ variety. Such ‘as-a-ism’ seems only to provide a mantra of relief from the more detailed and difficult task – the ‘perversion’ task, as Sandra Harding (1991) describes it – of examining the complex contradictions constituting one’s positionality. Thus, in the final part of the chapter I bring the questions introduced by feminist critique to the specific contradictions involved in the conflicting ways masculinity and shared working experiences shaped my own fieldwork interviews of temporary workers in Vancouver, BC.1 This, then, is not an attempt to pretend that I can speak from a woman’s position – even if
it could be so singularly defined. Instead, my argument represents the situated knowledge of a man interrogating the masculinity of fieldwork by turning to feminist work.

FROM THE FARAWAY AND FEY TO THE FIELD AS A SPACE OF BETWEENNESS

Concluding her introduction to her book Technologies of Gender, Teresa de Lauretis describes an arc of feminist critique that traces what she calls ‘a movement from the space represented by/in a representation, by/in a discourse, by/in a sex gender system, to the space not represented yet implied (unseen) in them’ (1987: 26). De Lauretis’s more specific focus is on the visual arts, but, in this first section of the chapter, I will argue that the particular space of the field can also be traced through the same arc of representation and implication. To begin with, I outline the dominant masculinist demarcation of a feminized field. As a spatial concept-metaphor that has been shaped by/in worldly practices, I argue that the field has become normalized as a disciplinary concept, and, as such, has had world-constitutive effects. However, the way in which these effects have depended on the particular practice of fieldworkers tracking between field and academy has done more than serve as the adventurous stuff of manly myth-making. I shall suggest that it has also been its undoing. As new and increasingly critical scholars have come to retrace the back and forth route, they have brought into crisis the very distinctions – between researcher and researched, the near and far, aesthetics and politics, scholarship and practice, mind and body, masculine and feminine and so on – upon which it historically rested. In doing so, they have rearticulated – in the double sense of both ‘rejoining’ and ‘repeating out loud’ – a space of between-ness that was, I will argue, precisely the space that was previously assumed but disavowed, ‘a space not represented yet implied (unseen)’ within the older narratives of manly exploration.

The fielding of the field

In various Western discourses ‘field’ is associated with agriculture, property, combat, and a ‘feminine’ place for ploughing, penetration, exploration, and improvement. The notion that one’s empirical, practical activity unfolds in such a space has been shared by naturalists, geologists, archeologists, ethnographers, missionaries and military officers.

(Clifford 1990: 65)

Clifford’s summary provides a useful starting point for a genealogy of the field. Geographers too could clearly be added to his list of researchers sharing the space, and the questions he asks of anthropology are for the same reason just as relevant to geography: ‘What commonalities and differences link the professional knowledges produced through these “spatial practices”? What is excluded by the term “field”? (1990: 65).

I will return to this metaphorical yet material notion of spatial practice shortly, but one of the commonalities here is undoubtedly that of masculinity. The agent of action, whether it be of War, of God or of Science is assumed to be Man. Woman can symbolically serve as his helpmate, but it is he who proves and improves himself through a mastery of the field. By way of a corollary, a possibility that is systematically excluded by these gendered networks of power and knowledge is that of women acting as agents of knowledge. Instead, they are repeatedly seen – and the visual verb is not coincidental – as just part of the field. Fieldwork is in this way symptomatic of the more general disciplinary tendency in geography described by Rose (1993: 9), a tendency wherein femininity becomes the Other, the space above which and against which geographers of reason define their science, their art and, in these differing ways, their selves.

Considering the actual history of geography it is important to remember that associations like those outlined by Clifford constitute more than just verbal or writerly coincidences. Anna Skeels’s detailed historical examination of Sauer ‘in the field’ has indicated that his own conceptualization of field education was as a certain rite de passage into manhood, a ‘formation of the fieldman from the “boys”’ (Skeels 1993: 89). Reworking such views, Richard Symanski’s (1974) notorious fieldwork into brothels in Nevada might well have been an extreme and idiosyncratic example, but, as Barbara Rubin (1975) pointed out in her critique at the time, it illustrated quite clearly the ways in which a masculinist scholarly attitude had decisive consequences for the sexualizing of actual research and the objectification of actual people. Likewise, when David Stoddart (1986: esp. 143–57) – to retain one of Rose’s main examples – champions fieldwork as the hardy stuff at the heart of the discipline, when he commends Sauer for his insistence on the geographical gaze (1986: 147), and when he connects all of this to his own attempts at ‘making sense of nature’ (1986: ix), he illustrates a continuum between thoughts, words and deeds. It should be remembered, though, that these forms of flamboyantly unabashed claim take place within a much wider network of social practices such as those alluded to in Foucault’s interview with the geographers. Take as a particular moment of condensation Stoddart’s plea to the discipline to have pride in the history of fieldwork as ‘a record of achievement at the farthest ends of the earth’. ‘Let us’, he opines,

salute with Conrad ‘men great in their endeavour and in hard-won successes of militant geography; men who went forth each according to his lights and with varied motives... but each bearing in his heart a spark of the sacred fire’.

(Stoddart 1986: 157)

Here the associations noted by Clifford are articulated with grandiose aplomb. Masculinity, militarism, imperialism and science all come explicitly together in a fantasy of fieldwork in faraway lands. While, as Derek Gregory argues, their ‘modalities of power lie beyond the compass of [Stoddart’s own] account’, ‘their main thrust’ remains stridently, albeit nostalgically, clear (1994: 32, 20). More than just the exploits of lone men, then, it is within the
burning context of what Conrad fetishized as ‘sacred fire’ – namely, within the violent masculinist discourses linking science, empire and exploration – that traditional fieldwork has had its foundation and force. Stoddart’s heroic rhetoric simply makes the connections more apparent.

The fact that the masculinity of fieldwork has been fashioned in the context of general, indeed, imperial systems of knowledge production should warn against any personal attempt to ‘blame’ the masculinist construction of the field on especially flagrant individuals. Given that the problem is more general than individual intentions, so too must be the critique. As Rose (1993: esp. Ch. 4) indicates, the macho model of men entering the field is also overdetermined by the feminization of nature in science, and the privileging of the knowledge of the masculine gaze. Insofar as geographers have inherited a place in these traditions, they need to reconsider the masculinist and imperialist arrogance of the discipline at large. It seems inadequate for a commentator like Denis Cosgrove to simply poke fun at what he calls the ‘haughty-chested feats of scholarly endurance’ (1993: 516) advocated by those seeking disciplinary redemption in fieldwork. In this case, the writers he is responding to had argued for a form of field stamina involving ‘not merely physical exertion but also the intellectual discipline that comes from engaging in ethnographic research . . . in non-English-speaking settings’ (Price and Lewis 1993: 9). Against this type of claim, a more adequate critique would have had to address the overdetermined masculinist and Anglo-centric production of neo-colonial ‘intellectual discipline’ itself. Perhaps eulogies to fieldwork at ‘the farthest ends of the earth’ do sometimes express a ‘muscular disdain for the fey and metropolitan’ (Cosgrove 1993: 516). But coming from Cosgrove, a man who elsewhere affirms an ‘epicurean relish for what Stoddart calls “lands of delight”’ (Cosgrove and Daniels 1989: 179), the criticisms appear rather superficial. The point surely is that whether it is done with muddy boots or intellectual discipline or both, whether as a ‘recording science’ or ‘performing art’ (1989: 171) or both, fieldwork remains imbricated within masculinist modalities of power. These may, as Rose (1993: esp. Chs 2, 3) suggests, be understood as different genres of masculinity, some scientific and others aesthetic, but the construction of the field as either faraway or fey remains nonetheless the construction of an Other: the field as something to be looked at from above, to be struggled with and enjoyed on the ground, and always, in the end, mastered.

The systematicity of it all means that breaking away from a masculinist approach to fieldwork is often easier said than done. Cosgrove might be argued to be closer when he and Daniels (1989: 179) note how relevant ‘the metaphor of the mirror’ is for describing the performance of fieldwork. However, the notion of the field functioning as masculine geography’s self-consolidating, speculative Other is still left unexamined by the two men. Instead, the metaphor of the mirror becomes for them ‘congenial’ not critical, and thus ultimately appears, in David Matless’s words, ‘curiously conservative’ (1989: 182). In anthropology too, the difficulty which men seem to have of problematizing the masculinity of fieldwork is also clear. Paul Rabinow, for example, in a book that otherwise problematizes so much, fails to deal at all critically with the masculinist of his fieldwork in Morocco (Rabinow 1977). Instead, in a section of the book that relates a growing intimacy with the place, and a growing rapport with a male informant and his ‘roguish circle’ (1977: 61), he writes what might well be called a narrative of penetration, culminating in his having sex with a so-called ‘Berber girl’ (1977: 69). If it were possible – which I do not think it is – to disconnect what happened in this instance from what continues to happen, no doubt sometimes violently, to young women around the world in the context of white, male fieldwork, the section could at least be read like the rest of the book as a useful frank discussion of the feelings of the anthropologist. But even as such, the feelings are not problematized as masculine feelings, and there is no effort made by Rabinow to examine the event as a practical embodiment of the more general power relations privileging a white American man entering, studying and, in his own words, having ‘sensual interaction’ (1977: 65) with the objectified Moroccan landscape.

A factor that emerges as a defining characteristic of masculinist framings of the field is the capacity assumed unquestionably by the fieldworker to be able to leave. Very few of the people who are researched are ever able to even pretend to do the same. Their reflections on fieldwork are rarely written down, let alone circulated through the academy. Meanwhile, as the people and places visited by the likes of Rabinow, Stoddart and Symanski are fast transformed into mute objects before an assimilative academic gaze, the fieldworkers themselves become ensconced in the academy with all the authority due to scholars who have braved the field and returned. In this sense, the double movement of going There only to come back Here constitutes the elemental spatial practice, the primal fort-da, at the very core of masculinist fieldwork authority.7 In the next section, I examine how this spatial practice is itself secured through a masculinist metaphorization of the space of the field.

The field of masculinist influence

The trope of space must be consciously analyzed in order to evaluate its influence.

(Kirby 1993: 188)

In order to understand how the spatial metaphor of the field is caught up in the construction of a fieldworker’s authority it is necessary to consider what Katz and Smith (1993: 68) refer to as ‘the interconnectedness of material and metaphorical space.’ This interconnectedness is important to remember not only because it opens the question of how spatial metaphors such as the field come to shape social life, but also because it serves as a caution against any interested attempt to fix where metaphoricity ends and conceptualizations of materiality begin.8 As Dominick LaCapra’s (1980) deconstruction of Ricoeur’s work shows, there is an implicit violence done in any such theoretical project to legislate the meaning and scope of metaphor once and for all.9 As an alternative it is possible to take Derrida’s own approach and consider how
the interrelating flux of metaphors and concepts is abbreviated through philosophically or, as in the present case, politically interested moments of closure (Derrida 1982). Elsewhere I have described how this process of enclosure can effectively dehistoricize, homogenize and contain the reference of spatial names and metaphors so as to produce what I called anemic geographies (Sparke 1994b). Here, the case of the masculinist field presents another anemic geography. However, in contrast, for example, to the racist metaphorization of Africa as 'Dark Continent' critiqued by LucyJarosz (1992), it is one which takes place at a more personal and yet generalized scale. It privileges the individual fieldworker by securing the field wherever and whatever it is as separate and contained. It is this specific moment of closure that needs to be examined in terms of the irretrievably entwined relations of 'material and metaphorical' space.

Katz and Smith (1993: 75) argue that '[s]patial metaphors are problematic in so far as they presume that space is not'. They go on to outline how this form of presumption becomes possible when space is conceived along the geometric lines of what they call absolute space (see note 2). It is a conception that effectively makes space seem unproblematic by reifying it, removing it from the dynamics of its historical production, and naturalizing it as a timeless and measurable given. I think it is precisely this same absolutist way of imagining space upon which the fixing of the field is predicated. Pinned to the depthless horizon of absolute space the field can easily be presented as an unproblematic domain lying outside the academy, a space, then, that assembles its own complex and all too academic production. As such, the presentation of the field draws on a tradition in which space is seen after Euclid and Descartes as 'geometrically divisible into discrete bits' (Katz and Smith 1993: 75). To borrow a definition from Martin Jay, 'as [a] spatial metaphor ... [the] field [thus] tacitly assumes a synchronic entity to be surveyed or mapped as a structural or relational gestalt' (Jay 1990: 312).

For Katz and Smith the connection between the field and the problematic of absolutization is clear. The one serves as a metaphor for the other. Absolute space, they say, 'refers to a conception of space as a field, container, a coordinate system of discrete and mutually exclusive locations' (1993: 75). However, this raises the question of why the field should provide such an amenable example of absolute space. How has its fixity and finitude endured through all the turbulence of fieldwork over the years? Two closely connected reasons are, I think, quite clear. The first concerns the sexuality of vision, and the second, the hegemonic ways in which modern Western thought has made the world seem picturable in the first place.

The field has been able to share and lock into the compartmentalization implicit in the logos of absolutized space by serving simultaneously as the feminized object of the masculine gaze, and the pictured place of communion with the actual and factual (see Rose 1993: esp. Ch. 4). This sort of place of communion has itself been established, or as Timothy Mitchell (1988) has put it, 'enframed' through an episteme of Cartesian dualisms. Like the mental versus material 'everyday metaphors of power' Mitchell seeks to displace, the no less powerful academy versus field dualism is thus supported by the hegemony in Western thinking of distinctions between meaning and reality, structure and practice, mind and body (Mitchell 1990). Coming together with the masculinism of the academy and the feminization of the field, these dualisms enable the ongoing compartmentalization of the field as a disciplinary version of what Elizabeth Grosz (1990) has called a 'body-map'. Such a corporeal cartography would seem in this case to be coordinated so as to demarcate, contain and thereby incorporate all that the masculine disavows. As a result of such corseting, the field's meaning becomes encased, even, one might say, incarcerated. Seemingly barred from metaphorical movement, it is consolidated more as a concept, a durable, everyday and taken-for-granted embodiment of absolute space. And it is through this quotidian hegemony that it has functioned again and again to guarantee a place to which researchers can go secure in the knowledge that they will always be able to leave.

The comings and goings from a feminized field of masculinist work can now be better understood as a spatial practice coordinated through a spatial metaphor turned absolute, routinized concept. As such they have quite literal implications: 'dead literal' to use Donna Haraway's more poignant words (1989: 58). The examples of Symanski's studies, Stoddart's rhetoric and Rabinow's reflections provide only a limited indication of this, but Haraway's own incredibly detailed critique of primatology shows just how violent, even lethal, masculinist constructions of the field can be. An essay, for example, which follows Carl Akeley into the field documents exactly the destructive intersection of manly adventure with science and art in self-styled heroic work that aimed with both gun and camera to master the field of African nature (Haraway 1989: 26–58). However, Haraway does not leave the story there, and while much of the rest of the book examines the racism, anthropocentrism and familial-sadism structuring primate studies, her final section opens the possibility of feminist renegotiation with a subtitle that speaks of primatology as a 'Genre of feminist theory' (1989: 278–383; see also Haraway 1991b). It is this same possibility for renegotiation that I seek to highlight next as I turn to the work of feminist geographers. As Heidi Nast suggests in her introduction to the 'Women in the Field' papers, this work can evoke a very different field, one that 'is not naturalized in terms of "a place" or "a people"; [but] rather ... located and defined in terms of specific political objectives' (Nast 1994: 57). (Re)placing the field of fieldwork within such a politics of location does indeed seem to promise what Haraway (1989: 288) calls 'the possibility of new stories not strangled by the same logics of appropriation and domination'. As feminist research that is still empirically grounded, it also highlights how 'the intervention must work from within, constrained and enabled by the fields of power and knowledge that make discourse eminently material' (1989: 288).
Rearticulating the blasphemy of between-ness in fieldwork

Under contemporary conditions of globalization and post-positivist thought in the social sciences, we are always already in the field—multiply positioned actors, aware of the partiality of all our stories and the artifice of the boundaries drawn in order to tell them.

(Katz 1994: 66)

To paraphrase de Lauretis (1987), my argument thus far has suggested the following: that the traditional space of the field has been presented by/in specific disciplinary systems of representation—call them scientific data retrieval and interpretative observation—that these have been upheld by/in an organization of power and knowledge comprising a back and forth spatial practice of masterful study—call it ‘going there’, ‘being there’ and ‘leaving’; and that this form of spatial practice has been fashioned by/in a system of sex/gender—call it heroic masculinism. Following de Lauretis, the critical move that needs now to be made is one that asks what spaces are assumed but yet disavowed through this formulation of the field. If the absolutization of space enables the field to be assumed as securely distant and contained, what ‘active and stirring’ spatial relations are concealed beneath such a projective palimpsest? What is the spatiality ‘not represented yet implied (unseen)’ by the masculinist fielding of the field (Derrida 1982: 213)?

Critics such as Katz have already engaged in exactly this form of questioning. Insisting, in her words, on how ‘we are situated and bear responsibility for interrogating our positionings’ (1992: 504), they have moved away from the Olympian high ground of objectification and Cartesian distinction. Instead, by drawing attention to subjects that previously went neglected, they have highlighted the geographies of power that, in the words of Staeheli and Lawson, ‘define academics and the people and places we study’ (1994: 97). This is a radical problematicatization of the field. Rearticulating what the absolutization of space previously kept apart—and thereby intangible, inaudible and unexamined—feminist critique has displaced the dualism of field and academy, replacing it with the more grounded yet dynamic notion of fieldworking in what Kim England calls ‘the world between ourselves and the researched’ (1994: 86). This is not, she notes, the same as conducting fieldwork ‘on the unmediated world of the researched’ (1994: 86). Nor is it another reincarnation of the field as radically Other. Instead, it is a repetition of fieldwork with a difference, a form of blasphemous empiricism that admits to subject positions and, hence, research positions constituted materially and interpersonally in what Katz rearticulates as ‘spaces of betweenness’ (1994: 72).

By describing the attention to interpersonal positioning in feminist fieldwork as blasphemous I mean to invoke the same ironic mix of fidelity and dissent made manifest by Haraway. Such blasphemy, she says, ‘has always seemed to require taking things seriously’, but it also ‘protects one from the moral majority within, while still insisting on the need for community. Blasphemy is not apostasy’ (1991: 149). Feminist empiricism seems blasphemous in much the same way. Frequently dissenting from high theory—both masculinist and feminist—it has had what Linda McDowell (1993) describes as a long and subversive history within geography. Faithful to the responsibility of representation through fieldwork, and insistent on the need for rigorous research that makes a difference for communities, it has also nevertheless blasphemed against the rules and rites of what to study, how, when and where. Pam Moss (1993), for example, describes how it has stressed qualitative over quantitative approaches, and, as Isabel Dyck (1993) underlines, this same stress on the knowledge produced through intersubjective communication has brought with it a dissenting reflexivity towards the gendering of research itself. It is this blasphemous empiricism that also provides a vital backcloth against which to discuss a point of seeming contradiction addressed in a footnote by Rose.

In the footnote in question Rose writes: ‘I am not suggesting that women cannot undertake fieldwork only that its dominant style is a tough masculinity’ (1993: 181). One way, perhaps, of thinking about the blasphemy of feminist fieldwork, is that it constitutes a critical renegotiation of this same tough masculinist style. Rearticulating what the style and accompanying spatial practice kept apart, the blasphemers raise complex questions about the relations of power linking the traditionally secluded spaces of academic life and fieldwork research. They respect what Clare Madge describes as the need to consider the role of the researcher in the research process and, in doing so, bring about a ‘boundary dispute’ (1993: 296), a radical interrogation of the limits of the field. It is therefore a renegotiation that, far from abandoning the field, works instead by remembering geographers’ ongoing positioning in between multiple overlapping fields. Katz’s argument, ‘I am always everywhere, in “the field”’ condenses this testimony to what before was only ever ‘implied (unseen)’ (1994: 72), and, for the same reason, presents probably the greatest possible blasphemy against the stylized, fort/da, spatial rituals of heroic fieldwork.

That they constitute blasphemy might also account for why reflexive statements about fieldwork and the academy have so rarely been uttered by male geographers. Certainly, when they have, the guardians of the sacred fire have descended. Allan Pred, for example, made what could well be read as a departure from the dominant penetrative model when he noted that:

the distinction made between ‘fieldwork’ and other more everyday observations and experiences is but one manifestation of a general unwillingness to accept the fact that our ‘professional’ and ‘non-professional’ lives are not in dichotomous opposition to one another, but dialectically interrelated.

(Pred 1984: 91–2)

This was clearly blasphemy for Stoddart: writing by which, he reports, he was not much enlightened; an argument deserving only of derision, not profound, not physical, and, presumably, not tough enough (1986: 147). Against this backcloth, then, the blasphemous achievement of the feminist methods papers in The Professional Geographer becomes clearer.

It may at the outset have seemed strange for me to turn to the example of
the 'Women in the Field' essays as an example of feminist renegotiation with masculinist fieldwork. The critical attention of the authors is not turned directly towards the question of masculinity and, empirically, men and their immediate affairs are—in a rare move for professional geography—marginalized. Instead, England (1994) attends to the dangers of doing research as a straight woman about lesbian life in Toronto; Melissa Gilbert (1994) analyses her position of privilege in relation to the low-waged women she interviewed in Worcester, Massachusetts; Katz (1994) critically connects her work with children in rural Sudan and East Harlem, so as to ground her argument about the continuities of the field in the context of globalization; and Audrey Kobayashi (1994) discusses the 'coloring of the field', bringing attention to the dangers of ethnographic authority rooted in ethnicist or otherwise essentialist absolutism.

As Nast suggests in her introduction, the writers thus go beyond the literalist and, as such, exclusive textualism that has limited recent attempts at ethnographic reflexivity by a number of men in anthropology. In contrast to some of these privileged performances of polyphony, the papers more immediately concern the politics of women doing fieldwork, and the problems facing feminist solidarity in the context of a racist, heteropatriarchal and capitalist society. However, it is in this very practical attention to the dangers of epistemic violence and appropriation that the writers make what I think is their most blasphemous break with masculinist fieldwork. Faithful to the project of research, they nevertheless put its gaze, its appropriative arrogance and its limits under critical vigil. Rather than claiming Olympian vision, they situate themselves as women within the relations of dominance through which they are privileged as fieldworkers. And, in doing so, they turn a contradictory position of being fieldworkers and feminists in geography—a position, to use McDowell's (1992) phrase, both 'inside and outside the project'—into a politicized location for critique. Overall, then, as Staeheili and Lawson put it, 'these authors question the boundaries of "the field"' (1994: 97), and as they do so the whole reified map demarcating and separating field from academy comes to life, the spaces divided by its boundary-drawing becoming rearticulated in the blasphemous between-ness of interpersonal debate.

I do not want to romanticize or homogenize the interventions represented by the 'Women in the Field' papers. They introduce a range of different approaches, and while, for example, Kobayashi, insists on how there is 'more to gain from building commonality than from essentializing difference' (1994: 76), Gilbert, by contrast, provides a host of sobering reminders of just how difficult seeking such commonality can be. Nevertheless, there is a shared blasphemous impulse in the papers, and it is this—most especially, their attention to the partiality of situated knowledge, and their rearticulation of field and academy—that I would like to bring to a re-examination of my own fieldwork in Vancouver.

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We do not seek partiality for its own sake, but for the sake of the connections and the unexpected openings situated knowledges make possible.

(Haraway 1991a: 196)

Like a number of feminist scholars whose research projects have stemmed from an attempt to come to terms with dynamics affecting their own lives (see Kobayashi 1994; Moss 1994), my research into temping had its roots in my own experience working as a temp while I was an undergraduate in England. Given an unshackled notion of the field, this very experience effectively served as my first round of fieldwork in the industry. 'Experience', though, is an abused category, and I do not mean to infer here that my work as a temp went on to guarantee an instant rapport with the temps I interviewed in my fieldwork in Vancouver. Turning experience into an origin for ethnographic authority in such ways leads directly to the dangers of identitarian absolutism critiqued by Kobayashi (1994). Experience is inadequate as an origin of explanation, and, instead, as Joan Scott has suggested, it is more usefully understood as 'that which we want to explain' (1992: 38). It was in fact as a reality, then, that I began the research on the temping industry in order to come to terms with my own earlier experiences. Ironically, however, in doing the fieldwork, I found myself involved in new experiences that sometimes repeated some of the same contradictions that shaped my time as a temp. Not least of these was my position as a man—first as a worker and then as a fieldworker—in an industry that predominantly employs women. It is to these contradictions that I would next like to turn after a few comments about the limits of academic male reflexivity.

The problem of male self-reflexivity

This is already as McDowell (1992: 56) notes, 'a profoundly self-reflexive moment in human geography', and perhaps it is more productive now to distinguish between different types of self-reflexivity. Although my aim in what follows is to follow the example of self-situating commentary presented by the 'Women in the Field' writers, my position as a man makes a difference. When men turn self-reflexive problems arise. As a form of gender-alert self-examination such work may halt men's abstraction from what Elspeth Probyn (1993: 47) calls 'the responsibility of speaking their own bodies', and, for this reason, it may also thwart the tendentious but common practice of associating 'gender issues' solely with women. But, as Probyn also indicates, the straight, white and propertied male voice has for a long time been the only voice allowed to wax autobiographical—even if it did so transcendentally. Contemporary attempts at self-reflexivity from such privileged positions, however well-intentioned, still carry with them something of this history of hegemony, and one of the results tends to be a moralizing mixture of introverted angst and anger. 'This self-critical mode of reflection', says Julia Emberly,
Karen: So you need to get facial gestures and things.
Matthew: Well yeah – and like on the phone. I've tried it and it's really weird – people give you a quick answer like 'No that never happened', or, 'Yes it's OK.'

(Laughing)
Karen's sister: Just wondering.
Matthew: So yeah, it's not my way of trying to get dates, right – that's not what I'm doing.

(More laughing)
Karen's sister: I didn't want to say it like that. It just made me, well [laughing] think.
Karen: Well it's a good way to meet people in a new country I guess.
Matthew: Yeah right . . . So – anyway – what kinds of jobs have you actually been doing on assignments?

It seemed to me that Karen's sister initially felt that the interview, with its awkward beginning and simple start-off questions, looked like a rather duplicitous attempt on my part to arrange something like – 'there's nothing wrong with this' – a date. She told me that she had come along because they were both going shopping across the road at Eatons, but I think the reasons why an older woman might accompany her younger sister to an 'interview' with an anonymous man also relate directly to very real fears about safety. Karen, herself, with a number of other phrases like 'so you need to get facial gestures', seemed to have wanted to preserve the idea that the interview was properly 'academic'. Yet, she was not at all perturbed by the possibility of its ulceration function as a way of meeting people. Indeed, putting her two ways of articulating my position together appeared – I think – to recreate quite well a picture of me as an academic male tourist: a late twentieth-century version of the Englishman abroad on his grand tour of educational improvement.

Another problematic dynamic exemplified by the interview with Karen, and, indeed, by the preceding discussion of it, concerns the politics of interpretation. It was, after all, my own reading from my own position that led me to bring up the dating scenario in the first place. Likewise, I have here only presented my own view – another objectifying verb for knowledge – of what I thought Karen and her sister were thinking. One further way of illustrating how my own position was shaping my interpretations became obvious in earlier versions of this chapter itself. In it I had discussed the laughing that was part of the exchange, and had commented on how I thought my two interlocutors might have been thinking that the whole event was a bit of joke. However, as one of my feminist colleagues pointed out, this was a notably masculine reading of the laughing. Instead, she suggested that, from her perspective, it could equally be read as the laughing of women dealing with feelings of anxiety. Clearly the differences in these interpretations highlight the specificity of my own reading. As such they also point up the more general possibilities of exclusion and violence that my own representations of my research – like those of any other scholar – impose on the researched.

The dynamics of gender, or at least the more awkward, problematic and potentially oppressive aspects of gender relations, did not always become so thematic in my fieldwork. When I was talking to older women, for example, my 'Englishman abroad' position was subject to quite different readings and feelings. Apart from talking about the poor availability of Marmite in Vancouver or decent coffee in England, we often compared notes on the differences between the organization of temping in Canada and the UK. Not only was this valuable for my research – introducing such issues as overtime rules and the way agencies dodge providing holiday pay by cancelling assignments over national holidays – it also brought attention to common class experiences, shared by us both as men and women workers in workplaces globally homogenized through international capitalism. In other words, it exemplified for me what Haraway (1991a) describes as 'the unexpected openings situated knowledges make possible'.

Perhaps the most unexpected of openings and the most developed articulation of between-ness in my fieldwork overall, however, was the way in which temps themselves described how they felt that they engaged in a form of fieldwork as temps. Constantly tracking back and forth from the rest of their lives to a job, and then to another job, and then another. temps move through the 'dialetic of experience and interpretation' that Clifford (1988: 34) describes as a defining feature of participant observation. However, unlike academic fieldworkers who assume a capacity to leave the field, temps' movements are ordered quite directly by capitalist economics. There is certainly little academic idealism driving this process along, no neo-colonial will-to-knowledge and no great sense of agency, but rather the much more practical need of working to earn money to live. As they move from office to office they cannot help but see and feel the differences and similarities. Moreover, temping is in this sense a form of participant observation with the emphasis heavily placed upon participation. There is none of the voyeuristic privilege that comes from the academic's material well-being resting on the 'interpretation' side of the dialectic. Temps have instead to participate with a will, they have to 'go native' in the new office as fast as possible. The following quotation from an older woman I interviewed was a typical ethnography of arrival, and a sensitive piece of fieldwork to boot.

Normally I ask: How do you wish to have the phone answered? Who have I got? Who are the names and where are the numbers? And normally it's: Oh no, sorry we don't have a list, or so and so do you have a list, and so and so never does. And usually the desk, if you get a desk, isn't stocked, there's no paper, you have to ask. I've never been told, well here is the copy room, here is the fax room, here is the mail room. All it would need is a little map or something. And this is what happens. And you have to find it all out yourself. And if you ask any questions, they're no damn good. You've got four hours to make your mark before you're pulled off or left on the job. You ask too many questions it shows you're incompetent.
Going through such arrival routines on a regular basis, temps experience the power relations of the hegemonic and routine, and in doing so they become knowledgeable about hegemony. The possibility of such knowledge production may even be read into the sorts of facile encouragement dished out in agency magazines. For instance, Kelly's Workstyle™ pamphlet, offering ‘tips from Kelly Services® for managing your work and life style’, used as a quote of the month an insight of Eleanor Roosevelt's: ‘You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face.’ It should be emphasized, though, that such fear can be very real for temps, and, unlike the academic fieldworker who might, like Geertz (1973: 7), be urbanely exercised by the problem of distinguishing wink from faked wink, temps are obliged to interpret such cultural distinctions in a context where they are far more closely felt and sometimes quite sexually threatening. One interviewee assessed a typical patriarchal pattern as follows.

First day in the office all the men come by with some precarious question. There's often this really silly need for them to comment on the way you look – 'You look very professional', 'You look very nice' – and you have to get through all this stuff and still look professional. But I think the problem is not so much the compliment but the system of expectations you have to work out quickly.

There were many similar observations I recorded during my fieldwork, but the point I hope is already clear: temps too are agents of knowledge and interpretation. Far from being stationary others, their movements as supplementary workers afford them a position as producers of supplementary and, as such, potentially disruptive information. They see how the conventional is organized, varying and yet repeated, and in doing so they also see that it is not universal, something that is produced and which need not therefore be necessarily taken for granted. These are some of the classic characteristics of doing comparative fieldwork. But the differences distinguishing them from professional academic fieldwork also need to be noted. Not only do temps experience the strangeness of the field in more oppressive ways, they also have few of the resources granted academics. As was noted by the temp commenting on arrival routines, they are rarely given a map before they set out, and the chance of meeting an informant tends to be foreclosed by the routinized discipline of most modern offices. Moreover, temps who don't go on to become academic fieldworkers are rarely able to have their ethnographic observations listened to, let alone read in scholarly texts. Indeed, for them accruing the knowledge without anyone particularly wanting to hear it can become a practical problem. 'It's one of the reasons I'm glad I'm not a temp anymore', said one of my interviewees.

You always have to forget. Like when you get to an office and have to learn everything in 10 minutes. I filled up my head with so much garbage that way, that I had to train myself to forget everything. And then, of course, when I got good at forgetting, I got those dumb recollections asking for me to go back because 'she knows our routine'. And then, of course, by that stage I'd normally got it right out of my mind.

It was in the hope of listening and giving voice to people who are in this way obliged to learn only to forget and then learn again that I set out to record their observations and feelings. This led to some very detailed accounts of the industry which I found invaluable in my own research into its gendering and political-economy. Moreover, like England (1994: 85) in her earlier work, I was told by many of those that I interviewed 'that they found the exercise quite cathartic', allowing them to verbalize things that no one else had ever really wanted to hear. At some time, however, and also like England, I was mindful of how this did not prevent my interviews from also becoming moments of misappropriation, appropriation turned politically damaging, even oppressive. Particularly in exchanges like the one with Karen and her sister, I became aware of how my argument about giving back through listening could become little more than a rationalization for a patronizing form of business as usual. For this reason, I fully concur with feminist critics such as Gilbert (1994) who argue that attempts to meaningfully articulate and extend a space of between-ness are severely limited.

**A Conclusion**

[Field and home are dependent, not mutually exclusive, terms, and ... the lines between fieldwork and homework are not always distinct. ... Home once interrogated is a place we have never before been. (Visweswaran 1994: 113)]

Against the logic of the confession, I do not want to end on a note of self-critical despair. While some of the masculinist framings of the field are not easily displaced, their renegotiation remains a possibility even for men. At a practical level, for example, I would another time organize my interviews quite differently by enlisting the assistance (paid assistance preferably) of women colleagues. Even if it was just in the setting up of interviews, such help might allay the potential fears of would-be interviewees. Similarly, I would also in the future want to organize a more collaborative, focus group form of research that could also serve as the basis for getting temps together. More generally, though, it seems sanguine, even arrogant, to hope for immediate political and organizational advances through such refashioned fieldwork alone. Such aspirations would appear, in fact, to begin to forget how the notion of between-ness opens the possibility of multiple spaces for social change, some of which might be discontinuous from the research if not from the arguments to which its findings can contribute. They thus risk absolutizing the so-called space of between-ness as some form of reified ‘Third Space’, turning it too into a fixed and fetishized foundation that simply consolidates academic authority through another anemic geography. For the same reason it seems critical to heed Visweswaran's (1994: 102) warning that: '[f]ew proclamations that “the field is everywhere,” even when coupled with critiques of fieldwork, do little to unsettle the epistemological weight fieldwork
man, and the children are in his perfect image. The eye is infinitely more potent than the gun. Both put a woman to shame – reproductively’ (1989: 43).

Derrida speaks more generally of how ‘metaphysics has erased within itself the fabulous scene that has produced it, the scene that nevertheless remains active and stirring . . . an invisible design covered over in the palimpsest’ (1982: 213).

Although, as Pam Moss has pointed out to me in private communication, saying that blasphemy comprises dissent without apostasy, may not adequately reflect the serious and, in some ways, faithful forms of study conducted by feminists that remain committed to challenging the status quo.

Pred also critically documents here what I would call Carl Sauer’s romanticized white supremacy. Such criticism would no doubt also seem to threaten the imperialism of the sacred fire.

This put down seems to me to be bolder than that of George Marcus who, as an anthropologist, recently mocked attempts at ethnographic reflexivity by geographers, dubbing them ‘“[m]ore (critically) reflexive than thou”, (1992). While there was critical blasphemy that perhaps discomfited Marcus in the subsequent essays of Crang, Katz, Keith and Rogers, his commentator’s worry that reflexivity can become ‘the mode of a rather puritanical, competitive assessment among scholars’ (1992: 489), did nevertheless suggest a danger which I feel is serious, and which I discuss in relation to my own masculinity below.

She notes in conclusion that

[a] written text is merely a point amidst a continuous fabric of other texts that includes all communicative forms through which researcher, researched and institutional frameworks are relationally defined. Such contextualizations are essential if we are to carry out the kind of collaborative, global and otherwise transgressive kinds of research that presently peppers feminist geographers’ horizons.


For a critique of how textualism has been limited so as to exclude feminist work in anthropology see Deborah Gordon’s critique of the role of ‘Writing’ (1988: 7-24) and, the further contextualization of its racism written by bell hooks (1990: 123-33).

See also Teresa de Lauretis’s post-Althusserian description of how critics conducting feminist critique lie ‘both IN and OUT side ideology’ (1987: 10).

The name ‘temp’ is the popular abbreviation for temporary workers whose largest contractor in North America, the misnamed Manpower Services Inc., now employs more people annually than General Motors. For a discussion of the industry’s political economy see Sparke (1994c). For another series of quasi-ethnographic critiques of temping see the testimonials now being printed in the popular zine Temp Slave from Keffo, POB 5184, Bethlehem, PA 18015.

See also James Clifford’s discussion of ‘fables of rapport’ used to ‘narrate the attainment of participant-observer status’ and thereby establish ‘a presumption of connectedness, which permits the writer to function in his subsequent analyses as exegete and spokesperson’ (1988: 40).

A major problem with a moralistic approach, of course, is that along with self-centering, the marginalized get marginalized still more. It leads to a dead end. Nast puts it this way: ‘Guilt that centers merely on the existence of this inequality and not on how the inequality can be transformed is therefore unproductively paralyzing’ (1994: 58).

I discuss the patriarchal relations structuring temping at length in Sparke (forthcoming).

I should note, though, that some of these deficiencies have now begun to be addressed as a matter of capitalist expediency. ‘Provide some information on the “culture” and “norms” of your organization so that temps can fit in comfortably’ advises The Office, 111, 1990: 59-60. In a similar vein Supervisory Management for...