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Coming to terms: Reinserting research assistants into ethnography's past and present

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Abstract

Research assistants have long been central to ethnographic practice, yet the conventions of academic labor have left their roles under-stated and obscure. The implications, we opine, are both theoretical and practical. Writing research assistants back in to our collective considerations of the method does more than simply fill a lacuna in the 'reflexive turn'. It opens windows onto a radically transformed field of ethnographic practice. Today, the 'field' appears neither where nor what it used to be. Ethnographers are exploring ever-new terrains—many of them emergent, unstable, and dangerous. These endeavors, in turn, are prompting new kinds of research relationships. Against this backdrop, the time is now for a critical reappraisal of the players of contemporary ethnography. Venturing a new calculus of reflexive thinking, this Introduction engages the research assistant to revisit core ethnographic concerns—among them: research in dangerous places; the ethics of ethnographic labor; the shifting differentials of 'academic vs. native' expertise; and the socially produced nature of the 'field' itself. As the articles and Introduction of this special issue show, research assistants unsettle conventional understandings of what ethnography is and can be. Readmitted to the conversation, they provide a unique look into ethnography's current state of play—and glimpses of the method's future possibilities.

Keywords

methods, fieldwork, ethics, reflexivity, research assistants

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What is the role of research assistants in the production of ethnographic knowledge? This is a question to which ethnographers have offered few systematic answers. Even as ethnography has negotiated the 'reflexive turn' over recent decades, the figure of the research assistant has received little sustained attention – this despite their frequent centrality to fieldwork itself. Now, as ethnography moves into a time of multidisciplinary expansion and renewal (Borneman and Hammoudi, 2009; Burawoy, 2000; Faubion and Marcus, 2009; Rabinow et al., 2008; Westbrook, 2008), what might theorizing these relationships contribute to understandings of fieldwork – past, present, and future? What kinds of practices and possibilities do these shadowy figures open up or foreclose? Are research assistants simply 'employees' in the field, or are they constitutive of 'the field' itself? And what might they, however figured, teach us about ethnography today? Contributors to this special issue offer some answers to these critical questions.

Fittingly, this project originated in the field. The conversation began, as they often do, in a pub with good company. We (Cons and Middleton) were in the midst of extended research: Cons on the India-Bangladesh border, and Middleton in the agitated hills of Darjeeling, India. Seeking a respite from fieldwork, we retreated into one of Darjeeling's watering holes to update each other on research and take the edge off the day. While there, Middleton's research assistant Eklavya stopped by, curious to meet another ethnographer. In his characteristic way, Eklavya managed to charm us whilst sucking down whisky and cigarettes – only to dash off to do whatever it was he did in his many lives beyond being a research assistant. His fleeting presence gone, conversation turned to the uncanny similarities between Eklavya and Cons's research assistant in Bangladesh, Saiful. Intellectually inclined, politically engaged, and socially adept, Saiful and Eklavya were proving integral to our fieldwork, but in ways that resisted simplistic understandings of research assistants as mere ciphers. Saiful and Eklavya's involvement in our work facilitated not just the collection of data, but the very experience of fieldwork itself. Indeed, we could not fathom our respective fields without them.

As the conversation that night meandered from the doings of Saiful and Eklavya specifically to research assistants more generally, we mulled over the glaring lack of any sustained discussion of research assistants in the history and contemporary contours of ethnography. Nowhere in our training as anthropologist and sociologist had we broached the matter in anything more than a cursory way. We could recall only sporadic mention of research assistants in the vast literature on the practice of fieldwork. And even then, these rare mentions only partially mapped to the experiences we were having with Saiful and Eklavya. Why weren't ethnographers talking more about research assistants? Why, when in the post-*Writing Culture* moment so many of ethnography's secrets had been brought to light, had these figures remained, for the most part, in the shadows? What would it mean to write the stories of people like Saiful and Eklavya back into ethnography's history? How would they stand up to figures like 'Doc', George Hunt, and Muchona 'the Hornet', who were so instrumental to the work of William Foote

Whyte, Franz Boas, and Victor Turner? And what might these more contemporary workers of the field tell us about ethnography today?

Having extended this conversation to numerous colleagues who share our own curiosity about such an endeavor, we believe the time is now for a critical reappraisal of the players of contemporary fieldwork. Over the decades, occasional authors have addressed research assistants (discussed below), but there have been no systematic or collective treatments. Responding to this relative silence, the Fieldwork(ers) project does more than simply fill a lacuna in the 'reflexive turn'. It opens windows onto a radically transformed spectrum of ethnographic practice. Today, 'the field' appears neither *where* nor *what* it used to be (Faubion and Marcus, 2009). With ethnographers exploring ever-new terrains – many of them emergent, unstable, and dangerous – accessing, navigating, and comprehending these nascent fields has prompted new kinds of research relationships. Against this backdrop, it is more important than ever that fixers, liaisons, and helpers of dubious designation assume their rightful place in the ethnographic imagination. Indeed, as contributions to this issue demonstrate, understanding the shifting contours of working relationships between researchers and research assistants marks one important way to understand new dimensions of ethnographic practice, new spaces of ethnographic inquiry, and new modes of ethnographic engagement. Calculating and analytically deft in their own right, these are the figures that, more often than we acknowledge, put ethnographers everywhere they want to be (and some places they do not). The implications of foregrounding such relationships are both theoretical and practical.

The essays bring together the voices of various researchers, as well as their assistants, to forge a new calculus of reflexive thinking – at once multi-perspectival and theoretically driven. Centering these partnerships in narratives of fieldwork, we are particularly interested in the entwined epistemological, political, and social dimensions of these working relationships. *Epistemologically*, we ask how research assistants mediate between local and academic paradigms, negotiating all the while researchers' understandings of their subjects and vice versa. *Politically*, we question how exactly research assistants leverage subject positions for their own and others' good (and bad), and how they enable and occlude particular kinds of inquiries, explorations, and results. These dynamics, we observe, are a part of the inexorably *social* nature of fieldwork – and of the production of knowledge more generally.

Fieldwork(ers) seeks to carve out a space of post-field dialogue about method, epistemology, and the contingent relationships that shape fieldwork experiences. From these tales, we interrogate the multiple roles of research assistants in the research process and beyond. At issue are the real-time dynamics of these partnerships. Thinking ethnographically about fieldworkers themselves, the articles draw together the actual experiences of researchers and assistants to develop an empirically grounded critique of how – and crucially, with whom – we make our knowledge. The approach, we believe, offers a unique look into ethnography's current state of play.

Opaque presences

Perhaps the most notable quality of the literature on research assistants is its sparse, episodic, and ad hoc character. The scattered pieces that address this relationship in no way constitute a cohesive 'literature' on research assistants. More often than not, discussions of research assistants are limited to footnotes, formal acknowledgements, or references to 'companions along for the ethnographic ride'. Rarer still, particularly in recent years, are cases that critically engage their agency, practices, and centrality in the field itself. Manuals on ethnographic methods seldom give research assistants anything but the most cursory discussion. The oversight extends into graduate student training as well. For even the most established scholars, the subject of research assistants can make for uncomfortable conversation.

Clearly there are institutional conditions undergirding this discomfort and subsequent silence on the issue. Academic norms of proficiency and authorship play a crucial role here. From the standpoint of proficiency, research assistants seem to signal a lack – of linguistic capability, access, understanding, etc. – on the part of the researcher his/her self. Concerning authorship, ethnographers today must find their place in an academy that privileges individual autonomy through its systems of recognizing scholarly achievement. The research assistant necessarily problematizes these norms of scholastic autonomy.

S/he, too, offers a timely challenge to the myth of the individuated ethnographic self. As Gupta and Ferguson ask, 'How many of the "lone anthropologists" doing fieldwork in "other cultures" have actually worked alone? What does the heavy reliance of so many ethnographers on "native" research assistants do to our conceits about the intrinsic virtues of the "professionally trained observer"?' (1997: 23).¹ If research assistants are regularly written into grant proposals, budgets, and research designs, their presence tends to be conveniently erased in the all important progressions from fieldwork to published ethnography. This erasure precludes discussion of the realm where research assistants make the most impact: fieldwork itself. This decoupling of workers from the field re-inscribes precisely the kinds of alienation that so much postcolonial critique has aimed to redress (cf. Asad, 1973; Chakrabarty, 2000; Prakash, 1992, 1994; Said, 1978; Spivak, 1999).

The estrangement of fieldworkers from the final products of their labor has implications not just for them, but also for broader understanding of 'the field' itself (Amit, 2000; Gupta and Ferguson, 1997). Recent theorizations have rightly noted that 'the field' emerges through ethnographic practice. It is not some pre-existing place waiting for an ethnographer to find it. Rather, 'the field' is constructed, negotiated, and made (Reddy, 2009: 90; Schumaker, 2001). Such conceptualizations demand attention to the agents and labor through which fields come into being. This means recognizing research assistants as part and parcel of the *social* ontology of the field itself (Bourdieu, 1987; Hirabayashi, 1999: 165).

Historically, we know assistants have played a central role in fieldwork.² But they have suffered considerable omission and elision along the way. Figured as 'key informants' (Casagrande, 1960; Dumont, 1978; Fricke, 2006), 'cultural brokers'

(Geertz, 1980; Schumaker, 2001: 13; Wolf, 1956), ‘interpreters’ (Lowie, 1960), and other designations, the functions of research assistants appear as varied as the terms of their employment. Even when acknowledged as enablers, we have heard little of how research assistants impact the actual directions of research. Notable exceptions do exist, however. For example, in *The Italians of San Francisco* (1975 [1935]), Radin explicitly argued for the employment of research assistants as a necessary strategy for engaging the field. Radin notes that ‘the very training [of academic researchers] erects an undesirable barrier between themselves and the person to be interrogated and this barrier is increased by the fact that they have frequently no experience in establishing contacts with strangers’ (cited in Gupta and Ferguson, 1997: 23). Research assistants plucked from the communities under study could transcend not just cultural barriers but also elitist distance and awkwardness.

If Radin doubted the sanctity of professionalized training and research, others have suggested a more hybrid understanding of the relations of ethnographers, native assistants, and the field. Lyn Schumaker (2001), for instance, illustrates how native assistants informed the ethnographies of the Manchester School, coproducing an ‘Africanized’ field – and, indeed, what she deems an ‘Africanized anthropology’. The dynamic between researchers and assistants thus comes into view as one of co-production, rather than a simple conveyance of data.

These examples notwithstanding, the agency of research assistants remains obscure. One approach that has been intermittently employed to re-center the research assistant has been co-authorship. Dating back to Boas’s pioneering work with George Hunt (Boas and Hunt, 1905–6) and extending through the literary bents of the ‘writing culture’ debates, co-authorship posits a form of collaboration where research assistants share equal responsibility for research results.³ Yet, with some notable exceptions (Gujar and Gold, 1992; Gold and Gujar, 2002), what co-authored pieces have not done is to interrogate the working relations of these partnerships and the co-constituted modes of engagement that they afford.

The doubts and silences that shroud the research assistant are assumed and perpetuated in classrooms, conversations, and writings for particular reasons. In a seminal article, Roger Sanjek (1993) has argued that the power differentials of the researcher-assistant relationship constitute anthropology’s ‘hidden colonialism’. Sanjek’s insightful critique suggests the ways colonial and exploitative power [may] still dominate the practice of fieldwork. The controversies over William Foote Whyte’s relationship with Ernest Pecci, or ‘Doc’, his famous key informant/research assistant in *Street Corner Society* (1993 [1943]), hinge on similar questions of exploitation. In a 1992 article revisiting *Street Corner Society*, Marianne Boelen argued that many of those discussed in Whyte’s pioneering work, particularly Doc himself, felt not only misrepresented but also taken advantage of. In defending himself, Whyte wrote, ‘Doc’s sons state that I had exploited their father. While I grant that I got more from the relationship than he did, that was not my intention’ (Whyte, 1993: 61). Raising the possibility that Doc himself may have gained from this working relationship, Whyte went on to chronicle his support of Doc’s political and professional career during and after fieldwork. Nevertheless,

questions concerning his 'use' of Doc remain. Research assistant exploitation took a more intra-academic form when Professor Dorothy Swain Thomas enlisted Japanese graduate student Tamie Tsuchiyama for fieldwork in the Japanese internment camps of the 1940s. On her own in compromising, potentially dangerous circumstances, Tsuchiyama eventually quit. Her relationship with Thomas deteriorated soon thereafter (Hirabayashi, 1999: 5). These examples call attention to inequalities that inhere in the researcher–assistant relationship.

The employer–employee dynamic mustn't be overlooked. If there is anything that clearly distinguishes research assistants from other informants and helpers it is this condition of employment. While these fieldworkers may become key informants, cultural brokers, co-authors, and even friends, they remain employees. As such, the commodification of ethnographic labor proves integral to the researcher–assistant partnership. That commodification directly shapes the data obtained through these working relationships. Ethnographic labor here cannot be divorced from the logics of capital. With rare exceptions, ethnographers are in the business of transforming the work of the hired assistant into the cache of intellectual capital and acumen. This happens anytime academic ethnographers single-author publications on fieldwork that was in practice co-produced, socially constituted, and shared from the start. These transformations from use to exchange value, in a Marxian sense, raise troubling concerns about the commensurability of labor, data, money, and ethnographic 'truth'. Which is not to suggest that research assistants share equally in the labor of producing ethnography or that the moment of fieldwork is the only key moment in the production of the commodities of the academic trade. It does, however, point to ways in which the role of capital in, as opposed to simply the subject of, fieldwork remains mystified and naturalized, often by those whose writing and research seeks to do precisely the opposite. Bringing the research assistant back in offers a productive way to address – and perhaps offset – these dynamics of ethnographic knowledge production.

Contracted labor here is the primary but not the only place where capital inserts itself into the researcher–assistant relationship. Working for an ethnographer may profoundly change the research assistant's standing in ways that exceed strictly financial concerns. Victor Turner's relationship with Muchona the Hornet is illustrative in this regard. In *The Forest of Symbols* (1967), Turner describes an incident in which Muchona, his key informant/research assistant, uses money Turner had provided him to purchase a suit. As other villagers discover how Muchona came to own the suit, he is ridiculed, accused of spreading lies and tales to outsiders, and forced to return the garment. In an insightful reading of this incident, Jules-Rosette argues that the relationship between Turner and Muchona, as exemplified in the purchasing of the suit and Muchona's explanation of Ndembu ritual, represents a complex process of ethnographic transculturation.

Muchona literally sheds his old clothes, as well as his former identity, as he reaches out to Turner, whose subject position as the anthropologist has subtly shifted... Muchona presides over Turner's initiation into the web of conflict and

social pressure of Ndembu life. And Turner brought Muchona – already a troubled, fractal, and marginal subject – closer to digesting the West. (Jules-Rosette, 1994: 169–70)

The active engagement between researcher and research assistant is figured as a transformative one. Neither Muchona nor Turner remains untouched. However, what is also notable in this transformation are the ways that Muchona is marked within his community by the receipt and use of capital from Turner. The lesson is instructive: working with ethnographers can transform ‘native’ assistants’ relationships with their ‘home’ in ambiguous and often troubling ways.

These issues certainly inform the silence and doubts about the use of research assistants in ethnographic practice. But what are we not seeing by not talking about these workers of the field? In what ways might reintroducing fieldworkers back into the discussion of fieldwork not only expose uncomfortable truths but open up new and productive possibilities? The question points us toward ethnography’s current contours. Writing the research assistant back into the debates, the contributors of this special issue work against the assumption that working with research assistants entails a deficiency of either the research or researcher. Rather, the Fieldwork(ers) project sets out to explore the opportunities, challenges, and possibilities opened up by the inclusion of research assistants in the actual doing of ethnography – as well as in our collective reflections thereof. Offsetting the literary bent of the reflexive turn, the focus here is on the actual people and practices of the method. If, as Lyn Schumaker has opined, ‘A field-centered history of anthropology can make research assistants’ work visible again’ (2001: 12), this special issue also ventures to consider how a critical consideration of research assistants, *now*, might refigure the present and future possibilities of ethnography across the disciplines.

Key themes

These articles bring into focus important themes for exploring researchers, assistants, and ethnographic practice more generally. To begin, multiple contributors take on the question of ethnography in unstable places. As ethnographers venture into increasingly dangerous terrains for fieldwork, their research continues to yield critical understandings of war, conflict, insurgency, and revolution (e.g., Nordstrom and Robben, 1996; Nash, 1976). But such endeavors entail myriad practical, ethical, and epistemic difficulties. In such circumstance the research assistant may prove not only advantageous but vital to the safety of the ethnographer. Daniel Hoffman and his research assistant, Sparo (himself a leader of the Civil Defense Force militia), initiate this conversation with chilling accounts of their work in war-torn Sierra Leon. David Holmberg follows with a reflection on his growing implication in the charged ethno-politics of Nepal – an implication born largely out of Holmberg’s relationship with his research assistant. Jason Cons reflects on fieldwork along the militarized borders of Bangladesh, theorizing the co-dependencies of researchers and assistants alike. Towns Middleton and his

assistant Eklavya discuss work in the charged context of subnationalist agitation in Darjeeling, India. The research assistant figures here as a ‘fixer’ – uniquely able to get the ethnographer into the action and out of trouble. Collectively, these essays reveal the challenging conditions of fieldwork in unstable places. As we learn, ethnography on the frontlines demands partnerships and collaborative engagements that challenge the conventional paradigms of ‘scholarly’ research.

Central here are the ethics of contemporary ethnography – our second key theme. Importantly, the figure of the research assistant raises both old and new questions on the ethics of ethnographic research. Pluralizing consideration of the politics of representation, Anne Gold and her assistants Bhoju Ram Gujar, Madhu Gujar and Chinu Gujar discuss the evolution and entanglements of family ties, research participation, and ethnographic representation. But the line of ethical questioning in these essays runs deeper. Hoffman, Cons, and Middleton, for example, candidly discuss the ethical gray areas of fieldwork. By enabling the study of dangerous subjects, assistants also muddy the waters of ethical reasoning in ways that challenge existing ethical conventions of the method. Particularly now, when ethics is once again at the fore of ethnography’s public profile (*viz.* the return of the controversies surrounding Napoleon Chagnon in 2012–13, recent debates over embedded anthropologists in the US armed forces, etc.), these honest accounts of researchers and their assistants prove especially timely. In short, writing research assistants back into our collective reckonings throws a different kind of light on ethnography’s ethical quandaries – old and new.

Third, the articles theorize the generative dialectics and shifting differentials of ethnographic knowledge production. If the researcher–assistant relationship is predicated on difference, it may also set into motion palpable transformations in the positionality and expertise of assistants and ethnographers alike. In this regard, research assistants unsettle rigid understandings of insider/outsider knowledge. They often occupy a third space – neither wholly inside nor outside the field. But neither is the ethnographer’s position static or clear. While they may begin as outsiders dependent on assistants, gradually their position and expertise may shift, triggering a litany of power struggles and epistemic possibilities amongst fieldworkers themselves. Reflecting on these transformations, the authors examine the dynamic entanglements of ethnographic expertise, local knowledge, and positionality in the field. For example, senior scholars David Holmberg and Anne Gold and her Gujar assistants chronicle research relationships that span not just one stretch of fieldwork but decades of engagement (see also Howell and Talle, 2011). These essays document how intimate engagement with research assistants over time changes the very nature of the field itself, moving researchers from more classically defined research agendas to markedly more personal and often political relationships with and to the communities in which they work. Other contributors reflect on more short-term or ‘one-and-done’ experiences with research assistants. Unlike ethnographers, research assistants often cannot leave the field once fieldwork is done. Depending on the work conducted, this condition may spell the necessary

end of partnerships gone either bad or simply too dangerous to carry on with good conscience. Even for the most transcendent partnerships, difference, in such instances, remains.

Finally, the essays work to reconceptualize ethnographic agency and ‘the field’ itself. This requires thinking anew the relations of the *field* to the *workers* that bring it into being. The issue concerns not so much the division (or sharing) of ethnographic agency. Rather, we ask what kinds of research engagement researchers and assistants bring into being. Can such collaborations exceed the sum of their parts to open new modes of inquiry, new ‘objects’ of analysis, and new kinds of ‘fields’? If so, how might these partnerships help rewrite received, often occluded, understandings of the method? While all of the essays in this special issue offer a provisional answer of ‘yes’ to the first question, we see the second question as one to be worked out in the years ahead across an ever-expanding landscape of ethnographic practice. These essays offer a beginning to this coming conversation. Rethinking the *field* through its *work(ers)*, we aim to unpack fieldwork through the actual people, practices, and partnerships that make it happen.

As in the field, the Fieldwork(ers) project thus sees researchers and assistants come together to co-produce understandings – this time of ethnography itself. The collection is neither a ‘methods piece’ per se nor a collective ‘how-to’ for prospective fieldworkers. Rather, the project ventures a different theorization of ethnography – through the figure of the research assistant. The fieldworker partnerships discussed are not offered as replicable relationships but rather as strategies to further problematize and push questions that have dogged the field since the 1980s. As such, authors in this issue approach the relations of researchers, assistants, and the field not as a ‘thing’, but rather as a lens to rethink and interrogate some of the fundamental questions about ethnographic work today and going forward. Our aim here is to capture both the critical idiosyncrasies of specific ethnographic engagements and to ask how these particularities are complicit in producing contemporary ethnography. In doing so, we hope this will be a first salvo in an ongoing exploration of not just the practice but also the practitioners of ethnography today.

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Notes

1. Recent attention to collaboration has also helped debunk the myth of the lone ethnographer. George Marcus writes, ‘Today collaborations of various kinds are increasingly both the medium and objects of fieldwork, quite aside from the long established

collaborative character of the relationships between fieldworkers and their once labeled “key informants” in the Malinowskian scene of encounter’ (Marcus, 2009: 29). The work with these ‘epistemic partners’ (Marcus, 2009: 30) does much to pluralize the agency of ethnographic knowledge production (cf. Reddy, 2009). But again, research assistants are notably absent from these discussions.

2. For various accounts of anthropology’s historical entanglements with research assistants, see Bauman and Briggs (1999) and Jacknis’s (1991) discussions of Hunt and Boas; Kroeber and Kroeber (2003) and Starn’s (2005) work on Ishi; Bailey’s (1995) writing on Francis La Flesche; Clifford (1983) on Griaule’s reliance on teams of key informants/assistants; Metcalf’s (2002) discussion of Muchona and Turner; Morgan’s (1851) discussion of Morgan and Parker/Hasanoanda; and Berreman (2007). For a more comprehensive evaluation of these figures in anthropology’s history, see Sanjek (1993).
3. For examples of such collaboration see Gold and Gujar (2002); Majnep, Bulmer and Healey (1978); Hakim Hassan’s afterward to Duneier’s *Sidewalk* (1999); Holmberg, March and Tamang (1998); and Redfield and Villa Rojas (1934).

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