Notes from the Icehouse

Research in Theory and Practice

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In June 2019 I traveled to rural Malawi for six weeks to conduct preliminary dissertation research. I set out with confidence. I had, after all, checked off all the right boxes. Two years before I had successfully completed field work in South Africa (Reynolds, 2018; Reynolds, 2021). Now I was returning to another part of the continent, to a village in which I had previously conducted community outreach activities in partnership with a local nonprofit. I had contacts in the village, an interpreter, people I considered friends. I had spent the last year studying the local language and would continue lessons upon arrival. The villagers knew I was coming; many of them had communicated, via my primary village contact, their excitement about my research project. I was to investigate how Malawian farmers navigate climate change adaptation discourse and policy through community-engaged, action-based research. I had written a dissertation proposal, brushed up on the literature. A local academic had

agreed to advise me. I even found a mountain bike to borrow for transportation to the village and to ride for fun in my free time. With all these boxes ticked, I thought I was well prepared.

Yet misgivings began to surface in the weeks and days leading up to my departure. My primary village contact asked me to bring more, and then more, money to pay him and the farmers I planned to work with after we had agreed upon a set participation fee. When I denied his requests, he told me that I shouldn't come to the village at all, despite months of communication and preparation with the people there. Most likely, I reasoned with myself and my advisors, this was a personal conflict that could be resolved once I arrived in the village. I was wrong. When I arrived, my village contact refused to see me. As I scrambled to find another interpreter, miscommunication with the local village chief delayed project activities. Community members consistently asked for more money for participation, and I had to refuse them even as I rode my bike back to my discounted room at the upscale lodge that still cost more than the lo-

Figure 1. Conducting agroecological outreach activities with farmers in Lilongwe District, Malawi, during my first visit in 2014.
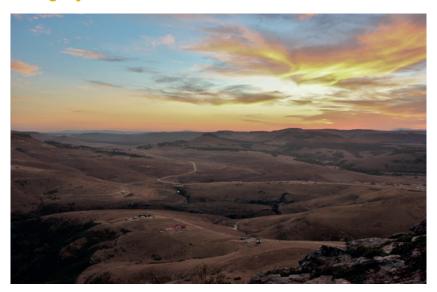
cal average annual income. But raising their participation payment just wasn't in the approved budget. Throughout my time there, I heard repeatedly about an earlier, failed business project introduced by another American who stayed at the same lodge. I recognised the implied – and disparaging – comparison with my own research, though neither its design nor its purposes remotely resembled those of the earlier project. I could not extract myself from the colonial development legacy that has so profoundly enveloped the country.[1]

During those six weeks in Malawi, I was confronted with uncertainties that I could not fit into my neat list of checked boxes. This confrontation with an unfamiliar world was reminiscent of my encounter with a *sangoma* (traditional healer) two years before in South Africa (Reynolds, 2019). Sitting in the sangoma's medicinal hut, she told me that her spirit ancestors insisted she request a larger monetary 'gift' than the one I had offered for her services. In that moment I realised that my Western perspective was not the only one guiding my research. I had to face the futility of the assumptions I held about the world. These assumptions couldn't help me understand what the *sangoma* asked of me, at least in a way that respected her experience as much as mine. I could not explain or respond to this unknown that was her own religio-cultural worldview with any of the tools in my epistemological toolbox. In that small moment inside the *sangoma's* hut, I shed something pre-determined about my world and leaned into the unknown.

From that experience, I began to appreciate the need for a new kind of research that accepts the possibilities of non-Western knowledge systems and ways of being. I found a name for these possibilities and a framework for thinking through this research in the collected essays edited by Bernd Reiter titled *Constructing the Pluriverse* (2018). These essays on the pluriverse reinforced my sense of the importance of moving beyond colonial rigidities of thinking and

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[1] While in hindsight many of these events leading up to and during the research are obvious red flags, at the time many of them were viewed and explained - by myself and colleagues - as all a part of the research process. In other words, these conflicts were unfortunate but were also possible to overcome.

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Figure 2. A landscape of the Eastern Cape, South Africa, during my Master's fieldwork in 2017.

theorising – of embracing what Reiter calls 'a global tapestry of alternatives'.[2]

Leaning into the uncertainty in Malawi was not so straightforward. The different perspectives I encountered, including on the politics of money, seemed to be incompatible with my ability to complete my dissertation project. How could I un-determine this research when, at the end of the day, I had to leave with the makings of a dissertation?

Two years after returning from Malawi and four years after my time in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, I still haven't found an answer. I tell this story now, not because I think my experiences are unique or even exceptionally remarkable, but as part of the process of reflection on my privilege in academia, the responsibility I carry

[2] Although Reiter's collection of essays was my first introduction to this term, conceptualisations of the pluriverse have been introduced and championed by Native and Indigenous communities, notably the Zapatista movement's articulation of 'a world in which many worlds fit' (EZLN, 1996).

to the communities with whom I work, and the ongoing violence of racist colonialism.

I write this also to honour a commitment I made to myself to continue these conversations around the politics and ethics of fieldwork – for my own practice in reflexivity, but also to encourage more graduate students (and their mentors) to think critically about international or ethnographic fieldwork. Many of the questions I grappled with in Malawi and through the months that followed are the same ones that feminist scholars have contended with for years. I find this both comforting and unsettling.

Diane L. Wolf writes in the acknowledgements to the edited 1996 volume *Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork* (p. xiii) that she put together the book she wished she had as a graduate student working through her own fieldwork and post-fieldwork experience. In the months following my return from Malawi, I initiated the conversations with advisors, faculty and other graduate students that I wished I had before departure. Our conversations covered many of the same topics introduced in *Feminist Dilemmas*, as well as many other articles and books published on this topic. We compared the optimistic discourse of community-engaged, action-oriented research with the understated discussions of conflicts and challenges faced on the ground: performing the emotional labour required to create and maintain research relationships, navigating the politics of reciprocity and the political economy of research, and balancing the integrity of research practices with the simple act of being human in the field.

These conversations helped me process what felt like a standstill. It wasn't that the challenges I faced in the field couldn't be overcome. It was that I couldn't overcome them as a graduate student with limited resources and time. I had to accept that I did not have the funds to pay farmers higher rates for research activities, nor the time within my graduate programme to develop the relationships with people and place for truly community-engaged research. I was not, as a Ph.D. student from the US, the academic partner that the community needed.

I also had to come to terms with the deeply personal realisation that *I did not want to do this work.* I didn't want to uproot my life for months on end, in relative isolation from friends and family. I

Figure 3. Dawn in Malawi, 2019.

didn't want to live every day exhausted by the emotional labour of living in a country where my white, privileged presence reenacted colonial relations. This admission felt like treachery: to survive the neoliberal and institutional violence of the academy on our emotional and mental wellbeing (see Smith and Ulus, 2020), we equip ourselves with the discourse of passion or convince ourselves that we have a calling to accept a career that blurs the work/life boundary. By admitting that this research was only work to me and that I wasn't willing to commit my life to it, I felt selfish. I felt that I had failed.

I still struggle with my decision to not return to Malawi and continue that dissertation project. I asked the villagers to commit their time, energy, and ideas to my project and, simply put, I owed them for that. Further, there will always be uneven power relationships within the realm of research, regardless of where that research occurs. And I do believe that co-productive inter-community research is possible. As Cindi Katz has written (in her chapter in *Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork*),

> It is time to live and work with and against the contradictions rather than employing self-confession as a barrier against them. Social scientists who engage in field research must find non-innocent (self-reflexive and clearly positioned) ways to work in the world such that we can at once uncover common bonds and recognize differences (1996, p. 197).

I'd like to think my decision to reposition my fieldwork domestically was a move away from the colonial violence of international research. But there was certainly a selfish hue to that decision, one that turned away from daily confrontations with my privilege. Perhaps it was a move to innocence. It strikes me now that these two possibilities were never divergent outcomes, but simultaneous and inevitable.

Feminist scholars have long called for institutional change in the conduct of fieldwork and in the kinds of research that academia recognizes and prioritises. In alignment with those calls, I am asking for something a little less grand in scale. I'd like to see greater visibility of the realities of fieldwork and the institutionalisation of con-

Figure 4. The village at dusk in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, 2018.

versations about research politics and ethics. Particularly for graduate students, and especially in the context of international research, these conversations should be a requisite part of the preparation for qualitative fieldwork.

I am cautious of the academic tendency toward intellectualisation, the defence mechanism of thinking to avoid feeling (Freud, 1992; Smith and Ulus, 2020). I don't want performative conversations that only function to ease the conscience. I don't need further research and analysis on ethnography and power relations to add to my citations list. What I needed before that pre-dissertation trip, and what I still need now, is care-full, empathetic and consistent dialogue that unchecks the boxes and illuminates the realities, and therefore the actual capacities and consequences, of graduate level research. By encouraging dialogue on these issues, I hope to change the possibilities for such research.

In South Africa, I had to choose to let go of what I thought I knew. I discovered new possibilities of research and encounter when I un-determined my world. I believe this is a pivotal step toward better and more critical forms of engaged scholarship. But it requires much, especially of the young researcher: understanding when they are equipped with the right tools to engage respectfully and intentionally with the uncertain, and recognising when they need to step aside. In the end, the pluriverse doesn't need me in it to exist.

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