PROTECTING PRIVACY IN FOREIGN FIELDS

GARTH ANDREW MYERS

The one by whom the object exists is thus a deject who places (himself), separates (himself), and therefore strays instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing. … Necessarily dichotomous, somewhat Manichean, he divides, excludes, and without, properly speaking, wishing to know his objections is not at all unaware of them. Often, moreover, he includes himself among them, thus casting within himself the scalpel that carries out his separations.

—Julia Kristeva, 1982

And you may find yourself in another part of the world
And you may ask yourself, well, how did I get here?


Privacy is an ambivalent and multifaceted question when fieldwork is conducted in Africa by a non-African scholar. Assuming that the researcher makes a conscious and political choice to live among the people whose thoughts, lives, and cultural practices are being studied, the first great difficulty appears to be protecting private space and a sense of self. Shortly, though, additional questions arise about the privacy rights of others in our conduct of research and our writing about it. Each side of the privacy issue is complicated. In this essay I examine privacy questions that I experienced on various projects in Tanzania and Malawi from 1991 to 2000, most of them in the city of Zanzibar. I start, as does fieldwork, by examining myself.

A number of geographers have become captivated by the opportunities opened up to humanistic geographical inquiry by various modes of psychoanalysis (Pile 1993; Bondi 1999). I do not wish to sidestep these opportunities entirely, but I also do not want to make this essay entirely about what goes on in my head, as Julia Kristeva does in the lead epigraph, mainly because I hope I am a better storyteller than a psychoanalyst. Still, fieldwork for Western-trained academics is foremost a private, inner exploration. Kwame Anthony Appiah distinguished the general strategy of Western fiction writers from that of African writers, suggesting that westerners engage in a “search for the self,” whereas African writers embark on a “search for a culture” (1992, 74). His conception, generalized though it is, also works to differentiate the Western field-worker, as bourgeois intellectual individualist, from how he or she appears to the surrounding city-dwellers or villagers, as a new player in a social collective.

Selfishness is inherent in individuated Western fieldwork in non-Western settings, an arrogant assumption that somehow one person develops explanatory powers. One quickly learns that selfishness must give way to a sharing, an open-ended...
identity enmeshed in a community. This giving way of self, however, also has its limits. Certainly I have felt there were parts of my soul that I needed to hold privately out of the field of play in fieldwork. To negotiate the boundaries between selfishness and selflessness addresses how I go about “casting within [my]self the scalpel that carries out [my] separations” as Kristeva put it (1982, 8).

The literal translation of the Swahili word used to describe a white person, mzungu (pl. wazungu), is “stranger.” As one of two wazungu in the Kikwajuni ward of Zanzibar city in 1991 and 1992, the “stranger” label remained mine until I was known by my middle name, Andrew, by what sometimes seemed to be all 4,000 people in the ward. Children were especially fond of calling out “Andrew!” as I walked by or rode through the alleys on my bike, and I grew fond of their voices. In ordinary life identity is, to a considerable degree, a gendered performance (Butler 1997, 258). Although we cannot control entirely how those who see us performing interpret the performance, at most times what appears outwardly is an installation of what we inwardly deem an acceptable appearance, beyond our unconscious selves: It is an act. In foreign field experiences, totally immersed in another language, this can be a performance I feel I am watching, an out-of-body experience.

The dominant use of my middle name came about innocently enough, through difficulties in pronouncing my first name and ample local familiarity with “Andrew” as both a saint (for the Christians, who are a sizable minority in Kikwajuni) and a liver-salt medication (for everyone else). Being somewhere between a saint and an intestinal disorder suited me, and because a great many of my male Zanzibari friends are known by their nicknames or monikers other than their given name, I felt I was following custom. But being Andrew ended up, I believe, as one of the ways in which I could preserve a sense of my rather naive and inexperienced self, Garth, distant from this person who easily coped with living in one of the rougher neighborhoods in town.

I saw and heard things happen that deeply troubled me. I hesitate to even write them here and have already several times pasted then cut then ultimately pasted them again in this text, for various reasons. After all, I loved living in Zanzibar and formed friendships that surpass in strength and endurance most of those I have at home in the United States, and that is more important to me than the rest. Yet suddenly, immediately, palpably, noisily, I found myself thrust into a sweep of awful and sorrowful events from which I had remained comfortably distant all of my life. One neighbor, a soccer star, had his eye beaten out of his head by the butt of a police rifle on Christmas Eve, blinded forever for sassing the cop who had stopped him for not having his bike light on. Another neighbor, a fishmonger, regularly beat his four-year-old son, whose piercing screams and muffled sobs echo in my head ten years later when I see him as a sullen teenager. I had things stolen—money, watches, knives, clothes off the line, a Walkman—and saw and heard people jumped in alleys in heroin deals gone wrong. Grandmothers came to my house to beg for food and money. And worse things.
For me, such events had always been on the news, things that happened in other places, to other people. Now they were happening right next to me, all around me, to my friends, to me. The little sense of distance from my body and my first name helped me, not entirely successfully, to go on past these experiences with the people who committed awful and sorrowful acts, were victims of them, or witnessed them with me. One can easily stray, lose one’s bearings, under circumstances like these. I had seen it happen, had watched field-workers basically lose it (their self, their mind, their perspective). The separation of me from my name became a symbolic means of protecting me from my own witness to urban violence, police brutality, oppression, social dysfunction, and destitution in East Africa.

One can go too far in trying to protect oneself, though, as I unwittingly learned early in my time in Kikwajuni. I had rented a home nestled in a dense pattern of alleys, a recently renovated house surrounded by houses of exceedingly varied quality. The home had been unoccupied for more than a year when I rented it. I later learned that neighbors had called its immediate vicinity the College of Heroin: the porch of a vacant home away from an open road had become an ideal gathering place for local junkies to smoke “cocktails” (heroin and pot wrapped in a joint), enjoy their highs or sleep off coming down. The landlady, a Zanzibari woman who lived in a somewhat more upscale home across the city, perceived Kikwajuni to be a violent and dangerous neighborhood. She therefore had installed burglar bars on the windows and bars for the backs of the doors and had shards of glass embedded in the top of its courtyard walls. I thought the whole package of hardware ridiculously obsessive, but I liked the house and its location otherwise. Besides, even if I actually never put them on the doors, the door bars made good weights for my morning exercises. Many of the junkies were musicians, artists, and intellectuals; I knew a few who stole from their mothers when they were desperate, but most were exceedingly interesting people to talk with. One even became a close friend, and I still consider him so.

My first weekend in the home, I decided I would do my laundry in the courtyard, intent on living in the house the way I thought it was meant to be lived in. I had dirtied all of my clothing except a cloth wrap I wore around my waist as I contemplated washing my clothes by hand. I had had major surgery on my right shoulder six weeks before leaving for Tanzania and was only beginning to use my right arm again. Even if I had not been so disabled, I am sure I would have looked an utter fool to my neighbors for the ridiculous failure I would seem as a hand wringer. Nonetheless, I propped the door back into my house open and set about my task. No sooner had I reached the faucet than a gust of wind knocked my prop out and slammed the door shut. I discovered that I was locked in my own courtyard. I couldn’t very well climb out with bare feet and just a thin cloth around me, even if I hadn’t had an injured shoulder. I banged on the outer door until my nearest neighbor, Juma Maalim Kombo, heard me. After I assured him I was not a thief or a junkie, merely the mzungu who had just rented the house, I explained my plight. Juma calmly sent a young neighbor across town to the landlord to get a key, and we struck
up a very enjoyable conversation. Once the door was opened, Juma remarked, “This is what happens when you have too many locks.”

I used to say that from that day on I lived in Kikwajuni in a house with no walls, never mind locks. I invited a friend, Ali Hasan Ali, to come live with me and work with me on the research project because, as Ali said, “It is not right for someone to live alone” (Figure 1). My life and my work seemed to be everyone’s business, and I mostly thrived on this—or Andrew did, at any rate. I carried on conversations through my bedroom walls with my neighbors behind me in this crossword puzzle of homes. There was a constant stream of houseguests and visitors, some with hidden agendas, others simply seeking to build friendships. Either way, I soaked in everything I heard, from anyone. Once, during my first weeks there, I heard a neighbor call to me at 11:00 P.M., “Andrew, what are you doing?” I said, “I’m typing my interview notes into my computer.” The response came back: “Why are you doing that when you could be talking to us out here?” I wanted to say, “Because this is the only time I have to myself all day,” but instead I crawled out of bed and went to sit on Bwana Juma’s porch. The friendship I developed with him and others made crawling out of bed (and putting my laptop to sleep instead) entirely the right thing to do. I would never have learned very much about Kikwajuni without the trust, friendship, and respect of my immediate neighbors.
By the end of my time in Kikwajuni, my neighbors clearly understood my sense of privacy and what it meant to me, without my having locks on it. Partly this was Ali’s accomplishment, not mine, because he did much in the beginning to explain my agenda and open the community’s doors to me. His friends quickly became my friends, and we became inseparable. Ali was often out at sea at night—he is a fisherman—so that in the evenings my young male neighbors were my main companions. In my last week there in 1992, when I repeatedly ignored late-night knocks on the front door, I heard my tough young friend Badi walk around to the door and exorciate the guest for his rudeness. “Andrew is sleeping, can’t you understand that? Come back tomorrow.” As he came back past my bedroom window, and knowing that I actually would be awake, Badi quietly said, “Andrew, we want this to be a neighborhood we are proud of and where people like you feel welcome. Sleep well.” At that moment, at least—if by no means at all other moments of fieldwork—I felt that I had achieved a balance between my selfish needs on one hand and my desires for a selfless embeddedness in the community on the other. In every research experience, though, it remains a constantly negotiated boundary space within me and around me, as well it should.

Situating Knowledge versus Protecting Other People

The protection of privacy also extends into conducting fieldwork, writing accounts of fieldwork, and using data from the field. Today’s sensible consciousness of situated knowledge and the concern for author(ity/ship) brought to the forefront by feminist and postcolonial theory dictates that readers ought to know something of who I am and how I relate with the people I am studying—hence some of my writing above (Haraway 1988; Robinson 1994).

A laundry list of social ills in my neighborhood should not be interpreted as a diatribe against Zanzibar, or a revelation of social secrets. In this sense, it is no longer the Western private self that matters but the privacy of the people in the communities among whom one works. Yet I still ask myself, “Isn’t this work about telling the truth?” My first answer echoes what a Cree hunter said in testimony to a Montreal court: “I’m not sure I can tell the truth . . . I can only tell what I know” (quoted in Clifford 1986, 8). Yet some of what I know is unpleasant and painful to me, or to others—or it is irrelevant outside my own experience. At some point, I was doing research into the life of a community and needed to see it in all its variety. Edward Said noted the need for such inclusiveness: “There is no vantage outside the actuality of relationships between culture . . . that might allow one the epistemological privilege of somehow judging, evaluating and interpreting free of the encumbering interests, emotions, and engagements of the ongoing relationships themselves” (1989, 216).

The second privacy boundary that needs negotiating, then, is that between what one knows that no one else needs to know and what others need to know about what one has learned. The separation of research and espionage is a crux that the Zanzibari novelist Muhammed Said Abdulla writes about: “The difference between re-
search and espionage is this: That 'research' is examining with care, with attention, with listening, in order to completely get at the heart of the matter, even to the point of being able to decide that 'this' was 'that' for 'this reason.' And spying is penetrating into something, picking at it, inspecting it even to the point of destroying it" (1976, 7; my translation).

My advisor gave me two books to read to prepare me for my dissertation fieldwork. These certainly represent contrasting approaches. In his Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco, Paul Rabinow shares some wonderfully funny and poignant moments with which I, at least, could readily identify. He then crosses a line I see as a necessary barrier protecting the subject's right to privacy—a remarkable transgression for one who is regarded as an excellent ethicist in anthropology. In attempting to be honest in revealing his real experiences, Rabinow describes a sexual fling under a waterfall in the mountains with a young relative of his troublesome field assistant. Not only does the event reveal a narcissistic moment; it also leaves the young woman—literally and figuratively—exposed. Perhaps people in remote Berber villages do not read Rabinow's work, but that is not the point. He should have had more consideration for protecting the woman and her family from the world's knowing glances. As Heidi J. Nast reminds us, an ethnographic text is not just about the relationship between the ethnographer and the studied people; it is at the center of a triangular field of relationships that also involves a multifaceted audience for the text (1994).

Carol Spindel's In the Shadow of the Sacred Grove, by contrast, tells us—Western world–based academic researchers, who constitute one significant segment of that audience Nast has in mind—what we need to know about her, her husband, and her neighbors in Côte d'Ivoire (1989). Neither she, nor her partner (the geographer Thomas Bassett), nor the neighbors are unnecessarily prettified. There are times when "Tom" the character seems like "Andrew" in that Kikwajuni courtyard, wrapped in a cloth and feeling foolish, or when he and Carol experienced hardships and heartaches as difficult as those I have mentioned. But neither are readers given voyeuristic insights into the innermost experiences of the field-workers, either with the "subject peoples" or with each other.

I know that some of you may disagree, but those intimate experiences are really in most cases their business (Bassett's and Spindel's), not mine. It is often said that all poetry needs to be written but that not all poetry needs to be published. The same is true of fieldwork experiences. I say this for several reasons. On one hand, when we write about fieldwork or use what we learn in the field, "the geographer becomes a translator, translating the story of places in such a way that the subjective and objective realities that compose our understanding of place remain interconnected" (Entrikin 1991, 58). It is important that our "explanatory schemata do not reduce and dominate the complex, unstable character of human reality—including feelings and emotions . . . that are so much a part of that reality" (Tuan 1989, 240). This can lead to a "personal division between intellectual and emotional registers" for an individual academic writer that might seem to some in the audience—my
audience—an avoidance of the rich complexity of one’s inner world and its geography (Robinson 1999, 455). On the other hand, though, we must also be conscious of the intellectual and emotional registers of those we are writing about and of those who are—intended or not—readers of the text.

This need for a contextual consciousness occurs not simply because there may be things about me (or about Paul Rabinow or Carol Spindel or Tom Bassett or anyone else) that I think are nobody’s business but those closest to me (or them). It is also because I believe that fieldwork is an active, engaged process that involves a “strategic choice . . . to think the narrative through together” with the people under study, as Said put it (1989, 217 and 224). Rather than seeing this as sentimentalizing the “subject,” I see the feedback loops as a part of making one’s work “embedded,” from the field to the periodical shelf (Moss 1995). In one example, an official of the Zanzibar Commission for Lands and Environment took issue in 1997 with how I had described the commission’s inner workings and interpersonal politics in an article I published in the Journal of Contemporary African Studies (Myers 1996). But when I explained and defended my choices, he shrugged and said, “Well, it is 96 percent accurate.” I have always wondered which 4 percent represented my inaccuracies; but arguing about the content, in this particular context, was precisely what was necessary to maintain the working relationship I have had and continue to have with this official.

The people with whom I have worked in Zanzibar are not only involved in the fieldwork, be it participatory or collaborative work; they also see drafts of what I write, as well as final versions. Most of the time the manuscript changes in the process, and in two cases the changes were specifically designed to protect the privacy of people in them. This privacy protection became especially important for an article I published in Historical Geography (Myers 1999). In it I use the life and work of the late Zanzibari Sikh architect Ajit Singh Hoogan to interrogate certain aspects of postcolonial discourse analysis. Ajit’s grandchildren opened his collection of personal letters to me, and they shared closely guarded feelings about their grandfather and their family. I often shared letters I found in the files that they had not read, so they gained new perspectives on their grandfather’s thoughts and feelings. Parmukh Singh Hoogan and I traveled to Malawi for several weeks in 1997 to retrace Ajit’s career there. We combined my research aims with Parmukh’s longing to reconnect with his own experiences when visiting his grandfather there in the 1970s, and we managed to thoroughly enjoy the result. I am honored that Parmukh and his brother Jasjit felt that I had earned their trust, and their friendship continues to be important to me. Writing about all that we discovered, though, is a delicate matter. It is ultimately my decision and theirs what is anybody’s business and what is nobody’s business about their grandfather, about them, and about my relationship to them.

This second, outward side of privacy protection covers both the conduct of the research itself and the sharing of information from it afterward. Ultimately, it is a question of ethics and a question of politics. If in fieldwork we “inhabit a difficult and inherently unstable space of betweenness,” the reason for doing so for many of
us is to “engage in rhetorical, empirical, and strategic displacements that merge our scholarship with a clear politics that works against the forces of oppression” (Katz 1994, 67). Respect for and intensive collaboration with people in peripheral societies requires a strategy that balances an expression of our situatedness with careful, thoughtful, and protective silences. That is never going to be an easy balance.

INSIDE THE SMALL WATCH

In January 2000 I completed a year of fieldwork on a National Geographic Society project in collaboration with the Zanzibari urban planner Makame Ali Muhajir. I am not certain when I will return to the island, and this has led to a sense of closure on the first eleven years of work there. When Julian Asquith, a colonial official in the 1950s, was interviewed about what working in Zanzibar was like, he stated that he “felt like a cog, but not in a wheel—rather, in a very small watch” (1971). That is what it feels like for me to be in the field: like being inside a small watch. Occasionally I see how things tick, but I never know what time it is until I leave, and by then I am in a different time zone.

Questions about the protection of privacy arise when I am inside the watch and when I come back to see what time it is. In fieldwork, protecting privacy means, for me, protecting at least a small corner of myself and my private space inside that watch, even as I let go of large tracts of private space to share my self with others. Privacy protection also means respecting the private spaces of those I interview or work with, and then carrying this into how I write about or draw from field experience, even while I seek to give readers a sense of who I am to be writing about what I am writing about. There are no easy answers to either of the sides of the privacy question I have presented here, but answers are not what is required. Instead, field researchers need to constantly revisit and reevaluate the balance between selfishness and selflessness and between expression of situatedness and respect for subjects or audiences, throughout the field experience.

REFERENCES


