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## Stability of Shifting Ground. Feminist Ethnography and Practice

In this article the two authors problematize the moment of stabilization in doing fieldwork and writing ethnography from a feminist perspective. The paper begins with an introduction to the question: How do feminist science studies scholars reconcile a normative need to stabilize our research site to create knowledge within the shifting ground of “truth claims” that feminist practices acknowledge and document? The heart of the paper reflects on our experiences as feminist theorists, teachers, and ethnographers with vignettes from studies of high-risk pregnancies in the industrialized world, specifically the United States, and gender and everyday technologies in West Africa. Our goal is to theorize this instability in order to highlight the limits and benefits of working with consciousness and reflectivity in social contexts while challenging and enriching the vibrancy of our feminist theory and practice.

**Keywords:** ethnography, fieldwork, engagement, feminist practice, reflectivity

## Introduction and Question

With the rise of interdisciplinary analyses within the social sciences there is in an ever-growing and debated quandary about the validity, reliability and engagement of ethnographic data. Over fifty years ago Laura Nader<sup>1</sup> (1969) raised this same question about doing engaged and unbiased fieldwork. Her analysis is still unresolved by feminist ethnographers. As feminist ethnographers and science and technology studies (STS) scholars, we, the two co-authors<sup>2</sup>, are asking a variation of this question. Our work, writing, and teaching occurs at the intersection of feminist practice, theories of science as a social institution, and the social construction of knowledge. These three angles shape our epistemology and social practices and ensure that questions about engaged and unbiased fieldwork remain at the heart of our work.

Within the discipline of STS, scientific objectivity has become understood as sociocultural truth claims modeled and built upon foundations of consensus. Scientific practice is value laden and its outcomes are the expression of its socially situated economics, politics, and relationships.<sup>3</sup> There are various forms of science objectivity, from strong objectivity to weak objectivity,<sup>4</sup> or to standpoint theory, that challenges objectivity as neutral and disconnected<sup>5</sup> to interest-based objectivity.<sup>6</sup> While these different approaches exist to explore this “messy” reality, much like the shifting ground under an unstable walkway, the analysis and critique is still overseen by a scientific community working within

1 L. Nader, *Up the Anthropologist—Perspectives Gained from Studying Up*, in: *Reinventing Anthropology*, ed. D. Hymes, New York 1969, p. 284–311.

2 Throughout the article the “we” refers to the two co-authors. Deborah Blizzard (DB) is an US based social scientist studying medical interactions, trauma and body representation within the US. And Wenda K. Bauchspies (WKB) is a US based social scientist studying science, technology and gender in Francophone West Africa.

3 S.G. Harding, *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, New York 2004; M. Biagioli, *The Science Studies Reader*, New York 1999.

4 S.G. Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from Women's Lives*, Ithaca, New York 1991.

5 A. Wylie, *Why Standpoint Matters*, in: *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, Ed. S. Harding, New York 2004, p. 339–351.

6 S. Crasnow, *Feminist Philosophy of Science: Values and Objectivity*, “Philosophy Compass” 2013, no. 4, p. 413–423.

a scientific culture to present the knowledge in a clean fashion where outliers are explained away and new stones are placed upon existing foundations<sup>7</sup>. These foundations, however, are built upon the shifting ground of evolving and revolving truth claims of reality in an attempt to bring stability via scientific validity to a moment that is inherently unstable. This scientific process is the cornerstone of the culture of scientism<sup>8</sup>. For many it is a comforting approach, far from “anything goes,”<sup>9</sup> it brings a measured calmness of security. It is clean, tested, and secure. It is peer-reviewed and published in a fashion that marks its authenticity. It is knowledge stabilized by the collective scientific community within an established culture.<sup>10</sup>

What problematizes our work is that when we take our methods to the site, analyze it, and present it in credible academic journals we too come face-to-face or ear-to-ear with a siren song of scientifically legitimate presentation of research data. We acknowledge that we are producing social scientific data that is stripped of the reality of what made it occur in order to stabilize the experience and produce knowledge. This brings us to our dilemma between practice and theory: how do we reconcile a traditional need to stabilize an ever shifting reality in order to produce knowledge that our studies inform us is socially constructed? In so doing, we find ourselves on shifting ground where worldviews and worldenses<sup>11</sup> are colliding.

In theorizing we are professing that the “this” we claim to know is

We acknowledge that we are producing *social scientific data* that is stripped of the reality of what made it occur in order to stabilize the experience and produce knowledge

7 W.K. Bauchspies, J. Croissant, S.P. Restivo, *Science, Technology, and Society: A Sociological Approach*, Malden 2006.

8 D. Blizard, *Looking Within: The Sociocultural Construction of Fetoscopy*, Cambridge 2007; D.J. Hess, *Science Studies: An Advanced Introduction*, New York 1997.

9 P. Feyerabend, *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge*, London 1975.

10 W.E. Bijker, T. Parke Hughes, T.J. Pinch, *The Social Construction of Technological Systems: New Directions in the Sociology and History of Technology*, Cambridge, MA 1987.

11 Sociocultural analyses often point to the importance of worldviews. How individuals and communities picture the world around them and how they identify their place within it reflects norms and socialization of difference and familiarity in such areas as gender, class, and age. Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí argues that worldview is a Western cultural notion because of western culture’s historical valuation of sight and vision. She suggests ‘world-sense’ to stress ‘cultures that may privilege senses other than the visual or even a combination of senses.’ (O. Oyèwùmí, *Visualizing the Body: Western Theories and African Subjects*, in: *African Gender Studies: A Reader*, ed. O. Oyèwùmí, New York 2005, p. 4).

‘always’ contextual and contextual. Thus, the contradiction driving this paper is that our methods begin by recognizing the context. This context in turns highlights that our lived experience of doing research is messy. The contradiction becomes clear: the world that we theorize is shifting, yet the mode in which to capture its essence is grounded in stability. Here we ask what methods of analysis and dissemination do we use, or need, to relate our perceived reality of the sites we study. And secondly, what practices do we use, or need, to keep a provocative and evolving site from stagnating as data?

In facing the reality of this shifting ground of knowledge and truth claims we come to the stark realization that our examinations are attempting to do the near impossible: to offer a “still fame” of a moment that risks missing the messiness of the reality. In this juncture, we realize that our critical science is (re)creating the normative existences we strive to deconstruct by acknowledging an ever evolving site and its inhabitants.

Thus the question this paper proposes to explore: what happens when we stabilize the instability of the shifting ground of our sites?

Ethnography and dialogue is inherently unstable when we “catch it” and write it in traditionally accepted academic genres. When we catch it, we lose the moment(s) of instability. In this article we problematize the moment of stabilization by utilizing a dialogue approach in which the flexibility of meaning, indeed the creation and questioning of meaning, is pursued<sup>12</sup>. We offer a narration of the dialogue to stabilize and guide the reader through the shifting ground. The narration appears before and after the dialogue to frame it, provide an anchor to the instability of dialogue through the known form of academic prose, and offer an alternative voice to the di-ologue. By illustrating the condensed, stabilized version followed by the back and forth movement of dialogue we highlight what is both gained and lost in recreating stable representations of an inherently unstable context.

Presenting this as a dialogue that is normally experienced orally in text form is an attempt to illustrate the instability and to place our

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12 This is a dialogue that started in the corridors, classes, and common spaces of an interdisciplinary graduate program many years ago by two researchers who are now mid-life scholars. We, the authors, are those scholars. Originally we shared the same professors, classes, theories, and office while our research questions took us to different continents and communities to ask questions about the power of science, when a technology is used, and the intersection of gender and knowledge. The uncertainty that emerged as we did and reflected on our fieldwork required a trust and faith in the “process” of study. Ultimately the uncertainty and trust fueled our conversations over the years and it lead to the writing of this paper.

theory and practice in conversation with the reader. Our goal is to find that brief moment of stability within which we speak or briefly capture and celebrate the instability of wor(l)ds in order to add a piece of consciousness and reflectivity to the ever moving terrain of theory and practice. A text version of a “di-alogues” has its shortcomings as well. As we highlight the two voices we are also erasing the setting, the space, the cultural milieu, the facial expressions and the body. A third voice may only enter the dialogue by writing in the margins, unseen and unheard in this textual dialogue. Therefore, we invite you to interrupt the conversation to write in the margins and join the conversation in between the stability and instability.

## Dialogue

**DB:** I am taken back to one of my first encounters with STS and the Social Construction of Technology or “SCOT”<sup>13</sup>. Whether it was webs or actor networks – all of which were ultimately criticized and revived in different ways, the main idea was about technology being unstable – that is, open to renegotiation through competing ideas and politics that would eventually “stabilize” allowing an artifact or commercial product to be readily identifiable, marketable and culturally known. Artifacts, however, are less slippery than ideas or know-how. We can touch physical artifacts, we can try them out, such as the “bone shaker” bicycle and decide that it is only meant for certain parts of the population. Ideas are harder to try on (or stabilize), as they tend to morph more quickly and take on the tenor, and aspects of those who discuss them, while also reflecting the circumstances and meanings of the present moment.

**WKB:** within this fluidity of language in time and space – its very instability - I find that there is incredible freedom and incalculable danger in doing interdisciplinary teaching, theory and research. Freedom in that the poetic nature captures and names a bit of what we do and how we move in and out of our field sites and “home cultures,” in and out of the classroom and professional worlds or in and out of theory and the everyday realities of life. The danger is that the poetic nature obscures, mystifies, offends and/or speaks to the emotions. Words and their poetic nature are tools, bridges, symbols and/or survival responses

13 W.E. Bijker, T. Parke Hughes, T.J. Pinch, *The Social Construction of Technological Systems...*

to dealing with the crevices of life that are easily over looked but when seen demand either a bridge to transverse it or a rope and flashlight to explore. I would like to suggest that if we can pay attention to those in between spaces where the instability lies that perhaps we can further our understanding of the everyday instability of life, words and culture and enrich the dimensions of “engagement” in the dynamics of theory and practice.

**DB:** In other words, you are using word-play to call out the seemingly stable reality as critically instable.<sup>14</sup> I agree there. One of the difficulties or dangers in my work is balancing the comfort of the supposed known with the unsettling instability of constantly shifting meanings, networks, and places. I think our rhetoric often obfuscates this shifting terrain. For example I use the term, ‘my site’ to refer to the hospital in which I conducted my ethnography. But the site was constantly shifting: people took days off, patients came and went, moods shifted, etc., and all of these affected my daily interactions. On the surface it may seem somewhat insignificant, but when you take a critical look at it these issues they are important because they alter the landscape of what the site ‘is’ and how I responded to it. For example, I remember one day in which a patient learned that she had lost her pregnancy. The cry that she let out still chills me. I never looked at pregnancy loss the same way. And, if pushed, I don’t think I even look at pregnancy the same way since that particular interaction. Yet, for me to have experienced that moment – to engage in the meaning and emotion – required a number of events to converge, and many of these never happened again. This one time happening is an important part of what configured and defined the site, the research and the ethnography and was a hidden unstable aspect to the stability of the daily routines.

**WKB:** Exactly, and this brings us to ‘engagement’, what is it for us? There seems to be no doubt about the presence of engagement within the interdisciplinary academic world<sup>15</sup>. However, its presence does raise questions as to: how serious is the engagement, what are the realities of the engagement, where is the engagement, why the engagement, what is in our toolkit that facilitates engagement and what are the products of that engagement.

14 L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford 1953.

15 S. Sismondo, *Science and Technology Studies and An Engaged Program*, in: *The Handbook of Science and Technology Studies*, eds. E.J. Hackett, O. Amsterdam-ska, M. Lynch, J. Wajcman, Cambridge 2008.

**DB:** Before exploring the varying levels of engagement in my work, I think it is worth noting how my engagement with my colleagues also alters my approach to my work. A colleague at RIT has recently persuaded me that 'toolkit' is not the best term to refer to our collection of methods and theories. My colleague's claim is that we are using the metaphors of science and technology uncritically. I think she's on to something, and it may have to do with our intellectual and physical engagement with science and technology. She argues that using the term toolkit implies an acceptance of a mechanistic world, and the metaphors that create it. She further argues that since we are at a technological university (and therefore engaged with students pursuing science and technology degrees as well as their professors), she does not want to privilege the rhetoric of 'tool.' I tend to agree with her. If we carry intellectual toolkits, are we by extension all technologists trying to understand a complex world? I certainly think we can be, but we can be so much more with our fractured identities.

**WKB:** I like this challenge to the mechanistic world that your colleague is raising, because I would love to leave behind the mechanistic model that creates a dichotomous world where something is always on or off / good or evil. However, I am not sure that it means we need to throw out our tools or technologies. What if we acknowledge that one of our fractured identities is a technologist who is trying to understand a complex social world by inverting the typical meaning of toolkit by scientists and engineers. The mechanistic model is the most predominant one in the western world but it is not the only one to define and use tools. Therefore, I would like to suggest continuing to use tools and technology as an aid to our exploration of the world, and ultimately ourselves, while recognizing their limits and offerings. In paying careful attention to the metaphors and world-senses that define and structure how we use our tools, in doing so maybe we can begin to make more room for other metaphors and other ways of doing.

**DB:** Yes, more metaphors would be helpful, but the pragmatist in me wants to know from where and when will we create them? And, who are the "we"? Her point is that the metaphors shape our engagement with others. Certainly others have made similar claims, but I particularly like the way that she makes a reflexive turn and pushes her colleagues to question what intellectual space we are making with our students

through the implications of our language and our writings<sup>16</sup>. And of course this cuts both ways. The other day I was in class and we were discussing statistics. A student said that on the first day of class his professor stated that statistics were like prostitutes – you could make them do anything. I was horrified and there was an audible gasp from many of the students. I gave the student another saying about statistics and went on to a conversation about prostitution, power, and gender. Although the day's reading was not about prostitution, I engaged the opportunity to let my feminist views be known, provide a new metaphor, and to take the class a different direction that did not continue to reinforce the old models.

But returning to your idea of not throwing out the tools or toolkit, I agree that perhaps instead of exchanging one metaphor for another, that we need to increase the variety of metaphors that we use. What is it that we bring to conversations? Tools for understanding the world, yes, but these tools are derived from our experiences. It is very difficult to break away from the image of a toolkit. This alone suggests that something is deeply entrenched in our larger thought collective.<sup>17</sup> From one view it helps us to see the ways in which we work in the world; from another, it clearly limits our view.

**WKB:** And hence the need or desire to look in the in between spaces that make our world and limit our world. I think it is that flexibility to go in other directions other than the tried and true that defines engaged work, where we can be fully present and respond to that present in a conscious way. As yoga teachers remind us: notice the space between the inhale and exhale. By being fully present, I mean that I remember and practice my professional code of conduct, that I respect my informants and their culture, and that I stay within my bounds as a stranger, visitor, guest, educator, and friend.<sup>18</sup> An example of this was one interview in West Africa with one of my older interviewees. We had had several interviews with different people present, from her son, daughter-in-law, grandchildren and my research assistants. On this particular day it was only the elder, my research assistant and myself who were present.

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16 M. Barbercheck, *Mixed Messages: Men and Women in Advertisements in Science*, in: *Women, Science, and Technology: A Reader in Feminist Science Studies*. ed. M. Wyer et al., New York 2001, p. 117–131.

17 L. Fleck, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, ed., transl. T.J. Trewn, R.K. Merton, Chicago 1979 [1935].

18 M. Agar, *The Professional Stranger*, New York 1980.

In an earlier interview we had previously discussed female genital cutting and its role in her culture and family. However, she asked to return to this thread again (perhaps because of recent public service announcements on the radio against female genital cutting). She now asked me what my views were on female genital cutting. I answered her directly and honestly while employing various perspectives: cultural, educational and personal. After listening to my response, she thanked me and she said that she would carefully consider what I said. She explained that as the oldest female in the family she was the one who could influence her family about continuing to practice of female genital cutting. I use this to illustrate that when I am in the field, I strive to be fully present for both my hosts and myself. In the earlier interviews I did not express my opinions/ideas on what she was telling me of her culture; however, when asked I tried to respond in a way to bridge the two cultures, not to divide them. I was engaged in her culture and mine – as she was in mine, when she asked for my views. Together we created a space for dialogue between the two cultures to find understanding and new information. It was a social interaction that required full participation from all three of us: the elder, the research assistant, and myself.

This is also an example of using narrative as a form of intervention. When I am in the field, I am not there simply as a conduit to take information back to my home territory. I see my role as a bridge, a mediator, a stranger, and a traveler between two worlds, and it is through narrative that I am able to convey information most effectively to my research site. For this style of research the conversations with individuals who also want to build bridges between the two worlds acknowledge the spaces in between worldviews and enter into unstable ground. I told the elder my own narrative of genital cutting in US culture; it was a way of providing a different perspective and new information beyond her known experiences that may or may not result in her or her family changing their opinions, practices or options. However, either way we both gained information to consider and add to our worldviews.

It is through stories and examples that I often relay information to my West African colleagues, friends, students and interviewees. It is also my hope that my stories of West Africa are a form of intervention for US hearers to begin to see Africans beyond a 'tribal stereotype'. It is being this bridge between two worlds that sometimes is ethically, morally and personally challenging or exhausting. In any narrative I tell, whether it is on the North American or African Continent, I am aware that my story carries power because I have been in both places, and that in telling my story I have a social responsibility to the hearers of my stories and to the ones being described.

**DB:** I appreciate your openness to read the context and alter your behaviour to learn with your hosts. I think your language is extremely important. As I elaborate elsewhere, ethnography, particularly medical ethnography, relies on a researcher gaining access to a ‘site’ and working with her ‘informants’ to create relationships of trust, lest she be denied further access (citation removed for blind review).<sup>19</sup> Laura Nader pointed out that when one profession studies another with more power or cultural capital, the outcome is a risky ‘studying up’ form of engagement.<sup>20</sup> Linda Layne critiques this rhetoric, arguing that proponents of this verbiage are already giving too much ground<sup>21</sup>. Yet I hope engaged research makes space for studying with or to push the up/down dichotomy; perhaps there is room to study beside?

**WKB:** I really hope there is room to study beside; however, sometimes I question the dream of bi-lateral communication compared to the day-to-day realities of being in the field, in the classroom, and in conversation. Your response makes me wonder if I have done too much work to be open and thus given ‘ground’ in order to learn and communicate with my hosts, be they West African or Western. Perhaps working, studying beside, is just an illusion and comes back to the self-other problem that has haunted western thought for centuries.

**DB:** Engaged research is ideally redundant to me. While on site, when I was asked for my opinions, I tended to give them; however, I also admit that on occasion I did not. A perfect example of this followed a surgery.<sup>22</sup> The surgeon and I went to find the family of a patient (the woman, not the fetus!). We went to a small room where the physician explained the case in detail, and I listened to them talk about it. Once the physician was done, we stood to leave. After polite handshakes one person called me back, clearly wanting the physician to leave. At this point I was asked many questions about the surgery. While I could have answered the question in comparison to other surgeries, I deferred. I explained that I was not medically trained

19 M.J. Casper, *The Making of the Unborn Patient a Social Anatomy of Fetal Surgery*, New Brunswick 1998.

20 L. Nader, *Up the Anthropologist-Perspectives Gained from Studying Up*, in: *Reinventing Anthropology*, ed. D. Hymes, New York 1969, p. 284–311.

21 L.L. Layne, *Introduction*, “Science, Technology, and Human Values” 1998, no. 1, p. 4–23.

22 In an effort to extend as much anonymity to individuals “A” refer to those other than the physician and researcher as ‘family.’

and so it would be difficult for me to say – I could not translate all the medical jargon during the surgery. I felt awkward. I didn't want to give false or legitimate hope. And, while I didn't understand all the medical jargon – I did understand the *social state*. I was not prepared to answer on either the medical or social state. It is moments like these that I find most troubling.

**WKB:** Is that why we do this, to find the tools or theory to help us, so the next time, we know how to translate/transcend/negotiate such troubling situations into ones of “beside” rather than up or down? We have been talking of engagement, however, your story also highlights that to be engaged one needs to be disengaged as well in order to negotiate the terrain of social responsibility between the listeners/readers and the ones described in both thought, practice and text. I suppose it is a loop that goes back to the embodiment of us and our communities of study – by being fully present, and to be a carrier of information between worlds/cultures, a certain amount of disengagement is required. It is a two-way street. Historically researchers are to discover facts about a subject; they are to search again or anew or to search back or backward. The social science model and scientific model of researcher is someone who goes out and seeks information about something unknown and yet, the word – *re-search*, speaks more to searching anew or searching back. This also speaks to the idea that we learn about others in order to know ourselves better, rather than to know the other better. What we are suggesting here is that our research is a searching for new relationships that share power and information side to side. As for your encounter after surgery, this could be interpreted within a research culture committed to “beside” where you, the researcher, become the eyes for others, in places where they cannot go, and as a result are bringing back knowledge to share with them.

**DB:** Interesting point.

However, there must be a balance between accepting responsibility for how you shape a site and at the same time not usurp the narrative of the site (as interpreted through the researcher) with an overzealous need to place oneself in the center of the story. New ethnography must account for the implications of the researcher, but it should not be autobiography, unless, of course, that is your aim. I am reminded of the work of many feminists who study reproduction and who bring

themselves directly into their analyses.<sup>23</sup> Each theorist, in different ways, speaks to her reader from personal accounts as well as the individuals whom she has interviewed.

Although each day I encounter a 'new' site at the hospital, much of it remains the same and cultural patterns begin to emerge. In recognizing these cultural patterns I can begin to make knowledge claims. What do the patients have in common? Where do they diverge? And what about the ritual of the surgery itself? Medical anthropologists have illustrated the rituals in surgical procedures such as scrubbing and draping, but each surgeon and each surgical team member has theirs, too. I admit that I made mine, as well. The comforts in performing my own rituals before and during surgery were necessary for me to emotionally survive the experience. In some ways watching the surgeries turned out to be more difficult than conducting the interviews. There were different kinds of engagement. In surgery I stood to the corner, watching and listening as I took field notes and anxiously wondered what would be **this** woman's outcome. At least in an interview I could cry with her, rub an arm, or whatever human to human, person to person, interaction was warranted; but in watching surgery, I felt powerless. I was engaged with the social situation, but all I could do was look at the monitor and try to reconcile competing notions of hope and fear.

**WKB:** Are we highlighting that engagement with individuals is 'easier' because of the issue of embodiment, or that our bodies allow us to be both engaged and disengaged with other bodies? With technology and bodies, as in your example of watching surgery through technologies of surgery, it creates a different sort of engagement and/or disengagement, with your engagement being stronger because of the boundary of disengagement between human and machine? This gets into 'unstable ground' very quickly. Take for example the issue of embodiment. Remember our graduate class with John Schumacher<sup>24</sup> about the role of the body in theory, in experience and in life? Where embodiment and our place

23 L.L. Layne, 'I remember the day I shopped for your layette': *Consumer Goods, Fetuses, and Feminism in the Context of Pregnancy Loss*, in: *Fetal Subjects, Feminists Positions*, eds. L.M. Morgan, M.W. Michaels, Philadelphia 1999, p. 251–278; R. Rapp, *Testing Women, Testing the Fetus: The Social Impact of Amniocentesis in America*, New York 1999; M.J. Casper, *The Making of the Unborn Patient a Social Anatomy of Fetal Surgery*, New Brunswick 1998; G.H. Landsman, *Reconstructing Motherhood in the Age of "Perfect" Babies: Mothers of Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities*, "Signs" 1998, no. 1, p. 69–99.

24 J.A. Schumacher, *Human Posture: The Nature of Inquiry*, Albany 1989.

in the text/the research site is grounded in our theories, and in this case feminist theory/social theory – and places me/us in the text/site, uses reflectivity and narrative, avoids claiming absolute objectivity/authority, and employs thick description? And yet the contradiction is there, that one cannot do good research unless one is disengaged, and in theory your research in surgery should be better (and easier?) because of the disengagement that the technologies offer. Within a patriarchal, capitalist and mechanistic culture, those that are labeled engaged are devalued over those that are disengaged. I have seen this numerous times where my audience responds either positively or negatively to my research. For some, the embodiment of the researcher/storyteller is acceptable, and for others a mark of subjectivity, relativism or going native. Is there a comfortable line to embodying the researcher and not be discredited? Or is the narrative stance a provocateur that legitimizes our work by exploring new realms and challenging pre-existing boundaries?

**DB:** As with any field of theory, ideas of acceptability and credibility change over time. The challenge, of course, is what happens when individuals are not willing to consider the validity of any method other than their own. I think we need a variety of stances – from ‘respectful distance’ to a deeply entrenched new ethnography in which the researcher and researched blend into a co-constructed project and reality.<sup>25</sup> I tend more toward the later. I enjoyed sharing closeness with many at the site where I worked: our trust led to better understanding on both our parts. Now, did everyone at the site want to be close? No. But that is okay. A blurring of method within a project is just as effective as a variety of method outside the project. Reflecting back on my experience I would find it difficult to accept that any ethnography situated at a Western hospital did not have a spectrum of closeness in method. I think method should follow the relationship. I went into the research with certain methodologies in mind, but as the people and site changed, my willingness to alter components of my work came in response. I think of it as emotional work, and I highly doubt that anyone could do emotional work without being both engaged and disengaged as warranted, or better put: as needed.

**WKB:** And was it simply changing the methods slightly? Was it radical? Did it require a new look for theory to meet the needs of the site and its inhabitants?

25 S. Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, New York 1992, p. 67.

**DB:** The simple answer was that the methods only slightly altered, but my response to it was radical. As with any study, you do not fully know what you will see. In essence my method changed when I accepted that I was both a data collector and a data maker. The changing of method was more akin to defining the site beyond the building and my decision of whether or not and when to help my friends at the hospital.

**WKB:** Another dimension on this boundary of engagement and/or disengagement between bodies and technologies is my use of pictures to give an academic talk. Through a sequence of 20–40 pictures, I overlay words, theories, and ideas to enrich, supplement and explore – and perhaps to even provoke. My research site in West Africa easily facilitates my doing this because my audience is often unfamiliar with West Africa. By communicating with images and words, I can provide a richer description than by depending on words alone. I wonder would the use of basic pictures aid you as much since your site is a western hospital and most westerners in your audience already have a pre-existing narrative for a hospital, (i.e. – you can skip images of a hospital and go straight to the operating room or equipment, perhaps?), while I create a narrative from the ground up because the context is so different from the western material world, or I tell a narrative that may challenge stereotypical national geographic type narratives. If my research site was based in an industrialized nation, I wonder if I would or could use pictures so heavily as a means of narrative in order to stabilize the communication?

**DB:** The question of photography is intriguing in explorations of fetoscopy. I do not think that photos help very much in my presentations. The real problem is what can I photograph? I cannot photograph the woman due to confidentiality, the same holds true for the caregivers. I have used the in utero images, but I do so hesitantly as I join the long list of feminist theorists who do not want to further entrench the fetus as separate from the woman who carries it.<sup>26</sup> Though there are times when I use a picture of surgery, where everyone is covered from head to foot in surgical garb.

Since so much of my work rests on the emotional work undertaken by the individuals at the site, I often find that a single photo cannot

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26 R. Petchesky, *Fetal Images: The Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction*, in: *Reproductive Technologies: Gender, Motherhood, and Medicine*, ed. M. Stansworth, Minneapolis 1987, p. 57–80; J.S. Taylor, *The Public Fetus and the Family Car: From Abortion Politics to a Volvo Advertisement*, “Science as Culture” 1993, no. 4, p. 601–618.

convey the fractured and conflicted experiences. Recently I have turned to art to do so. One image in particular is a drawing of a woman crying, a gravesite in her mind, with empty arms that at the same time hold an imagined cradle. The colors bring out emotion, the symbolic statements are clear – and yet at the same time the image allows the viewers to look inside themselves and bring their own experiences into my story. I find that is most effective.

**WKB:** My use of pictures in giving academic talks also plays the same role as yours do of surgical dress that provide and create a space for the culture, the community and the individuals to have a presence in the talk. I also use the pictures to place myself in the research site. I have a favorite picture of an interview in a small village that includes my research assistant, the male head of household, the female head of household and myself in a small circle surrounded by a secondary circle that includes other female household members, passing visitors and a few children. Whenever I show this picture, invariably what the audience appears to focus on is the bowl of mangos at the center of the inner circle. The questioner usually has some theory about why the mangos are there and is looking for me to affirm their theory. However, what the mangos are doing in the picture often symbolizes something very different than the questioner's interpretation. So by using pictures, I run the risk of the narrative getting out of my control, which I rather welcome as it creates an interaction between the audience and the subject, with me playing interrupter, but it ultimately leaves the audience to decide for itself who and what to believe. Whereas your artwork invites the reader/listeners' interpretation without validation from the researcher. I like that.

**DB:** Going back a step, I think your question about pictures of research in our own cultures is well put and drives home the issue of 'otherness'. Yes, most people are familiar with the Western hospital; however, as Rayna Rapp<sup>27</sup> notes in her work, and I experienced in mine,<sup>28</sup> it leads to a different kind of dissidence. Those of us who pursue research in our own larger culture may find it particularly vexing when we enter a site in which we know enough to be at times frightened by what we do not know.

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27 R. Rapp, *Testing Women, Testing the Fetus...*

28 D. Blizzard, *Looking Within: The Sociocultural Construction of Fetoscopy*, Cambridge 2007.

An example of this, which caused me continued emotional pain and intellectual confusion, was ‘aseptic technique’. As you know, hospitals are a good place to catch a cold! There are germs everywhere, so great care is taken to keep the patient (who has undergone fetoscopy) safe from infection (especially during surgery). In an effort to keep her and her fetus safe, there is an area surrounding the surgical table. Those at my site explained it as the ‘surgical field’. Within this field only those who were ‘scrubbed in’ could enter. Multiple layers of surgical dress would be used to keep the germs and other ‘bad stuff’ that was naturally on the practitioners off the patient. But the more I watched this occurrence, the more confused I became. Although medical discourse identifies scrubbing with controlling the spread of contaminants, the more I watched the variations of it, the more I became convinced in the argument that while scrubbing and cleaning oneself may be useful (especially to the mental state of the surgical team), its advantages may lie in the ritual that it creates. The ritual brought together a community (the fetoscopy team) while at the same time it offered them a sense of medical propriety – the efforts that they took would help to ensure a safe surgery (to the extent any surgery can be ensured). As I asked different members of the surgical team what the appropriate way is to ensure proper aseptic technique, I often received a variety of answers, further illustrating the need of aseptic technique as medical ritual. But, while I could theorize the ritual, I could not get beyond the imaginaries in my popular science mind of accidentally contaminating a woman. To be honest, I was thankful that ‘my position’ was to the corner of the surgical suite – far away from the patient. Even so, I wore the medical clothing: complete scrubs, a facemask, and surgical bonnet and booties. All the white blood cells and antibiotics in the world could not erase my recurring question, ‘but what if...?’

**WKB:** So are the margins a safe space, full of germs but not contagious? How close/faraway is good for engagement/disengagement? Or maybe it is a good idea to be a little contagious? Perhaps this is what is at issue with engagement – how contagious are we? And can we be contagious and be researchers, scholars, teachers and/or humans? Or do we need to be sterile? These questions echo the traditional belief that scientific activity needs to be objective rather than subjective. However, we now recognize that knowledge creation incorporates subjectivity and the inclusion of subjectivities strengthens knowledge construction. This opens the door to explore where subjectivities are working to improve knowledge and where are they failing to do so.

**DB:** With closeness and understanding comes the invisible, emotional work of survival. In this sense survival takes on many meanings: survival of a critical perspective, survival of relationships; survival of the self (and a willingness to the self who is transformed through engagement). It is odd, but every once in a while when I tell people about my ethnography, they are shocked and literally ask me, ‘How did you survive it?’ My common response is ‘What makes you think that I survived?’ And, in a sense, I did not. The naiveté that I had when I entered the site is gone. I have been transformed through my engagement. And, not surprisingly, I have been told time and again from my friends and informants that they too were changed. The engagement that we are discussing is personal, analytical, physical, and emotional. It does not seem to have a boundary. Or, perhaps, it is only transgressions that allow it to exist?

**WKB:** So you have been vaccinated by fieldwork? What about the field site; has it been vaccinated?

**DB:** Active, action-oriented research feels the best to me – managing the tensions and falling in the rabbit holes only to emerge somewhere else. And with the reemergence, the researcher is changed, as is the site. Yet within both, cultural patterns and narratives remain to be critiqued. This sounds appealing to explore the side effects of our vaccinations.

### Stabilization: Engagement, Worldview, and Shifting Words and Metaphors

By acknowledging that the shifting states of the site are in constant motion, we find the use of research methods that are responsive to feminist theory helpful.<sup>29</sup> Their methods highlight that there are times when the social interaction is more intimate, and times when it is more distant. In other words, the context demands the method and not visa versa. Rayna Rapp’s<sup>30</sup> work uses a similar methodology and addresses how she has been called upon as a ‘trusted insider’ to offer her viewpoint. In these cases she may freely give advice back to those who she studies: she becomes the informant. Rapp’s openness to engage her site and to report her experiences is powerful both theoretically and methodologically.

29 S. Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research*; M.L. DeVault, *Liberating Method: Feminist and Social Research*, Philadelphia 1999.

30 R. Rapp, *Testing Women, Testing the Fetus...*

Not long ago there may have been little to no room to do so for fear of being intellectually discredited for ‘going native.’ But the turn to reflexivity and to the new ethnography has actually allowed many researchers the opportunity to engage fully their areas of study and then to confidentially engage their readers, students, and colleagues in ways that allow them to develop, to study beside, and to remain engaged as a human, colleague and researcher.

Studying beside may be described as activist research, as opposed to cultural critique.<sup>31</sup> The latter is research and writing whose political alignment is in the content of the knowledge; it champions the colonized while deconstructing the colonizer, all the while using the same research tools, methods and formats that social scientists have been using. The former is based on the relationship the researcher establishes with the group, and it requires a new set of research practices. Their methodology diverges because activist research has two loyalties: to academia and the research community, whereas cultural critique has only one, the academy. Cultural critique is typically perceived as uncompromised because of its singular loyalty, whereas activist research is seen as compromised because it works in the space between theory and practice with multiple loyalties.

Hale<sup>32</sup> argues that activist research requires higher levels of accountability than conventional methods that are written in from the beginning of the research – loyalty to good scholarly practices and to the values and practices of the community studied. This requires activist researchers to be constantly working between two worldviews whose notions of objectivity, accountability, and values may be quite contrary. It is this tension that risks enhancing, polluting, or diluting the knowledge production of the researcher. This implies that social scientists have only taken the reflectivity and social construction lesson far enough to be sensible and to acknowledge other epistemologies while staying close enough to “science” to maintain the authority and business as usual of science.

Obioma Nnaemeka<sup>33</sup> challenges academics to think about living with contradictions rather than transcending difference. As public intellectuals, we cannot afford to let difference or its contradictions slip away. As the world shrinks from technological advances, it also erases

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31 C.R. Hale, *Activist Research vs. Cultural Critique: Indigenous Land Rights and the Contradictions of Politically Engaged Anthropology*, “Cultural Anthropology” 2006, no. 1, p. 96–120.

32 Ibid.

33 O. Nnaemeka, *Mapping African Feminisms*, in: *Readings in Gender in Africa*, ed. A. Cornwall, Bloomington–Indianapolis 2005, p. 31–41.

intersections of class, race, gender, ethnicity and sexual preference. How we theorize categories and labels defines theory and practice, as feminist scholars have illustrated. However, African studies scholars have been challenging feminist theory precisely on this issue because a pure gender analysis can be more limiting than helpful sometimes in interpreting African cultures.<sup>34</sup>

This challenge to attend to difference and contradictions is a necessity for interdisciplinary scholars because the role of difference is both a problem and a fuel for social sciences.<sup>35</sup> Difference is the 'raison d'être' of science that focuses on naming, cataloguing, identifying, and objectifying difference to define both itself and the world. Therefore as scholars we can either take the predominate theoretical stance of reproducing, maintaining and re-inscribing difference, even as we think we are challenging it,<sup>36</sup> or we can attempt to find a way through, around, over, and under the dominate and not-so-dominate paradigms to address difference and contradictions in our research sites, classrooms, lived realities and, ultimately, ourselves. And hence, our question and think-through of 'how do we live, work and embrace contradictions as feminist science studies scholars?' It is a dangerous and challenging question because it occurs in a place of tension, boundary crossing and uncharted territory.<sup>37</sup>

We wrote this paper as a dialogue to highlight the moment of stabilization in doing and writing fieldwork, while the form may also have been static and risked excluding others. In this process we risk reproducing the status quo, even as we attempt to engage with it. In recognizing stability and instability, we found a way to both contaminate and inoculate the other. It became a place of engagement where ideas, worldviews and world-senses were/are shared; where ideas are given space to play, grow, die, expand and retract; and where our theory and practice is allowed to explore, make mistakes, reevaluate and encounter

34 *Africa After Gender?*, eds. C.M. Cole, T. Manuch et al., Bloomington 2007.

35 M. Lazreg, *Decolonizing Feminism*, in: *African Gender Studies: A Reader*, ed. O. Oyèwùmí, New York 2005.

36 This is exactly what feminist theory is facing in that while they have introduced and established the importance of bringing women, their issues and gendered relationships to the table for equal consideration. This very process that is meant to bring liberation, has also contributed to redefining whose interests are valid and whose interests are invisible, thus a new definitions and actors within the same un-changed framework. So the question is how to change the framework, culture, power relations and the practice as well as the definitions and actors.

37 G.C. Bowker, S. Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences*, Cambridge, MA 1999.

others without the threat of alienation or nihilification. By doing and writing fieldwork that incorporates the stability and instability of our sites and science, we ensure the vibrancy and resiliency of our feminist theory and practice.

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**Tytuł:** *Stabilność na ruchomym podłożu. Feministyczna etnografia i praktyka*

**Abstrakt:** W niniejszym artykule problematyzujemy etap stabilizacji w procesie badań w terenie i pisania etnografii z perspektywy feministycznej. Rozpoczynamy od postawienia następującego pytania: w jaki sposób badaczki z zakresu feministycznych badań nad nauką godzą normatywną potrzebę stabilizacji naszego obszaru badawczego z tworzeniem wiedzy w obrębie ruchomego podłoża „roszczeń do prawdy”, uznawanego i dokumentowanego przez praktyki feministyczne? Centralną kwestią tego artykułu jest refleksja nad naszymi doświadczeniami jako feministycznych teoretyczek, nauczycielek i etnografek prowadzących badania nad ciężami wysokiego ryzyka w krajach rozwiniętych, szczególnie w Stanach Zjednoczonych, oraz nad gender i codziennymi technologiami w Zachodniej Afryce. Naszym celem jest teoretyzowanie tej niestabilności w celu podkreślenia ograniczeń i korzyści pracowania ze świadomością i refleksyjnością w kontekstach społecznych przy jednoczesnym rzucaniu wyzwań i wzbogacaniu energii naszych feministycznych teorii i praktyki.

**Słowa kluczowe:** badania terenowe, etnografia, praktyka feministyczna, refleksyjność, zaangażowanie

readings

