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EDITORS' INTRODUCTION: CONTEXTUALIZING HOMES AND FIELDS IN THE ETHNOGRAPHY OF INDIA

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This special issue of *Fieldwork in Religion* takes the relationships between "home" and "the field" in the ethnography of India as its primary interpretive framework.

It includes the reflections of eleven scholars working in the field of South Asian religions whose ethnographic research stretches back to the 1970s. This issue grows out of a 2019 symposium that we jointly organized for the Annual Conference on South Asia at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, titled “Shifting Sites, Spaces and Selves: Analyzing Ethnographic Practices in South Asia over Time”. The impetus for that symposium was a conversation that Jenn had with Ann Grodzins Gold and Sara Dickey in which Ann and Sara discussed the boxes they each had in their possession containing letters written home to their mothers during their initial fieldwork in India, which neither had yet looked through. Jenn not only wanted to know what those letters disclosed but also began to reflect on the ways that her access to a laptop and email during her research in India may have shaped her fieldwork—and fieldwork reflections—differently. When Jenn described this discussion to Amy, Amy noted that she, too, had recently been gifted the letters that she had written to her parents over the course of multiple periods of living in India beginning in 1995. Like Jenn, she had been thinking about the role that different forms of correspondence had played in her journey as an ethnographer and how to incorporate those reflections into her writing, teaching, and mentoring.

Building on this exchange and a shared interest in the material and virtual traces of our field-writing, we convened the day-long symposium by inviting presenters to contribute papers that could collectively consider how ethnography and ethnographic practices in India have changed over time. We were especially interested in hearing about the various ways that ethnographers recorded their fieldwork, positioned themselves in their field contexts, and have written and taught about their field worlds in different eras. Ultimately, thirteen scholars participated, ranging from recent PhD graduates and junior professors through one just-minted *emerita*. We achieved some parity in terms of gender (i.e., eight female-identified scholars and five male-identified ones) but, unfortunately, none of the scholars of South Asian descent whom we invited were able to join, primarily because they had prior commitments at the conference. We sought to rectify that imbalance by inviting these scholars to contribute essays for this issue. Several of the men who presented during the symposium were ultimately unable to contribute to this issue, largely due to circumstances related to the outbreak of COVID-19, the consequences of which we address in greater detail below.

The symposium featured probing, personal papers with responses offered by the two of us, followed by robust exchange and discussion as a group. While a number of themes surfaced in these conversations, the one that emerged most powerfully was an emphasis on selfhood, particularly as one navigates between various “homes” and “fields”. We reflected on the fact that we had all made new

kinds of homes in our field communities (including, for some, homes inspired by religious belonging and participation) and considered the ways that technology, particularly email, WhatsApp and Skype, has created new opportunities as well as obligations to engage with “the field”. Some participants have begun research projects closer to their homes in the United States, and we discussed the increasing permeability of homes and fields as well as how distances between these locations seem to be ever shrinking. While the constructed nature of the categories of home and field and the related questions and topics that we engaged are far from novel for anthropology or the ethnography of India, the site-specific nature of our work, the mix of generational vantage points, and the intimate setting of the symposium felt generative. We agreed that our reflections were worth sharing with a broader audience if we could maintain the intimacy fostered by the symposium as much as possible in publication.

Vulnerability, Intimacy and Transparency: Reflecting on Homes and Fields

After conversations with *Fieldwork in Religion* editors Carole Cusack and Rachelle Scott, we asked contributors to expand their papers to include relevant literatures and discourses but also to maintain the critical and personal reflections that were the focus of the conference papers. The resulting essays are thus shorter and less formal than traditional academic articles, and we believe that their personal and intimate nature is their most significant contribution. As examples of embodied writing, these essays are deliberately reflexive and foreground situated, complicated, and particular narratives of selfhood. They offer brief, powerful glimpses into the struggles, frustrations and joys that arise in fieldwork and shape our selves and our work. As such, they underscore Judith Okely's argument that the personal is both political and theoretical and thus merits our scrutiny, an approach that she acknowledges “stands against an entrenched condition which relegates the personal to the periphery and to the ‘merely anecdotal’: pejoratively contrasted in positivist social science with generalisable truth” (Okely 1992: 9, quoted in De Neve 2006: 71). In moving away from traditional academic formats, these essays present some of the critical messiness of ethnographic work that is typically “cleaned up” for publication because we see value in these moments of vulnerability and transparency.

The subjective character of these essays, particularly as they reflect currents and shifts across the *longue durée* of the anthropology of religion in India, makes them valuable teaching tools for both undergraduate and graduate audiences. Their first-person viewpoint and frank approach will not only draw students into the

daily practices of anthropological fieldwork and the myriad negotiations it entails, but also help them to appreciate the mutual imbrications of field and home and the ways those relationships have changed over time. In a chapter exploring the tensions involved in conceptualizing “the field”, Simon Coleman argues that ethnographers do not adequately feature the perspective that boundaries between field and home are blurred in what he calls “one of the most significant of all anthropological practices: teaching” (2006: 44). He goes on to say that we neither consistently foreground nor sufficiently contextualize the historical, social and other circumstances of the anthropologist’s “‘home society’ alongside the changing circumstances surrounding ‘the field’” (2006: 44). The essays in this special issue speak directly to this blurring of home and field and analyze its implications alongside the kind of broader contextualization that Coleman calls for.

These essays also reveal some of the personal struggles that fieldwork entails. Students will likely find these honest reflections engaging, instructive and, in the case of graduate students, perhaps comforting. Such reflections were not part of our graduate school reading lists and have come to us piecemeal, via our mentors, colleagues and the oral traditions of our fields. While particular to the ethnography of India, the personal and professional developments across time and space that emerge in these essays complicate ideas of the field as a static or bounded place, which will be valuable to those working well beyond South Asia. Much as Maya Unnithan-Kumar and Geert De Neve observe about the contributions to their co-edited volume, *Critical Journeys: The Making of Anthropologists*, the essays included here affirm that “webs of relatedness across fields (both personal and academic) challenge the notion of a home-field distinction at the same time as they highlight the idea that one can never fully be at home, in the sense of ‘knowing it all’” (2006: 9). The intervention of these essays, then, is to reveal the porosity of those boundaries and the shifting notions of place, belonging and self that constitute these sites over time in the most intimate ways possible, making them accessible to and formative for our students.

In emphasizing the personal, we privilege a certain kind of reflexivity along with an embodied approach that values situated, particular narratives as illustrative of broader themes. We encouraged the authors to calibrate the attention they gave to relevant literature in ways that would not overshadow their personal reflections. This rebalancing of voice and citation is another way in which these essays are distinct from more traditional academic articles. We have also resisted our initial instincts—honed as they are by training and teaching—to develop a traditional literature review for this introduction. While all of the authors in this issue are indebted to the literatures and lineages that shape us, we want to emphasize how these essays bring us closer to the people writing, not the theorists of

their disciplines. Thus, we focus here on how these authors reveal vulnerability and humility as well as the permeability of selfhood in ethnographic experiences in unique ways and let them situate themselves more specifically within their disciplines in the individual essays.

Shifting Sites and Selves over the *Longue Durée* in the Ethnography of India

By taking the productive tensions between home and field as our framework, we were able to explore varying strategies for self-fashioning and self-presentation in our fields. We could also identify sensory engagements with and emotional entanglements in these contexts and call for richer reflexivity and standpoint work in our writing. Nowhere is that clearer than in our first essay by Ann Grodzins Gold, in which she revisits some of the letters she wrote to her mother during her initial fieldwork in 1979–1981. She comments on how the dialogical elements of letters that are not always transparent, but are still central to fieldwork experiences, reveal both the internal and external processes of fieldwork. These letters, she suggests, help to show “fieldwork as life itself”. Ann Grodzins Gold has long embodied the call for greater transparency and subjectivity in ethnographic writing that began to emerge in the 1980s (Gold 1988; see also Abu-Lughod 2008; Behar and Gordon 1995; Clifford and Marcus 1986) and here she guides us through the shifting worlds of rural Rajasthan and urban Illinois, past and present, inviting and invoking precisely the intimacy that we want to call attention to in this special issue. Daniel Gold, in his reflections on the different spaces, times and personas he has inhabited in India—including how they compare to those of his wife, Ann—outlines four “senses of home” in the field: 1) one’s own cultural environment, the traditional sense of “home”; 2) a *retreat* within the fieldsite; 3) the *alternative* home in the field; and 4) the fieldsite as *second* home. In describing his experience with each, particularly as he moves through the overlapping realms of scholar and devotee, Daniel Gold’s work emphasizes the inherent plurality of homes and fields, and how the selves we occupy within them blur the boundaries between them. Joanne Waghorne reflects on her training as a historian of religion who transitioned into more traditional ethnographic fieldwork. As she was not trained as an anthropologist, Waghorne did not seek “the field” *per se* but, in reflecting on the trajectory of her various research projects in India and now in Singapore, she ponders the ways in which methodology shapes and reshapes the embodied selfhoods that we come to inhabit in the spaces between homes and fields. We begin with these three essays, written by our senior-most scholars, because they offer insights made possible over the *longue durée* of their fieldwork, even across different sites. Daniel Gold

and Joanne Waghorne explicitly reflect on their own assumptions about India during their earliest, non-scholarly trips to India and how the nature of their field of History of Religions has changed in the past forty years in relationship to shifting experiences and theories of power. Together, these essays introduce the themes of vulnerability, gratitude, growth and awkwardness present in negotiations of participation and observation that are taken up in other contributions.

The next three essays, all authored by untenured (at the time of writing) female-identified scholars of South Asian descent, extend the themes present in the first set but consider fieldwork in Indian contexts and communities as a located, embodied and gendered enterprise in critically different ways. Specifically, they examine how their South Asian heritage can shape fieldwork expectations and commitments. While not exactly the “anthropology at home” perspectives of Kirin Narayan (1993) or Tulasi Srinivas (2018), among others, these authors offer candid examinations of how balancing American and Indian identities—particularly as young, female scholars—shapes the field and their individual vantage points. Bhakti Mamtora analyzes the disjunctures between the identities of student and researcher and between the expectations of graduate work and fieldwork, which many ethnographers experience when entering the field. She focuses on having to cast aside carefully framed fieldwork plans as well as the academic self she had come to inhabit as a student in order to truly listen to her interlocutors in northwestern India. She describes this as ethnographic humility and suggests that such shifts between one’s academic home and the field can productively challenge liberal academic ways of thinking. Shana Sippy more directly addresses issues of selfhood and describes in detail her struggle to operate as a scholar in India when this identity conflicts with the gendered expectations of Indian family members. She discusses being both at home and not at home in India and how these “ambivalent belongings” distance her from her family and her colleagues in ways that ultimately push her to pursue research in the diaspora. Harshita Mruthinti Kamath brings together streams and ideas from both Sippy’s and Mamtora’s contributions as she reflects on her experience of attending the death rituals for her grandmother in India. In particular, she analyzes her complex reaction to claims, practices and expectations related to purity and impurity. Through deliberations on caste privilege, gender, and generational shifts in diasporic families, Kamath bridges selfhoods across time—much like Ann Gold—and considers how to understand her grandmother’s gendered negotiations of life and death.

Emilia Bachrach’s essay turns the lens of analysis to focus on the perspectives of her interlocutors and account for how they perceive and represent her identity. Specifically, she analyzes her experience working with a Swami who has

constructed her as the “right kind” of American scholar of religion by categorizing her as a “*sattvic* [pure] Jew”, despite the fact that she does not herself identify as a practicing Jew. Such slippages, Bachrach suggests, should remind us that the selves of home and field are always co-performative and co-constructed, thereby enabling us to see misunderstandings as an invitation to a new selfhood. Jenn Ortegren draws on this idea of co-construction in her examination of how email, online chats and WhatsApp bridge spaces and selves of home and field in unique ways. She considers how these forms of electronic communication constitute what she calls an “archive of the self”, which can reveal the complex selves we inhabit during fieldwork that are not necessarily captured in fieldnotes, but should, she argues, inform our analyses and writing. Ortegren concludes with reflections on how WhatsApp, which brings the selves of the field into our lives “back home”, can be both uncomfortable and promising for continuing to compile an “archive of the self”.

All of the essays in this volume offer reflections on the contingencies and positionalities that shape ethnographic engagements and ways of knowing, thereby demonstrating that all ethnographic knowledge is inescapably partial and incomplete. Much of our discussion in Madison focused on how to privilege accountability and reciprocity in fieldwork interactions and in the production of anthropological knowledge. The final two essays turn to this point by explicitly considering how we teach and mentor in relationship to ethnographic assumptions and positions at home and in the field. Peter Gottschalk revisits “A Virtual Village”, an online pedagogical tool he originally co-created in 2000 with Matthew Schmalz, which they are currently revising and updating. The website is intended as a way for students to visit the Bihari village where Gottschalk has conducted fieldwork, and he reflects on how bringing together his American and fieldwork homes offers unique opportunities for students to engage in the everyday lives of Bihari villagers in nuanced and familiar ways even as it reveals the vicissitudes of teaching and fieldwork. Specifically, Gottschalk takes up the issue of “otherness” that is central to both fieldwork and teaching and asks how virtual ethnographic learning may undermine and/or elide elements of othering. Amy Allocco’s essay considers what she calls the “technologies of reflection”, the diverse forms of field-writing—including handwritten letters home, creative essays, emails, and more—that she has produced over the course of twenty-five years of study and fieldwork in South India. She leverages this material to reflect on the intergenerational gifts and relationships that have structured her experience of the flows between home and the field and highlights the deeply intersubjective and relational aspects of fieldwork. Reflecting on the sources in her archive—which powerfully illustrate the interpenetrations of home and field, life

and death, and self and other—leads Allocco to reaffirm her commitment to centering the crucial relationships that develop in these contexts in her scholarship, teaching and mentoring.

Finally, Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger offers an Afterword that brings us into the present moment, addressing some of the political challenges associated with current notions of home in and beyond India. She reflects on how these challenges intersect with her own scholarly and personal identities in the context of her current research among shopkeepers in Mussoorie. In assessing some of the indigenous terms for “home” and the ways in which this concept is gendered and may change over the course of an individual’s life cycle, the fundamental fluidity and specificity of ideas of both home and field come into sharp relief for Flueckiger. She discusses not only the ways that belonging, home and place-identity may be shifting and multiple, but also the limits and constraints of these categories.

Staying Home, Longing for Fields

As symposium participants who wished to contribute to this issue were developing and expanding their papers for submission, COVID-19 took hold in our communities. Many of us began scrambling to adapt our courses and reconfigure our lives amidst radically changed campus operations, institutional commitments and personal circumstances. At this point, three of our male-identified contributors withdrew from the issue, primarily because teaching and childcare responsibilities made revising their oral presentations impossible. This set of realities seems worth highlighting here, especially in light of the open letter written by *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (JAAR) editor Andrea R. Jain, titled “An Update on Journal Publishing and a Plea for our Discipline in the Time of Pandemic”. Jain notes that while the number of submissions to JAAR remained steady after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020, submissions by women dropped markedly. Citing articles in *The New York Times* and *Inside Higher Ed*, Jain concludes that “the pandemic has not thwarted our heteropatriarchal culture and its assumptions that the majority of emotional and family labor should fall in the laps of women”. Jain asks us to strategize about and commit to pursuing greater equity in our publishing practices and to “shift the burden of inequity from traditionally marginalized groups to those in positions of privilege and power”. Although we regret that the high-quality, provocative papers from these three male colleagues do not feature in this issue, we see it as significant that all of the planned submissions from our female-identified collaborators, including the three scholars of color who we invited to contribute, came to fruition. Considering Jain’s report and our own commitments to equity and representation, we hope that bringing these scholars’ work to publication makes some contribution

toward redressing these imbalances. Furthermore, given the precariousness of this moment, we are especially proud to be publishing a double issue that features nine essays by women scholars complemented by two from male authors.

We believe that the multigenerational cohort of scholars represented here makes a unique contribution to understanding the developments and shifts in the anthropology of India and its religions over the last several decades. Their contributions grow out of a diverse set of experiences, backgrounds and vantage points on the field. Our authors are trained in Religious Studies, South Asian Studies, Anthropology, History of Religions, and Indian languages and literatures; they work in different regions of India. Our effort to assemble this diverse complement of scholars emerges out of a deliberate, shared commitment to feminist, inclusive collaboration. As their individual explorations of and reflections on the categories of field and home suggest, these scholars occupy distinct positionalities and identities vis-à-vis their field contexts and traverse the spectrum from “insider” to “outsider” and multiple spaces of semi-belonging in between. We can hear in the tones of these essays how scholars come to inhabit their ethnographic selves more comfortably and confidently as they pass through various markers of security both at home (e.g., established credentials and—ideally—tenure) and in the field (e.g., established relationships and developing senses of competence and belonging). We can also perceive the developing nature of our academic fields, whose norms, practices and boundaries transmute over time. These essays reflect the ways in which post-colonial, feminist and critical race theories have taught ethnographers to think, speak, write about and represent themselves differently. In some cases, authors explicitly reflect on how these theoretical shifts have changed their work, sharing reflections from their earliest experiences and writings that might seem out of place today. The vulnerability that the honest reconsiderations presented in these essays can require of the authors, especially for those looking back on long careers, is considerable. Their powerful reflections productively question key assumptions about fieldwork identities and the political dynamics of anthropological research and constitute one of this collection's signal contributions.

Finally, as we collated reviewers' reports and drafted this introduction in the midst of a pandemic and increasingly insistent demands for long-overdue racial justice, we were acutely aware of the ways that our changed local and global circumstances will further challenge our fieldwork practices, standpoints and relationships to home and field. This complex set of realities includes constraints on our ability to travel for fieldwork, suspended grants and shrinking travel budgets, and revised institutional risk management protocols. Appropriately, institutional review boards have developed new guidelines for research with human subjects

research in light of COVID-19. As researchers, it is incumbent upon us to recognize—and mitigate—the burdens that our work may place on vulnerable populations. Simultaneously, as teachers, this moment demands that we respond in concrete ways to the urgent and long-standing calls to action from Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC). We must redouble our efforts to identify and ameliorate disparities, diversify and decolonize our syllabi, interrogate and make our privileges explicit, center equity and inclusion in our classrooms, and insistently address injustice wherever we see it. We hope that reconsidering the boundaries and power dynamics at play in who and how one can conduct fieldwork, as our authors do in these essays, will help in reconsidering these issues and moving us towards action. Ethnography as an academic methodology developed in Euro-American contexts is rooted in colonialism, Orientalism and racism, structures that are not nearly as dismantled as we may like to believe. Simultaneously, the very vulnerability that one can experience and express in ethnographic fieldwork and writing—particularly in terms of interrogating the assumptions and slippages around the categories of selfhood at home and in the field—offers one way to move forward in the process of undermining these hierarchies. We hope that the voices in this special issue provide some models for continuing not only to think through but also to embody and enact these goals. We are also convinced that it is in this moment—when we are all radically emplaced (or re-emplaced) in the midst of stay-at-home orders, cancelled non-essential travel and remote learning, while at the same time intensely valuing and, often, taking for granted our mobility—we can find fertile ground for probing the multiple and diverse relationships between our “homes” and “fields” in innovative ways.

Acknowledgments

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