



Stephen Selka

POSITIONALITY: IDENTITY, STANDPOINT AND THE LIMITS (AND POSSIBILITIES) OF FIELDWORK

Stephen Selka is a cultural anthropologist and associate professor and director of graduate studies in the Department of Religious Studies at Indiana University. He is the author of *Religion and the Politics of Ethnic Identity in Bahia, Brazil* (University Press of Florida, 2007).

Department of Religious Studies
Indiana University
205 Sycamore Hall
1033 E. Third Street
Bloomington, IN 47405
USA
sselka@indiana.edu

ABSTRACT

This article discusses the concept of positionality, which challenges the notion of a neutral, disembodied observer. For ethnographers, thinking about positionality means to attend to how fieldwork happens through interpersonal relationships that play out in complex and uneven social spaces. Drawing on examples from my own ethnographic fieldwork in Bahia, I consider how positionality is both limiting and enabling, and I address the challenges of writing about positionality in ways that enrich ethnographic description and analysis.

Keywords: positionality; identity; subjectivity; fieldwork; Brazil; reflexivity.

Stated simply, the idea of positionality challenges the notion of a neutral, disembodied observer. That was a prominent concern in interventions into the theory and practice of cultural anthropology that emerged in the 1980s, the height of the “crisis of representation in the human sciences” (Marcus and Fischer 1986) and the “reflexive turn” in ethnography (Clifford and Marcus 1986; cf. Escobar 1993). Those interventions provided a compelling critique of ethnographic realism—the idea that the ethnographer’s “data” exist independently of the researcher—as obscuring the ways that ethnographic fieldwork is embedded in interpersonal networks

and social contexts. In response, many ethnographic monographs in the 1980s and 90s took up the call for experimental, reflexive writing in which the ethnographer's presence was registered in the text. But that experimental moment also raised the question of whether ethnographic texts can be *too* reflexive when the author's reflection on their fieldwork eclipses the people and places they set out to study. One of the questions I grapple with here, then, is that of how to be reflexive in ways that illuminate the fieldwork encounter without overshadowing it.

The term *positionality* overlaps quite a bit with one of the other critical terms in this special issue, namely *subjectivity*. I don't think it's desirable or even possible to draw a neat distinction between the terms. If *positionality* refers to how we are situated in social space, and we understand that situatedness as a standpoint, then it entails *subjectivity*. That's what the term *subject position* is getting at; it refers to the structural embeddedness of *subjectivity*, how *subjectivities* are located in social space. It's related to what others call a "standpoint epistemology" (Harding 1992; Wylie, Figueroa and Harding 2003). To the extent that I'm going to discuss the relationship between *positionality* and what ethnographers can or should *know*, then, *subjectivity* is part of the story.

Positionality is always part of the picture, even outside of the social sciences and humanities. Scholars of science and technology studies, for example, emphasize how the practice of the "hard" sciences are socially and institutionally embedded (e.g., Latour and Woolgar 2013). Ethnography involves an added dimension because fieldwork happens through interpersonal relationships that play out on complex and uneven social spaces. Our position in those spaces shapes our encounters with those we work with. Accordingly, I've often heard others draw an analogy between fieldwork encounters and the "observer effect" in physics. That comparison is deceptive, however, because it implies that there are pure, unobserved situations. Naturally, people often do things that they don't want ethnographers to see. But humans are always performing and positioning themselves in relation to others, present or imagined. The question for the reflexive ethnographer, then, is "what is my *positionality* and how does it shape my fieldwork and writing?" as opposed to how to find the unobserved situation, the encounter without interaction.

To get into these issues more deeply, I'll draw on my own experiences in the field. My most recent ethnographic project focuses on encounters between Afro-Brazilian religious practitioners and African American travelers in Brazil. These encounters happen at an Afro-Catholic religious festival organized by the members of the Sisterhood of Our Lady of the Good Death (known simply as *Boa Morte*) in Cachoeira, Bahia. The festival has become a major media event and tourist destination since the 1970s. When I say *Boa Morte* is Afro-Catholic, I mean that the

festival is formally Catholic—it commemorates the feast of Mary’s Assumption—and at the same time, all the sisters of Boa Morte are women of African descent who are involved with *Candomblé*, an Afro-Brazilian religion. By contrast, most of the African American travelers (the majority of whom are women) are Protestant Christian or “spiritual but not religious”. It’s a story about the interplay of identity and difference between two groups situated differently in the African diaspora who are coming together for an event that they variously define as religious, spiritual and cultural.

The challenge for me has been to find a way to tell the story in ways that are recognizable to the people involved, but where my voice is central to the text. I understand ethnography as *dialogical* in the sense that it emerges from the intersection of the perspectives of the ethnographer and our interlocutors (Clifford 1983; cf. Cabra 2020). That means that both perspectives need to be registered in the text; it is critical for the reader’s understanding of the ethnographic encounter that the ethnographer makes their perspective as transparent as possible. Obviously, this approach contrasts with the aim of ethnographic realism: to report on one’s observations, one’s data, as objectively as possible. A dialogical approach acknowledges that interactions and interviews unfold in a particular sociohistorical context, and that they involve people who are positioned differently in social and cultural space. Reflexivity is critical, then, not as a form of self-expression, but as part of our efforts to situate our ethnographic encounters in their wider contexts.

In this article, I focus on the ways that positionality is both limiting and enabling, as well as on the challenges of writing about that. Indeed, my positionality sets some obvious limits on my fieldwork in Cachoeira. I even appreciate some of those limits. Boa Morte is an organization that only women of African descent with roots in the Recôncavo region of Bahia can join, for example. The festival involves activities that are grounded in Candomblé practice and that happen in private, as opposed to the public side of the festival—the processions and masses—that are formally Roman Catholic. There are practices that go on out of public view and are restricted to the initiated; accordingly, I have heard some people refer to Boa Morte as a “secret society”. Although that may not be the most accurate term, it gets at the interplay between the visible and the hidden in the festival. The boundaries are clear, and in a way, that takes the pressure off me to get the “inside scoop”. And in any case, whatever I learn about the activities that happen out of public view, I can’t write about directly because I’m not supposed to have access to them, and if I *did* somehow have access to them, I wouldn’t be at liberty to share what I learned.

At the same time, readers quite reasonably expect that I have an idea of what’s going on through my familiarity with the religious and cultural context around

the festival. How do I negotiate what I should and shouldn't know (and according to whom?), what (I think) I know and what (I think) I don't know, and what I believe I can or should say about those things in writing? This is a common issue for ethnographers to the extent that our interlocutors share things with us that they wouldn't want to see in print. And it's particularly pressing for ethnographers who become part of the communities they study, including through initiation. I'll come back to questions about writing shortly, but in the meantime, I want to highlight that the limits that positionality imposes aren't simply obstacles, but they are challenging to negotiate and write about.

To take this a little further, positionality doesn't just create limits, it also makes things possible. Shared positionalities, for example, can facilitate connections between people. The trips that the African American travelers I work with take to Bahia, for example, are predicated on connections (spiritual, political, ancestral) between women in the African diaspora. That is, the majority of the African American travelers who attend the festival of Boa Morte come from Protestant Christian backgrounds, and as I explore in my ethnography, many of them draw on the language of spirituality to talk about their connections with the sisters of Boa Morte. That idea of diasporic connection can be pushed to the point that it glosses over differences, of course. That is something that I address in my research. But there's also a particular kind of interaction and recognition that being a black woman makes possible here. It's not the whole story, but the effect is often visible, even if in subtle ways. It can be as simple as someone who is a stranger reminding you of your cousin, for example.

On the other hand, I can sit with the sisters for hours, chatting and joking, but I'm not a sister in any sense of that word—literal, metaphorical, or vernacular. When I started my fieldwork in Bahia, most locals pegged me as a tourist at first, then after I stuck around for more than a week, a journalist. Eventually people saw me as a student and later as a teacher, which matched how I saw myself. For a long time, however, one of the sisters of Boa Morte with whom I most closely worked until she died in 2013, Analia, thought I was a seminarian. She told me I looked like a priest (“*você tem o jeito dum padre*”). The local point of reference for what a priest looks like, at least at that time, was Padre Hélio, a white man—and in fact, others told me I looked like I could be the priest's nephew. That's the slot I fit into for many locals, at least early on: one adjacent to the parish priest.

Over time my connection with Boa Morte developed and deepened. I became a “friend of Boa Morte” and built relationships with several of the sisters and their families. That put me in a similar category with photographers, artists and academics who engage with the sisters, most of whom are relatively light-skinned and well educated: that of a mediator. That role itself evolved gradually. When my

research began to focus on Boa Morte in the early 2000s, most of my interaction with Boa Morte centered on talking to the three or four sisters who spent time at the headquarters during the week (including Analia most of the time). Then, in 2005, a journalist interviewed me for a documentary about Boa Morte that aired on public television. He asked me to provide a foreign researcher's perspective of the festival and to comment on why the African Americans come to Bahia. The segment of the interview that aired was only about a minute long, but that was long enough for me to hit all the talking points, stressing Boa Morte's value both for Bahians and for the African American visitors. It aired on a Sunday night, and it seemed like everyone in town watched. "I saw you on TV!" several people exclaimed as I passed them on the street on Monday morning. Most importantly, nearly all the sisters saw it. This moment as a talking head on TV cemented my role as a friend and supporter of the sisterhood, and one who tells the story of Boa Morte to wider publics. The mediator's role is grounded both in inequality and proximity, of course: both sides may be benefiting from the relationship, but usually unevenly. The sisters of Boa Morte welcome certain kinds of publicity, for example, including the kinds that researchers can provide, but they also guard their privacy. Many of the sisters understood what I was doing was generating more buzz around the festival and educating Americans about them.

My whiteness is always in the picture here, but not necessarily in determinate ways. As an example, I spent a good amount of time in Analia's house over the years. She lived in the center of town in a neighborhood called Rosarinho, where several well-established Candomblé *terreiros* are located. Analia's house always seemed to bustle with visitors. Passersby could hear the TV blaring over the conversations inside. Late in her life when Analia's health problems made it hard for her to make it down the hill to Boa Morte's headquarters, she held court in her living room during the day. During my fieldwork I visited at least once a week. I often came with questions for Analia, but just as often I showed up just to be in the middle of this lively scene where I could soak up the gossip and listen to people "talk Candomblé". In 2010, in fact, I happened to be in Analia's house when a man who was collecting data for the national census came to the door. Analia invited him in, and he asked us each our name and our relationship to the household. When it came around to me, I simply said "Steve", and without missing a beat, Analia added: "He's my son". The census taker looked up from his clipboard, glanced at me, then at Analia, then back at me again. We managed to keep straight faces for a moment before bursting into laughter.

This moment helps to illustrate the liminal space I occupied at the threshold between the inside and the outside. I was welcome in certain private and informal spaces where Candomblé gossip, inside joking, and other routine interactions

were going on. The joke on the census taker reflects that familiarity, but at the same time, it turns on my difference, the difference of my skin. Similarly, in the neighborhood where I lived during my dissertation fieldwork, one of the families I got to know well jokingly nicknamed me their “pet gringo” (The term “gringo” refers to a foreigner, and it is racialized to the extent that most foreign visitors to Cachoeria are of European descent. But African American tourists are also referred to as gringos, so the category is not simply marked as white.) That too was a way of simultaneously highlighting my positionality and minimizing it. Indeed, these examples reflect the ways that the position of the ethnographer is inherently ambiguous.

Sometimes my appearance moved to the foreground of my interactions in unexpected ways, as when I worked as an extra on a Portuguese telenovela filmed in Cachoeira in 2008. The show, *Equador*, followed a story set in the Cape Verde islands in the nineteenth century. Most of the main cast was Portuguese (from Portugal). Several of my local friends suggested to me that I audition as an extra, pointing out that “they need more people of your color in the background!” I objected that I didn’t want to take away a job from a local who needed it more than I did. But one day I was walking down the street and Luis (one of the best-known Candomblé diviners in town) took me by the wrist and led me down to the casting office around the corner. When the casting director saw me, her eyes widened; she immediately called the wardrobe supervisor so she could see how this green-eyed gringo would look in a scratchy linen suit. I got the part (although I’m only in a couple of scenes and you can barely see me). It involved a lot of waiting around on the set, but it allowed me to spend time with locals I knew who were also working on the show; it was part of my fieldwork. At the same time, however, this example illustrates how my whiteness was absorbed into the racial unconscious of the Portuguese empire. This reflected the irresolvable ambiguity of my position: my friendship with Luis was close enough for him to drag me down the street despite my dramatized protests—to deliver me to a casting agent because I looked just like a European colonist from the nineteenth century.

My positionality in relation to the African American visitors with whom I worked was different than my positionality in relation to local Afro-Brazilians. We overlapped in our shared American identity and middle-class status, for example. What Americanness means for us was different, of course, and African American middle-class and white middle-class identities are not interchangeable. But, especially in a small town in the interior of Bahia, our common points of reference stood out more clearly. Speaking English, for one thing. And as a faculty member in a department of African American and African American Studies at the time, my familiarity with many of the same books and other references helped. In fact,

I ended up serving as an informal tour guide and translator for a group of African American women who came to the festival of Boa Morte in 2010. If I was a good guide at all, it was because I realized when I should be present and when I should disappear. There were many moments in which the women were processing the experience of the place and of the festival among themselves, for example, and those moments weren't for me. But there were also other moments where I was brought into the conversation and was part of the processing.

My experience at the festival of Boa Morte in 2017, however, went in another direction. I met another group of women traveling together that year. The group was about the same size as the 2010 group, but the women were younger and a few of them had spent several months in Brazil on previous trips (including an artist residency). A couple of them spoke some Portuguese, which was not the case for the 2010 group. Eventually I approached the leader of the group and told her that I'd been coming to Cachoeira for years and that I could point out some of the local sights and facilitate visits with some of the sisters. She was polite but said "no thanks". My interpretation was that she felt that she was culturally competent enough to not need a tour guide or an anthropologist to help her find her way around. Fair enough. Yet something else was in the background, and I can't be sure what role it played, but I do think it mattered. The festival of Boa Morte in 2017 took place just days after the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. The weight of that was in the air. The festival in 2010 had taken place during a more optimistic time, less than two years into Obama's first term as president (the local vendors even sold Obama-themed souvenirs in 2009). But at that moment in August of 2017, I had to think: what does it mean to this group of women to encounter someone like me in a place like Bahia against the backdrop of what just happened at home? I don't know the answer for sure, but I stepped back and out of their space.

Some of the dimensions of fieldwork that I've discussed here can be difficult to convey and uncomfortable to write about. They highlight the friction and awkwardness of ethnographic encounters in general. I'm working on ways to deal with the friction and awkwardness head on in my writing, in ways that can help the reader better understand the context out of which my ethnography took shape. I've also realized that I share that awkwardness and tension with the others involved in the encounters I study, including other meditators and the African American visitors as well. Thinking about my role as a mediator—not just between the people I work with in the field and my readers, but between the sisters of Boa Morte and their various publics—focuses my attention on the complex interplay of representations and standpoints here. As opposed, for example, to the attempt to gloss over the ways I'm situated in that interplay in the name of ethnographic

objectivity, or to uncover some authentic truth that I think others might be hiding from me.

Again, the most vexing thing about this for me is how to write about these issues. I think it's fair to say that in cultural anthropology, the trends have shifted to a "less is more" approach to reflexivity and writing about positionality. But I'm frustrated by ethnographies that spend a few pages in the introduction making all the right reflexive qualifications, then nothing more until the coda. The reason it's important to talk about positionality is because it shapes our fieldwork in fundamental ways—namely, how people interact with us, what they say and don't say to us, and so on. It's critical to have positionality as part of how we analyze our own fieldnotes, and it's important to discuss this with our readers, who are usually wondering about these issues anyway. That means baking the reflexivity into the ethnography, but what does that look like? If it comes as constant asides and qualifications, that can get distracting. I think it must be about working positionality into the description and analysis more seamlessly, in a more organic way that serves the ethnography.

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