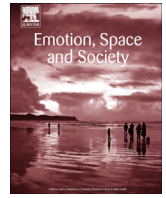




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## Sexuality and power on South African game farms; reflections on positionality and emotions in ethnographic research

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## ABSTRACT

The taboo around researchers' sexualities and sexual experiences in ethnographic field work persists. We found that our sexuality, alongside physical and emotional experiences, were pivotal to how we shaped research relations and processes. This evokes questions around how we reflect on our positionalities and the knowledge we generate. We argue that ethnographic accounts are strengthened by inclusive reflexivity, that acknowledges sex and sexuality. This article presents empirical material from field experiences on South African game farms. These spaces tend to represent a particular image of wilderness, constructed according to patriarchal and racist hierarchies, which heighten contestations over belonging. As such they become spaces of violence, seduction, and power, and we found ourselves (neither minds nor bodies) unable to detach from these spatial and emotional dynamics. Our strategies for 'being in the field' came to evolve around negotiations of power, sex and complicity. The emotional dynamics made us feel confused, bewildered and sometimes scared. We seek to share our experiences and feelings, and to contribute to discussion on the role of sexuality in ethnographic research, and the epistemological, methodological and practical advantages of reflecting on the ways we engage in the field.

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## 1. Introduction

This article explores the role of sexuality in ethnographic research and knowledge generation. We explore this topic through discussions of positionalities in relation to sexuality and power on South African game farms. Sex and sexuality 'in the field' has only recently been discussed by feminist scholars (e.g. Gune and Manuel, 2011; Elliston, 2005; Katz, 1994; Lerum, 2001). Earlier ethnographic work tends to be focused on the sexuality of 'Others' (Malinowski and Havelock, 2005 [1929]) or provide accounts of non-reflexive personal sexual encounters in the field (Rabinow, 1977): none of which deals with sex and sexuality as part of the research process. Our focus lies on how sexual relationships and sexualities shape how we interact with research participants, and how these dynamics influence how we 'do' field work and what we come to know about a place and the people in it. We particularly hope this discussion will assist researchers preparing for

ethnographic field work. There is much to gain by reflecting on these aspects of positionality, especially for those engaging in field work for the first time. We draw from empirical research materials to analyse how reflections on sexuality enable insights into the workings of power on South African game farms, and the process of knowledge production.

Our contribution draws on debates across sociology, anthropology and human geography, e.g. flirting in the field (Kaspar and Landolt, 2016), gatekeeper-researcher relationships (Reeves, 2010), power dynamics (Naples, 2003; Skeggs, 2001), falling in love and having love affairs in the field (Cupples, 2002; Hapke and Ayyankeri, 2001; Newton, 1993), issues of gender and race (Faria and Mollett, 2016; Ahmed, 2007; Gurney, 1985), and the multiple aspects of positionality, positioning, and power in the field (Lerum, 2001; Rose, 1997; Duncan, 1996). Despite these knowledges, we experience a persistence of assumed asexuality and emotional detachment in the field which begs the question whether scholarship has really moved beyond normalised 'objectivity'. Personally, we have been advised by supervisors and colleagues to maintain emotional and physical distance to our research and research participants, to avoid being clouded by emotions or

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subjectivity. Hence it is important to discuss how the expected detachment results in difficulties in navigating the field.

Preparing this article has been a lengthy and emotional process. It started in 2011 as a private discussion between the two of us after a series of workshops linked to our research project. We shared what Bondi (in Davidson et al., 2005) call the emotionality of our experiences; particularly around the relationships with men in our field sites (trophy-hunting farms). We both felt an awkward mix of being excited and deeply troubled by our field work experiences and relationships (discussed by Kaspar and Landolt, 2016). Our ambivalent and awkward feelings were inextricably linked to our positionalities: young, white, foreign (European) women, both navigating a male-dominated and violent research context. When we felt emotionally overwhelmed by our experiences we thought there was something wrong with us. We should not, or so we thought, as researchers allow ourselves to be so emotional and attached. Field workers are supposed to maintain critical distance. The boundaries that *we thought should exist* between our professional and personal selves became blurred and we raised this within our academic community, few were interested in unpacking these particular aspects of field work.

A few years later we decided to write about the silences that were bothering us and made us question the whole idea of doing research, and at times ourselves. Since then we have engaged with a multitude of articles, books, seminars and discussions related to this topic. These have inspired our writing as well as our framing of this particular article, and we have a rich body of literature that has helped us to make sense of our field work experiences. As part of the writing-process, we have presented on this topic on numerous occasions. Many ethnographers share similar experiences and anxieties, and that many students about to embark on field work have questions about sex and sexuality in the field. There is indeed a silence and a taboo, but also a desire and need to address this.

## 2. Landscapes of power: silencing sex and sexuality in the field

We conducted field work on game farms in South Africa, in the provinces of the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal, as part of a research project on the conversion of cattle farms into privately-run game farms, and the impacts of these conversions on farm workers and farm dwellers (see Spierenburg and Brooks, 2014). We focused on the experiences and stories of black farm labour, and interpreted them in the context of contestations over land, nature, labour, identity and belonging (Brandt and Spierenburg, 2014; Josefsson, 2014). We also engaged with game farmers, trophy hunters, professional hunters, and game rangers, who turned out to have a significant impact on our access to the field and our research.

A range of literature address specific aspects of the messiness, complexities, and politics of the research process. Kaspar and Landolt (2016) suggests that “the invocation and enactment of sexuality is far more common than is reflected in the current body of literature, and that even “apparently innocuous sexualisations have considerable effect on the way gender and sexuality are negotiated during the research encounter, and thus on the collection of data” (p108). Rose (1997) has been helpful in our understanding of positionality. For reflexivity and reflexive writing, we turned to Punch (2012) and DeLyser and Starrs (2001). Feminist scholars and feminist ethnography addressing power dynamics and the processes that make up research have certainly shaped our thinking (like Naples, 2003; Skeggs, 2001; Coffey, 1999). Scholarly work on intersectionality (Yuval-Davis, 2006; McCall, 2005) has also been useful for reflecting on the relational dynamics in our respective fields. It allows us to consider the cross-cutting issues of race, class, gender and sexuality, and the hierarchies of power in

which they operate. In our particular research context, the dynamics of sex and sexuality lie close to racial dynamics and the power of whiteness (as discussed by Faria and Mollett, 2016) that shape realities and landscapes of power. Our field work accounts provide an empirical and contextualised illustration of this process, and we extend the debate on concerns around the silencing of this topic during all phases of the research (also discussed by Cupples, 2002).

We are not the first researchers to experience the silencing of sexuality and emotions in field work research. Edited volumes like *Taboo* (Kulick and Wilson, 1995) have engaged with questions about sex and erotic subjectivities in field work, and the resistance to and/or lack of engagement regarding this topic. Several authors in the special issue “The Stickiness of Emotions in the Field” (Gender, Place and Culture, 2016) have noted the same thing, see for example Faria and Mollett (2016) and Kaspar and Landolt (2016). *Emotional Geographies* (Davidson et al., 2005) and the follow up publication *Emotion, Place and Culture* (Smith et al., 2009), focused on the place of emotions in research. Bondi (2005) argues that emotions do not necessarily have to be the subject of every study, but they can at least be more usefully included in reflections and analyses. Studying Jewish belonging, anthropologist Markowitz (2006) uses “full-bodied ethnography” (a term she attributes to Karla Poewe) to destabilize cultural categories and fixed notions of race and ethnicity. In an edited volume with Ashkenazi (Ashkenazi and Markowitz, 1999) they call for attention to embodied parts of field work, including sex and sexualities to demystify the process of doing fieldwork as well as the processes of negotiation happening before, during and afterwards.

In *After Method*, Law (2004) assumes that researchers inherently enact and generate social realities. In his own words, research does not require: “to seek disengagement but rather how to engage. It is about how to make good differences in circumstances where reality is both unknowable and generative (2004: 7).” ‘Doing’ ethnography is a deeply personal and relational experience *and* practice and therefore we can only strengthen our positions by reflecting on who we are and what we do in the field to enhance the credibility of our ethnographic accounts. Our methods are about ways of working and ways of being. It is about what kinds of social science we want to practice (Law, 2004). For us this includes what we are feeling and how our methods interact with our minds and bodies. Davidson and Milligan (2004:425) describe emotions as interrelational: “our sense of who and what we are is continually (re)shaped by how we *feel*”. So what does it mean when we feel discomfort or pleasure about the relational dynamics in ethnographic research? Why do the ways we carry out ethnographic field work invoke feelings of guilt, shame and concern? Why would transparency regarding the research dynamics compromise our data or our competence as researchers, as has been suggested to us?

It seems there is still an assumption that we should be ‘objective’ (meaning detached, asexual and apolitical) researchers in the field, whose personalities, experiences, feelings and sexualities do not shape, nor can be separated from, our research relations and the way we interpret field processes (Gune and Manuel, 2011). Law unpacks this so-called objectivity using Donna Haraway’s work as a lens (in Law, 2004), saying that how we try to be objective is usually by attempting to practise detachment and disentanglement from location. They both argue that this is never possible, with which we agree. Rather, the notion of objectivity is undermining to ethnography; it contributes to the silencing of our emotions as well as the assumption that sexual relations in the field compromise the research. Scholars like Kulick and Wilson (1995) and Cupples (2002) make clear from the start that it is simply odd to think that sexuality is not part of the field work process, for we enter places and interact with spaces with our bodies and minds, and not

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