



Forum

For fieldwork in geography: Lessons from the bookends to Janet Townsend's 'Women's Voices from the Rainforest'

Women's Voices from the Rainforest. Janet Gabriel Townsend (in collaboration with Ursula Arrevillaga, Jennie Bain, Socorro Cancino, Susan F. Frenk, Silvana Pacheco and Elia Pérez). Routledge, London, UK and New York, USA, 1995, pp. viii + 212. ISBN 978-0-415-10532-3 (pbk).

To begin with a personal anecdote, I first encountered Janet when, as a second-year undergraduate at Durham in the early 1990s, she marked an essay that I had written, which asked us to evaluate how useful remote sensing was for geographers. To set up a reflection on the essay's key terms, I started with a drawn-out description of how useful a penknife was. I described how I could use the different blades to do things like remove corks from bottles or extract stones from horses' hooves. Janet scribbled in the margins at that point, 'And in Colombia, the police would steal it from you!'

This comment illustrated how Janet spoke from her position as a fieldworker, and it is *Women's Voices from the Rainforest's* contribution to contemporary debates about fieldwork that I want to revisit here. 'The field' remains a crucial site of geographical scholarship (Richards, 2011). Despite multiple critiques of the practice and imaginary of geographical fieldwork as masculinist and colonial which marginalizes scholars who are female (Bracken & Mawdsley, 2004), parents (Jenkins, 2020), black (Hughes, 2022), or disabled due to mental (Tucker *et al.*, 2022) or physical (Rose, 2022) conditions, most geographers have argued that fieldwork should be reclaimed rather than abandoned. In this spirit, I re-read *Women's Voices* to reflect on what we can learn about fieldwork today in three interventions which draw upon the text's bookends, its first and last pages.

The 'case study'

I recently spoke with a UK-based researcher who had conducted a year's fieldwork in the 'Global South' wanting to test a theory that they had developed from a particular tradition of European political thought. They hoped that the fieldwork—an impressive ethnography conducted in a difficult local language—would demonstrate their theory. As so often happens when our theories encounter the real world, this turned out not to be the case. In writing up their research, however, they failed to draw the obvious conclusion that the theory needed a rethink, instead faulting the community they had been working with for not living up to the lofty expectations of the theory. This is a problematic form of the 'case study' approach to fieldwork—going out to find an example to fit *a priori* conclusions.

In contrast, Janet's preface to *Women's Voices* presents a radically different relationship between theory and the field. Over the course of fieldwork in the 1970s and 1980s in Colombia's Magdalena Valley and from 1990 in Mexico, Janet describes a series of 'conversions'—towards positivist/computer-based quantitative, and then Marxist, feminist, and participatory geographies. She began her groundbreaking third

year undergraduate Durham lecture course on *Geography, Gender and Change* (which may have been the first such course in the UK) using these conversions to narrate the recent history of the discipline through her own biography. What impressed me then, and impresses me now as I re-read *Women's Voices*, is that Janet was willing to allow herself and her whole worldview to be radically changed by fieldwork. She was able to admit that she was wrong, to become aware of the drawbacks of her previous assumptions, and to be open to see the world differently.

This is exemplary and intellectually important in an age when what James Hunter (1991) called the 'culture wars'—contentious political struggles about morality and identity in US public life—have increasingly played out on UK campuses. It is increasingly seen as virtuous not merely to shut our ears to other voices but to attempt to silence them. Janet's book points to the urgent value that fieldwork can add both to our own scholarship, and to the way that we educate students. Rather than running closed classrooms that instruct students on what they ought to think, are we, like Janet, letting our fieldwork unsettle our preconceptions, creating spaces that help our students in turn be open to thinking differently?

'Positionality'

Secondly, arcing from the start to the back of the book illuminates its exemplary approach to *positionality*. As an awareness of how who we are and where we are from influences how we see the world, this is an advance on the supposed view-from-nowhere. But it easily becomes gestural, a perfunctory listing of 'identity' characteristics that serves various functions from establishing one's *bona fides* as a right-on researcher to, paradoxically, reifying power relations and reasserting authority claims (Gani & Khan, 2024). In her marvellous 1996 critique of this, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart*, Ruth Behar excoriates such performances. Discussing one's positionality, she says, is hard to do well without looking boring. More than that, it is 'only interesting if one is able to draw deeper connections between one's personal experience and the subject under study' which requires 'a keen understanding of what aspects of the self are the most important filters through which one perceives the world and, more particularly, the topic being studied' (Behar, 1996: 13). That is to say, a discussion of 'positionality' is not about helping the reader understand *us*, but about helping them understand *our analysis*.

It is not simply in her autobiographical preface that Janet does this. Rather, she concludes the book by reproducing, in full, translated transcripts of life history interviews with four settler women, Carmela, Elena, Clara, and Guadalupe. This explains the book's title: after providing expert outsiders' analysis, she is allowing these women's voices from the rainforest to have the final word. Combined with her preface, this editorial technique enables us to better understand how Janet's positionality has influenced her analysis.

What I mean is this. For Chapter 5, 'Mexican women pioneers tell their stories', which precedes the four interview transcripts, Janet immersed herself in the life histories and analysed them under subheadings of her own selection which, she said, 'seemed to be discussed by many women at length and with interest' (p. 81). The subheadings include 'resistance', 'liberation', 'rape', 'control over money', 'fertility', and 'women earning an income'. When we read the women's stories, a striking element of some of them—for example Guadalupe—is Christian faith. As both theology and practice, it infuses her narrative. Janet, however, doesn't pay much attention to this. It isn't

given its own subheading, but rather is relegated to a single paragraph under the very last heading 'Women's groups'. Here Janet recognizes that some of the religious women 'prove highly articulate and confident', but expresses the somewhat surprising opinion that this is 'not because of the teachings of their religion but because of the experience of regular Saturday discussions' (p. 120). The women's own theological sensemaking and imperatives are reduced to an expert sociological aside.

This is perhaps, though, not as surprising as it seems at first. At the time, Peter Berger's thesis of secularization—which he saw as 'a global phenomenon of modern societies' (Berger, 1969: 113) still held sway: it wasn't until later in the decade that his fieldwork in Latin America would lead him to write his celebrated (Berger, 1999) book on *The Desecularization of the World*. Furthermore, as we learn from the preface, Janet's 'conversions' led her to Marxist and feminist accounts of the world and the subheadings she selected are obviously filters derived from those worldviews. It wasn't until the following decade that scholars in geography like Anna Secor were able to show how feminist analysis could take the politics of religious belief more seriously (Secor, 2001), and John Agnew declared 'Religion is the emerging political language of the time' (Agnew, 2006: 183).

This is not a criticism of Janet's approach: she acknowledges throughout that the team behind *Women's Voices* has limited and situated etic rather than emic knowledge (p. 131). Rather, the careful construction of her text allows us to understand the limits of her analysis and re-read it with twenty-first century eyes. Janet did not explicitly reflect on the women's faith, but her commitment to finishing with their words and providing us with the framework to understand how she approached their narratives enables this recovery. Janet's book is a model of how to write genuinely about positionality (which is very hard to do usefully) without descending into a boring rendition of a geography that breaks your heart.

Longitudinal studies

Finally, in closing the book with the moving stories of Carmela, Elena, Clara, and Guadalupe, the reader is left missing a longitudinal element to this research and wondering: what happened to these women, and the communities of which they were part? Unlike Janet's earlier work where she returned to the Magdalena Valley, there was no subsequent follow up of the Mexican pioneer women whose voices we hear in the book. She did return to Mexico for other major community and gender work, and stayed in touch with leading urban-based research associates, but did not go back to the tropical lowlands (Alan Townsend, pers.comm, 23 February 2024).

There may be many good reasons why it is not possible to follow up fieldwork like this. These include life and career cycles in the neoliberal university, and the other projects, interests and responsibilities that pull us in different directions. Unlike Janet's earlier work, often undertaken with one trusted former student (Townsend, 1993), this study was conducted with a large team of four Mexican women and two vehicles. Reconstituting that scale is inherently expensive and difficult. The snapshot we are presented with is valuable and interesting in itself. Nevertheless, Janet herself recognized that the research was based on brief encounters and could be characterized as 'gender tourism', with all its 'grave disadvantages' (p. 11). The reader is left wanting to know what happened subsequently, not least given the discussion in Chapter 2 (pp. 21–27) about whether land settlement is 'successful'.

This points to the value of what Karen O'Reilly calls 'longitudinal qualitative research'. She delineates three variants of this (O'Reilly, 2012: 519–20). 'Qualitative longitudinal research' is identified as such at the outset and modelled on its quantitative counterparts in studying processes and formations over an extended period of time (O'Reilly, 2012: 519). 'Return ethnography' is where a scholar goes back to the same field site over time and observes how communities have changed. The third variant she calls 're-studies', where other scholars revisit the site of a previous study with newer lenses and perspectives. This approach has yielded rich results in anthropology but (as far as I know) is rare in geography. Janet's work would be a marvellous candidate for such a future study by doctoral or other researchers who might take up the challenge of re-visiting the people and places she and her team explored so that we can listen, once more, to the *Women's Voices from the Rainforest*.

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