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Fieldwork as Social Transformation: Place, Time, and Power in a Violent Moment

Noelle Brigden\textsuperscript{a} and Miranda Hallett\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}Political Science, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, USA; \textsuperscript{b}Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Social Work, University of Dayton College of Arts and Sciences, Dayton, USA

\textbf{ABSTRACT}

This special issue addresses the urgent need for reflexive introspection about conducting research in violent contexts. To do so, it explores two interrelated dimensions of the places where researchers conduct fieldwork: 1) temporality; and 2) power. In the current political moment, fully engaging with these dimensions of field sites has become an ethical and security imperative, as well as a methodological imperative. Once we put these two dimensions at the centre of analysis, the need to re-conceptualize fieldwork beyond the binaries of here/there and insider/outsider also becomes apparent. Thus, this special issue approaches fieldwork, not only as a means to a research end, but instead, as an opportunity for social action in itself. From a variety of methodological and epistemological positions, the contributors to this issue build on recent feminist work that explores fieldwork’s geopolitical dimensions. Collectively, these interdisciplinary essays argue in favour of reimagining fieldwork as an imaginative and transformative act.

We live in a violent moment. A wave of xenophobia has simultaneously swept across both sides of the Atlantic. Governments in Europe and the Americas are militarizing borders and repudiating legal obligations to refugees. Meanwhile, in many places, a deepening cycle of extrajudicial violence and crime blurs boundaries between war and peace. Conflicts and displacements spurred by neoliberal globalization often do not look like traditional wars (Kaldor 2012). Instead, in many areas around the globe, state and non-state armed groups vie for profits and power, compounding precarity for lives already made vulnerable by economic marginalization. Media representations of this seemingly chaotic violence justify border fortifications at the expense of refugee lives lost in the Mediterranean sea and the Arizona desert crossing. Meanwhile, the climate change crisis looms, and expectations of resulting population displacements further the border control and securitization agenda (Miller 2017).

Increasingly, ostensibly liberal democratic states around the globe produce ‘states of exception’ (Agamben 2005) via emergency declarations, and

\textbf{CONTACT}

Noelle Brigden \textsuperscript{a} noelle.brigden@marquette.edu Political Science, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI, USA

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‘extraordinary measures’ in the name of counter-terrorism and public security. Yet ‘security’ for some is most assuredly insecurity for others (Booth 1991, Booth 2005; Binford 2016). These assertions of militarized sovereignty restrict freedoms, invade privacy, and oppress already marginalized populations, all in the name of national security against perceived threats both foreign and domestic. Thus, we live in a moment of crisis and violence. But this crisis is not a complete rupture. As Walter Benjamin famously reminded us, “the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of exception’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule,” (Benjamin 2003, 392). For many of those subject to its most brutal intersectional oppressions, the contemporary instability is a familiar and everyday crisis, based in entrenched inequalities of ethnicity, class, nationality, legal documentation, and gender. It is a crisis whose violent dimensions range from the spectacular – with demagogues publicly and loudly scapegoating, denigrating, and punishing marginalized groups – to the banal, as mundane and bureaucratic practices feed into systems of surveillance, criminalization, and enclosure. Indeed, the State manipulates the spectacle of the crisis, particularly at its geographical borders, to justify its own exceptionalism, extending and redefining its own authority at the expense of the lives and safety of excluded populations, such as migrants and refugees (Mainwaring 2019; Mountz 2010). In this context, the spectacle of their suffering becomes political and economic opportunity for the State and the capitalist class (Valencia, Sayak 2018).

This spectacle has generated an acute need for more methodologically rigorous and ethically grounded fieldwork on violence, as well as reflexive introspection about conducting research in violent contexts. Researchers must re-think not only the nature of violence itself – looking for insights and re-framings that capture the brutal dynamics of an unequal world – but our own role in research fieldwork and scholarly representation. Researchers find themselves caught between the ethical and methodological dangers of sensationalism and the fetishization of violence, and the legitimate need for the documentation of violent systems and actions through fieldwork in crisis settings (Parkinson 2019). The latter compelling need is made more difficult by the intentional whitewashing and hiding of accurate information about violence by the perpetrators, especially in the case of state violence and other forms of highly organized predation. The suffering of victims becomes sensationalized in ways that eschew the responsibility of the State.

Motivated by these urgent dilemmas, CRISTOSAL, a Salvadoran-based non-governmental organization (NGO) dedicated to human rights research and protection, together with the Transnational Justice Centre of Marquette University and the Centre for Human Rights at the University of Dayton, convened a workshop in the summer of 2018 to address the ethical and methodological challenges for fieldwork in contexts of violence. The workshop invited researchers not only to critically examine these fraught ethics and methods, but to deepen their commitment to aligning research practice
with human rights principles and with emancipatory politics. By holding the workshop in San Salvador, and seeking local experts and scholars as interlocutors, workshop organizers hoped to de-centre the West as the assumed point of departure (Gledhill 2000; Matsuda 1987). This special issue, drawing together critical analysis of each author’s field experiences, emerged from the discussions and dialogue at that workshop.

Ultimately, this edited volume, as a product of that workshop, argues that rather than viewing fieldwork consequences as a byproduct of investigation or a clever strategy to achieve an end, we should understand the act of fieldwork itself as a contribution to society. Over time, engagement with participants is itself a transformative act that implies mutual social learning (often in unanticipated ways) and the formation of reciprocal relationships that frequently cross class, gender, nationality, or ethnic divisions. The essays acknowledge the myriad ways that fieldwork changes the world, long before the publication of findings, and the special issue repositions this transformative capacity at the centre of our work as academics. The papers accomplish this task by subverting binaries of here/there and insider/outsider that frequently structure discussions of fieldwork, and in place of these conceptual dualisms, the papers elaborate the complexities of temporality and power in structuring the places where fieldwork is conducted.

**Workshop as Border Crossings: Interdisciplinary Dialogue**

The workshop brought together an interdisciplinary group of researchers working in a variety of violent environments to learn from one another’s experiences in the field, to critically assess the challenges we have faced, and to think deeply about the impact of violence on the research process. In many field sites, violence is normalized, or experienced more acutely by minorities, and thereby obscured. Informed by the ubiquitousness of precarity and violence in a global system sewn together by colonialism, both past and present, our hope is that all fieldworkers, not only the usual suspects who happen to work in zones of spectacle, recognize how violence constitutes the social spaces where they conduct research. This includes places often constructed as ‘safe.’

The majority of contributors employ an ethnographic approach based primarily on participant observation or oral history. Some of these scholars, notably Kai Thaler, Rebecca Bell-Martin, and Jerome Marsten, employ a mixed-methods approach that includes quantitative analysis. Others, such as Sandra Gruner-Domic, employ a historical approach that includes archival work. Regardless of the point of inquiry or methodological and disciplinary orientation, conducting fieldwork in a context plagued by violence shapes certain common experiences and dilemmas in the research process. Using Central America as a shared reference point for a discussion of multiple, intersecting forms of violence and the ways such violence impacts research, the workshop examined five interrelated themes: ethics, access and data, safety, politics, and methods and concepts.
By embracing this diversity of field sites and methodologies, the CRISTOSAL workshop encounter generated a dialogue among scholars dealing with different forms of violence, including civil conflict, forced disappearance, displacement, deportation and immigration policing, political repression, gendered violence, genocide, and transnational organized crime. Some participating scholars, such as Noelle Brigden, Kai Thaler, Susan Ellison, Sandra Gruner-Domic and Rebecca Bell-Martin, conduct research on the process of violence itself via studies of criminal organizations, experiences of victimhood, or forms of political repression or the repression of mobility. Miranda Hallett, Ariana Markowitz, Jerome Marsten, and Amelia-Frank Vitale focus on objects of study, such as emotions or migration, that are not inherently connected to violence. The multidisciplinary essays that resulted from this discussion leverage the experiential knowledge emerging from firsthand fieldwork experiences to complicate, or challenge, several accepted ‘common sense’ best practices that guide contemporary scholarship on violence. Brought together as a collection, these essays trouble a variety of enduring yet problematic binaries that frequently structure our fieldwork practices across time and space: the illusory splits between field/home, violent/non-violent, safe/unsafe, local/global, innocent/complicit, insider/outside, victim/victimizer, and displaced/settled.

Importantly, the contributions to this special issue take the current political moment into account. Aware of past compilacies between social scientists, state surveillance, and racist political repression, the authors of these essays grapple with contemporary processes of securitization that interweave with longstanding elements of racialized and gendered inequality. Engaging with diverse theoretical orientations, the authors in this collection offer insights into the entanglement of power and knowledge. Leveraging experiences from fieldwork among (and sometimes in collaboration with) vulnerable populations, their essays illuminate and denounce contemporary forms of social control and violence. In the process, they underscore the need to take two interrelated dimensions of fieldwork sites seriously: 1) temporality; and 2) power. In the current political moment, fully engaging with these dimensions of fieldwork, as they interact with/in place, has become an ethical and security imperative, as well as a methodological imperative.

Once we put these two dimensions at the centre of analysis, the need to reconceptualize fieldwork as an act of imagination and an act of transformation also becomes apparent. Thus, this special issue builds on recent work that explores fieldwork’s geopolitical dimensions from a feminist lens, deepening the intersectional critique of the geographical and political imaginaries that continue to find their way into our research practices (see Berry et al. 2017; Nordstrom and Robben 1995; Wibben 2016). From a disciplinary perspective, this edited volume sits at the critical crossroads between geography, anthropology, political science, human rights studies, and history.
Violence Contextualized: central America as a Shared Reference Point

Inevitably, the political moment in which we work and write structures our thinking. While some of the authors conduct cross-regional analyses or focus on Central America, one of the authors works exclusively in North America and one of the authors works in South America. However, as a collective work, these essays are a product of a workshop encounter in San Salvador, and thus have largely been informed by a particular violent context: the human security crisis confronting contemporary Central America. This particular crisis, a stark example of geopolitical forces imploding at the local level (see Appadurai 2006), forcefully directs our attention to the larger historical and geographical continuities that connect both violence and fieldwork across time and across the boundaries of nation-states. These continuities reveal the incompleteness of processes of decolonization as well as pushing us to recognize the many ways in which, to adapt a phrase from Bruno LaTour (1993), ‘we have never been sovereign.’ Geographically and politically, as well as intellectually, this edited volume occupies a borderland space fundamentally structured by the flows of both licit and illicit capitalism and the politics of borders and boundary-making where North and South America collide.

For example, El Salvador and Honduras have registered notoriously high per capita homicide rates for the last decade. This turmoil is a product of many complex factors. The legacies of civil war and inadequate forms of transitional justice (particularly in El Salvador and Guatemala) foster impunity and continued marginalization. Violence in the northern triangle of Central America has deep historical and political ties to the United States (Danner 1994, Menjívar and Nestor 2005). These dynamics of state violence in the name of security and social order are not just a recent phenomenon. Central America was a Cold War proxy battlefield in the 1980s, as the United States supported anticommunist governments and counterinsurgency campaigns against local revolutionary movements (Kruckewitt 2005; Grossman 2005; Lauria-Santiago 2005). In Guatemala, counterinsurgency targeted Mayan communities, transforming the long-standing marginalization of this community into a genocidal campaign (Grandin 2011). The mass graves, political killings of civilians, and gendered violence committed during the region’s long period of civil conflict in the latter half of the 20th century cast a long shadow today. Hundreds of thousands of Central Americans fled to the United States during the war period.

In the aftermath of this repression, displacement and political violence, deportation, policing and criminalization in both the United States and El Salvador has merged the urban zones of the two countries into what Elana Zilberg has called a singular ‘transnational securityscape’ (Zilberg 2011). Salvadoran gangs, as the cultural practices they embody today, first emerged
on the streets of Los Angeles as the Salvadoran refugee community acculturated to the lived realities of U.S. racialized urban marginalization (Zilberg 2011). In turn, those practices initially arrived in El Salvador through mass deportation from the United States in the 1990s (Zilberg 2011). In the contemporary period and summoning the ‘War on Terror’ rhetoric as justification, the Salvadoran government imports resources and ideas for heavy handed gang policing from the United States, and in so doing, often violates the basic civil liberties and human rights of its own citizens (Zilberg 2011; Wolf 2017, 67–71).

In Guatemala and Honduras, governments emulated these ‘iron fist’ policies, which repress stigmatized communities in a broader context of continued political repression of environmental, labour and social activism. Assassinations of environmental activists and indigenous rights activists in Honduras and Guatemala are commonplace. Furthermore, after the U.S. government accepted the results of a 2009 Honduran coup, a 2017 election rife with irregularities and accusations of fraud, which were never sufficiently investigated despite widespread protests, failed to restore popular trust in the government. In response, the Honduran exodus accelerated, moving out of the shadows as caravans of asylum seekers moved north with great publicity.

However, the violence that expels Central Americans from their homelands also haunts the pathways of migrants (Brigden 2018; Vogt 2018); their perilous flight represents a continuation of this violent experience, not a rupture, and it casts a long shadow across the continent. Some people traverse the corridor across Mexico to the United States, while others relocate within Central America or elsewhere. Those who reach the U.S.-Mexico border are subject to a new wave of state violence, as asylum seekers face arbitrary detention and multiple forms of mistreatment at the hands of the United States (Hing 2019). In fact, the workshop that catalysed these articles took place during June 2018, at the height of the cruel forced separations of thousands of Central American asylum-seeking children from their families under the Trump administration’s ‘zero tolerance’ policy (Hallett and Arnold 2018).

The spectacle of legal violence (Menjívar and Abrego 2012) created at the U.S.-Mexico border by the Trump administration echoes the escalating violence that motivates flight from home, and those experiencing it relive multiple traumas. The individual’s experience of trauma during migration journeys across a Mexican drug war zone and the militarized U.S. border, of child separation policies, and deprivation during detention, disrupts family and community practices across multiple countries (Abrego 2014; Coutin 2007; Menjívar and Abrego 2012). Thus, this legal violence reverberates within communities across the continent, as family and friends left behind in Central America fear for their distant loved ones trapped in camps, detention facilities and the drop-houses of smugglers. In a society that has
been de facto integrated by the movement of everyday people, violence in one location ripples outward with a larger social impact.

In sum, we are indebted to this Central American experience for a number of insights. These transnational connections demonstrate not only the prevalence of violence in an unequal hemispheric order, but also the elastic nature of the spaces of field sites and the indefinite temporal qualities of ‘fieldwork’. From our experiences of Central America and the diaspora, it becomes clear that violence and violent practices are not contained by ‘here’ and ‘there’ distinctions. As fieldworkers change their geographical and political vantage points of this violence, moving from ‘home’ to the ‘field’ and back again, different dimensions of violence may become more or less salient in both their analysis and their personal experience. Thus, researchers’ movements across borders offer different vantage points of a shared system, rather than an opportunity to view violence from a ‘safe’ distance. As we shared our experiences, it became increasingly clear that in a shared global political system, there is also no ethically pure location or position, regardless of geographical or social distance from violence.

Violence may stalk researchers wherever they roam. In fact, researchers engaged with topics and social settings not typically associated with ‘danger’ report experiences of violence and sexual harassment (Hanson and Richards 2019). In particular, for researchers with identities constituted by intersecting vulnerabilities of race, class and/or gender, there may be no safe spaces and no comfort zone to return to after fieldwork, let alone during it (Berry et al. 2017). Vulnerability can be carried in our skin, rather than a product of location. We cannot assume that researchers feel secure in the United States and insecure in Central America. We cannot assume that we work in a non-violent context in any location. The larger geopolitical system – a system anthropologist Michael Taussig (1992) calls the “Nervous System” – courses with violence that alternates between connecting and disrupting. Social practices and networks span our field sites and our home. Within this system, our identities and interpersonal relationships may generate or obviate distinctions between the experience of safety/danger and here/there.

Thus, in an important sense, the contributions to this edited volume set aside faulty constructions of binary and bounded difference, and respond to the urgent lived reality shared by researchers and others who live or work in the Americas. This reality is shaped by a transnational geography of violence, not just the acute violence of the chaotic present, but rooted in decades of political repression and geopolitical engagements. These essays explore fieldwork moments contextualized within a deeper history of ruptures and continuities between communities and across national borders. This context shapes the fieldwork experience and data collected: a world of military, humanitarian, academic, journalistic relationships, and understandings formed over time (Parkinson 2019). Research participants and interlocutors make sense of the
field presence of researchers through the prism of these historical, geographical, and relational engagements (Parkinson 2019). Thus, this edited volume self-consciously sits at a historical and geographical (as well as disciplinary) crossroads, connecting the past with the present and the future.

**Roadmap to Re-Imagining Fieldwork in Violent Contexts**

We have organized the edited volume around two of the (multiple) conceptual binaries destabilized by the essays: field vs. home and outsider vs. insider. Importantly, these two binaries, one expressed in distinctions between territorialized places and the other in oversimplified framings of differences between ethnicized peoples, structure fieldwork as discrete practice set apart from the sphere of advocacy or intervention. In this framing, fieldwork is often de-politicized: there is a failure to recognize and reckon with fieldwork as social action, and potentially as social transformation. These false dichotomies – rooted in colonial ideologies – help to perpetuate problematic forms of Othering and distancing, as well as preserving fallacies like methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002) that reduce the accuracy of research in a positivist sense. By troubling these boundaries of difference, the essays clear an analytical path towards re-envisioning fieldwork as a transformative project.

The first group of essays unsettles notions of ‘field’ and ‘home’. Understanding the researcher as an “embodied link between two places”, Kai Thaler argues that reflexivity, temporality, and the geography of research complicate disciplinary goals of replicability and transparency for political science fieldwork in conflict and post-conflict zones. Thus, he re-conceptualizes research as bridge building between worlds with practical, methodological, and ethical implications for the conduct of fieldwork.

Connecting intimate, local and global power struggles in one analysis, Susan Ellison explores how violence becomes a technique for managing uncertainty. Drawing our attention to this relationship between the larger geopolitical system and its expression in the domestic domain, she complicates the idea of separate fields of ‘here’ and ‘there.’ Her intervention is at once methodological, exploring what is visible and invisible about violence from a fieldwork perspective, and also theoretical, demonstrating the analytical utility of moving across multiple scales to understand violence.

Miranda Hallett and Sandra Gruner-Domic’s contribution grapples with the role of mediation and distance in fieldwork. They discuss the ways that unequal power relations mediate the intimate spaces of fieldwork, and thereby generate vulnerabilities for participants that trespass across the borders of field and home. When it comes to populations whose suffering is already caught in a maelstrom of political wrangling (whose lives are often already exposed to public scrutiny, surveillance, and interpretation), research
ethics require critical awareness of these fields of power and the flexibility to improvise creative responses. Standard practices of informed consent are revealed as inadequate in a context where anonymity may not be a choice for informants, and even if it is, cannot be assumed to be safe. The false binary between field and home elides the ways that persons and representations circulate and interact in an unpredictable and risky temporal and geographical field, and this ideological binary is part of what underpins mechanistic and inadequate forms of research ethics.

In the article by Ariana Markowitz, we confront the consequences of the collapse of field/home as we dwell on the reality of trauma for fieldworkers in violent contexts – primary, secondary, and vicarious. Markowitz points to the failure of academic institutions to recognize the psychological and emotional dimensions of fieldwork, rooted in notions of objectivity and distance as well as a masculinist culture where difficulties in the field serve as a lonely ‘rite of passage.’ She argues persuasively that recognizing the reality of trauma and prying open time and space for its processing – developing a social science ethics of care – is not only necessary for the survival and health of researchers, but for the accuracy of research. Trauma produces triggers and blind spots that diminish our capacity to be present, observe clearly, and sustain our work.

The second group of essays unsettle notions of ‘outsider’ and ‘insider’. Noelle Brigden discusses how her own identity became unmoored and shifted in response to her fieldwork relationships and the physical transformation of her own body. Her adaptation to this new corporeal reality generated a space of shared community not only around her research, but the physical practice of powerlifting (a strength sport). The gym became a boundary crossing space, where Brigden’s professional and personal lives intersect and complicate her position as an outsider. Not without coincidence, the gym also provided opportunities for Brigden and her research participants to cross gender boundaries by practicing non-conforming gender roles. In other words, Brigden describes how fieldwork potentially transforms both participants’ and researchers’ lives in often unexpected ways.

In the contribution from Amelia Frank-Vitale, the standard advice to “do what the locals do” is complicated through an analysis of the utility and persistent ambiguity of her outsider/insider status. By challenging the conventional wisdom that “local knowledge” is uniform, reliable, and applies across the board, Frank-Vitale highlights the importance of positionality and the contingencies of the moment. Navigating social categories and strategically performing her ‘outsiderness’ was a crucial strategy of survival, access, and in the end of solidarity. She is able to utilize this social distance to act in solidarity with a person from the community she studied, facilitating her mobility through space that would otherwise be impassable. While troubling the dichotomy, we must also recognize the crucial work that these distinctions do as situational social performances, and not as grand ideological formations.
Such insights contribute to positivist research on violence and human rights, not only interpretivist fieldwork. Rebecca Bell-Martin and Jerome Marsten explore how the informational context of violence creates patterns of selection bias that silence marginalized voices with both normative and empirical implications. They show that local insights and power relationships often shape access to participants. In so doing, like Frank-Vitale, they also complicate an uncritical reliance on ‘local knowledge’ by researchers, which can reinforce local hierarchies and vulnerabilities. Thus Bell-Martin and Marsten challenge any binary that privileges either insider knowledge or outsider knowledge. This work, like all of the contributions to this volume, thereby shows how methodological choices about the conduct of fieldwork are also, de facto, political choices.

**Temporal and Transformative Dimensions of Fieldwork: An Argument**

Drawing together the insights of the essays collected here, we see an emerging vision of fieldwork as social transformation. Research is a praxis that is always already embedded in complicated geopolitical fields imbued with historical memory. Thoughtful consideration of the temporally and geographically complex dimensions of fieldwork brings the role of imagination into focus. Because fieldworkers must constantly consider past, present, and future consequences of their actions for methodological, ethical and safety reasons, we must engage our research contexts imaginatively – a point made by several of the essays in this volume (see for example, Brigden).

Because researchers always approach the field from a particular situated social and geopolitical position, they also must recognize, as Hallett and Gruner-Domic illustrate, these positionalities are often mediated. They must look ahead over horizons both temporal and geographical, and develop reflexive expectations about multiple potential alternative future spaces in which the consequences of their action unfold. Such reflexive forecasting disrupts typical ‘best practices’ in many spheres, from questions of positivist methodology (see Bell-Martin and Marston) to the ethics of informed consent (see Hallett and Gruner-Domic). They must carefully consider the past, linking memory to present landscapes and future expectations. Such social and cognitive processes are more complex than a simple forecast, and they thus require reflexive imagination.

In this special issue, the contribution by Thaler directs our attention to the interaction between reflexivity and temporality. He argues that the interpersonal research on violence necessarily complicates the attempt to foresee any practical, ethical, or methodological eventuality. As a result, researchers must adapt and reimagine their roles as they negotiate violent terrain. In a violent context, to avoid methodological, ethical, and security pitfalls, researchers must address three types of potential dangers, each of them with a unique relationship to fieldwork time: 1)
risks; 2) uncertainties; and 3) certainties. Risks are the probability that a danger befall you or your participants. Uncertainty is a situation in which the past is not necessarily a guide to the future, and the researcher therefore lacks sufficient information to judge the probability of the danger (see Blyth 2006; Brigden 2018). The longer the time horizon, the more complex and uncertain future events become, as geopolitics and technology change the socio-political landscape in unanticipated ways, generating new risks for both individual participants and communities (Brigden and Gohdes Forthcoming). As Bell-Martin and Marsten point out in this edited volume, the methodological and ethical issues that accompany these time horizons may be particularly acute in the high risk, low information environments that generally characterize the context for human rights and violence research. The contribution by Ellison shows us how violence itself is a strategy to manage some uncertainties, and must be taken into account as such by fieldworkers.

In the fieldwork moment, however, some consequences are certain and given. For example, we know that fieldworkers will inevitably be transformed by their engagement with the people and violence around them, albeit often in subtle ways rather than overt trauma (e.g. Clark 2017). In this sense, we are ‘vulnerable observers’ (Behar 1997). As the contributions by Brigden and by Markowitz in this volume illustrate, we may not be able to predict the people we become during the fieldwork process, but that person is not the same as the individual who embarked upon it. The fieldworkers’ presence will also inevitably change outcomes and futures for the community they study, no matter how carefully the researcher attempts not to interfere (Hyndman 2001). Field research in crisis settings is, by definition, a political intervention (Parkinson 2019). Indeed, our capacity to embrace this transformative potential, refashioning our research as a form of resistance to injustices we witness, may mediate the trauma we experience vicariously during interviews about violence (Maillet, Mountz, and Williams 2017, 942). As explained by Maillet, Mountz, and Williams (2017, 942) in their reflections on fieldwork in confined and obscured spaces, ‘researchers are simultaneously vulnerable and powerful.’

In this context, researchers must be imaginative and innovate on their own scripts, as opposed to following stale routines (Kovats-Bernat 2002). Other recent work has highlighted the improvised and imaginative nature of fieldwork (Brigden 2018; Pieke 1995; Yanow 2001, 2009). By improvisation, we mean the irreverent leveraging of anything fixed or established for new purposes (Brigden 2018). As they encounter new settings, fieldworkers improvise upon social norms, identities, networks, institutions, and practices to generate contacts, access communities and information, and stay safe. In this sense, researchers’ own survival and information gathering tactics mirror those of their participants, as they grapple with violent contexts (Goldstein 2014). In this way, as in so many others, researchers depend on the advice and support of interlocutors in the field such as field assistants,
intermediaries, and research subjects themselves – a form of work which too often goes unacknowledged and unremunerated, and may entail greater risks to these research collaborators than to the primary investigator.

The mirroring of research/survival strategies lends itself to a more nuanced approach to the role of local knowledge in fieldwork. As the contributions by Bell-Marten and Marsten and Frank-Vitale make clear, local knowledge is not an uncomplicated ‘thing’ to be collected. Instead, researchers use a toolkit that overlaps and mirrors that which locals have at their disposal, a toolkit that inevitably involves the establishment of social ties and connections that provide networks of support. These local fieldwork strategies yield insights for researchers in a social process of engagement and also entangle them in fraught local dynamics. Therefore, we might speak of ongoing local knowledge practices (plural and verb), as opposed to local knowledge (singular noun), as important to fieldwork in violent contexts. We also must expand our lens to the acquisition and maintenance of local relationships – alongside local knowledge – as a central ethical and political concern for the researcher.

Several essays call us to acknowledge the depth and emotional entanglement that can be implied by these relationships born via fieldwork, as well as the mediated social and geopolitical distance that often structures them (e.g. Markowitz, Brigden, and Hallett and Gruner-Domic). This reflexivity is important not only to properly situate the meaning of research, but to illuminate fieldwork as a social and political process. This approach generates a more complex, fluid, and reflexive understanding of the power relations that structure fieldwork, as well as the social processes we hope to investigate. To accurately grasp these dynamics, we must strive to undermine the dichotomies between field/home, researcher/participant, violence/non-violence, local/global, and so forth. The contributions to this volume challenge such oversimplified categories, prying academic discourse open to more imaginative understandings of power relations that structure the social processes we hope to understand, as well as our fieldwork.

The contributions to this special issue, and most explicitly the essays by Thaler and Bell-Martin and Marsten, make clear that political and ethical concerns about the embodied nature of fieldwork and the power relations that structure it are also positivist methodological concerns, ultimately shaping data and analysis. With an explicitly positivist epistemological orientation, Bell-Martin and Marsten triangulate between multi-method approaches to bring marginalized voices and experiences into their analysis. From a more interpretivist orientation, Ellison moves between analytical scales to show otherwise concealed violence(s) and the relations between them. Ultimately, these essays show how methodological rigour can be improved and systematic silences can be problematized through reflexive fieldwork. While many of the entries to this special issues have taken a post-positivist epistemological position, the powerful
emotional entanglements that result from embodied fieldwork engagement, such as those discussed by Thaler, Frank-Vitale, and Markowitz, do not imply that ‘objectivity’ must be sacrificed. Indeed, violent terrains are also emotional terrains, and work within them is more accurate and theoretically nuanced when the mediating role of emotions, including shock and anxiety, in fieldwork relationships are explicitly examined (e.g. Bahre 2015; Woon 2013). The reflexivity championed by these essays for coping with the emotional response to violence promises to provide a better contextualized and more complete account of social relations. Furthermore, emotions, such as guilt and anger, mediate the impact of our research on ourselves and our participants, and require ethical introspection (Clark 2017, p.432–444). Thus, these essays sit at a crossroads between research ethics and methods, and the theorization of affect and intimacy in research.

Towards Fieldwork as Social Transformation: A Call to Action

Most academic work treats analysis and written output as the imaginative and potentially transformative stage of research. Generally, researchers have discounted the social transformations that occur in the immediate moment of these fieldwork contacts. They tend to focus on the development of policy instruments (a medium-term time horizon social change goal) or on the critical discursive ruptures (a long-term time horizon social change goal) that potentially emerge from published studies. Nevertheless, every interview or social interaction during fieldwork is embedded in deeper power structures, both between researcher/participant/community and the larger global political economy. And every interview or social interaction during fieldwork transforms and/or reinforces those power structures in complex ways.

Over time, fieldwork, like the everyday actions of participants, transforms or reinforces elements of the social context through these improvisations. As people navigate violence, whether for the purpose of research or simply everyday life, their actions transform social spaces and relationships. Encounters between people are inevitably exchanges; they transmit information, understanding, and sometimes resources in both intended and unintended ways. They are also inherently partial, providing only traces and glances of the larger system at work (Hiemstra 2016). The question, of course, is how to mitigate potential harms in this indeterminate and uncertain context, and ensure as much as possible that these micro-level social changes are largely positive and do not increase risks to people who are often already in highly vulnerable conditions.

In calling for fieldwork as transformation, we draw on the wisdom not only of academics and researchers who have laid the foundation for this insight, but also on the visionary work of Central Americans both individually and as mobilized collectivities. In the latter half of the 21st century,
grassroots movements in the region denounced their oppressors and enacted a ‘new politics of survival’ built on concepts of liberation, solidarity, and social transformation (Sinclair 1995; Wood 2003). For example, Nicaraguan scholar José Luis Rocha (2017) argues that the mass migration of asylum seekers from the region can be understood as a form of ‘civil disobedience’ that reveals the failures and pushes the boundaries of contemporary rights regimes. Thus, the migrant trail produces not only suffering but collective agency (Frank-Vitale 2011; Vogt 2018; Wheatley and Gomberg-Muñoz 2017).

We wrote and revised our contributions, including this introduction, in the shadow of a critical moment in October of 2018 along that trail. At that time, the world witnessed the Mexican government beat and gas unarmed asylum seekers at the Rodolfo Robles Bridge at the Mexico-Guatemala border (Pérez-Bustillo 2018). That incident, coupled with scenes of U.S. Border Patrol firing gas and rubber bullets into families with children attempting to cross from Tijuana in January 2019, can be understood as a ‘Selma moment’ – a turning point in violence and cruelty that in years to come may be framed as a courageous act of resistance met with repression (Pérez-Bustillo 2018). Shortly thereafter, the extent of U.S. border patrol harassment and interrogation of journalists documenting this violence came to light (Bhandari and Handeyside 2019). Watching these scenes with horror, and keenly aware of the attempt to track journalists’ activities, many of the contributors to this volume felt a deepening sense of vulnerability to and potential complicity with government efforts to gather intelligence about this collective resistance to the global border regime. Collectively, we felt a renewed resolve to rethink the political potential of our fieldwork.

For the researchers in this special issue, who have taken up Central America as a shared reference point, the consistency and creativity of Central Americans’ collective resistance often inspires and compels us to go deeper and further with our own fieldwork and research praxis. As we consider the temporal dimensions and power dynamics of fieldwork, the need to re-conceptualize this stage of research as imaginative and transformative social change becomes more urgent. The suffering that we must confront in the violent times in which we work underscores this urgency. By taking the political role and ethical duty of our research in this context seriously, the contributions in this special issue heed the call of Central American resistance movements to seguir en la lucha (continue in the struggle) by re-envisioning on-the-ground fieldwork as an imaginative and transformative act – a form of social action that must be grappled with in its full moral and political dimensions.

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