

Walking the Fire Line: The Erotic Dimension of the Fieldwork Experience

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His hands reach up to remove the camera from around my neck, the tape recorder from my shoulder. Then he solemnly undresses me, as if I were a small and very sweet child. I stand willful before him, and there is no fear. His face is smudged with smoke and dirt, as he reaches out to pull me down into the water. Fighting the forest fire for days has not worn him down but, rather, stimulated him in strange and unexpected ways. His strong hands move like small, pulsing animals as he wraps my legs around his hard body. Looking up, I see pine trees, smell pine trees, taste wildness. The forest seems to be leaping, blurred by smoke from the huge fire many miles away. But we are underwater now, away from the smoke and heat, rolling like smooth river rocks in the stream. And we are suffused in sunlight.

Suddenly, I hear the helicopter moving overhead. It awakens me only seconds before the alarm blasts from the bedside table. I swiftly leap from the bed, my back and belly drenched in sweat. 'I don't believe it!', I mutter to myself. 'This is the third erotic dream like that I've had in a week! My fieldwork seems to be permeating every aspect of my life. I can't get

away from it!' Packing up my gear in the hallway – cameras, tape recorder, notebooks, blank tapes – I vacillate between disappointment that it was just a dream and a growing sense of ambivalence. This fieldwork project has a grip on me that I'm unable to break away from even when I want a good night's sleep. It feels like an invasion – and a sweet and sour one, at that.

I was eighteen months into a fieldwork project in a rural, mountain town in Idaho when forest fires began breaking out in record numbers in the summer of 1992. Seven consecutive years of drought had rendered the land dangerously dry and vulnerable to fires started, more often than not, by lightning. Previous records were shattered, and a total of nearly 300,000 acres had succumbed to fire since 1985, more than 10 per cent of the gross acreage of that particular national forest.

As I studied and wrote about this place and the vernacular language utilized by the region's inhabitants to articulate and claim it, huge sections of the landscape were burning. All summer long, I had watched the planes and helicopters come and go, the small, local

airport bustling with US Forest Service personnel and aircraft, the air buzzing with 'birds' on their firefighting missions. Each morning, the helicopters rose up and over the mountains behind the house where I lived, moving overhead for the first run of the day at exactly 6:45 a.m. – a noisy and highly functional wake-up call which seemed to jump-start my days. Writing in my office in town one morning, it suddenly occurred to me that I had been listening to the almost constant droning of aircraft overhead for days. Jumping up, I began stuffing tapes and notebooks into my daypack, quickly locking the office door behind me. I wanted to be out there, in the forest, talking to the fire people.

The smoke jumper building and loft, sitting at the edge of the town of 2,500 inhabitants, is one of the northwest's regional headquarter stations for US Forest Service firefighting personnel. Through a fortunate series of events and circumstances, I was given permission to enter and to witness the world of the firefighters. Arrangements were made for me to be taken out to the fires, where I watched teams of firefighters build fire lines. I attended briefings and press conferences where the logistics of planning strategy for 3,700 firefighters, flown in from thirty-two states, were determined. In the process, I was able to study a phenomenon of particular interest to me, the construction of what I term an 'instant place'.

In this process, well-coordinated and highly trained teams of people rapidly construct and complete the building of fire camps. These self-sustaining small 'towns' are erected in a single day, providing a base camp for firefighters and support personnel until nearby fires are contained. They are then quickly dismantled, often in less than a day, leaving no trace of having met the basic needs of from 300 to 3,000 adults, depending upon the size of the fire.

The highlight of that month came when I traveled to the Warm Springs fire camp, located in a remote wilderness area high in the mountains, approximately forty miles from my study site. There, in a camp of 1,100 inhabitants, I interviewed firefighters and US Forest Service Overhead Team (administrative) personnel. Eating and sleeping in the camp, watching and talking to people as they came

and went from the fires or provided the support system required to sustain firefighting activities, I immersed myself in another reality. And it is the sensual nature of that reality, along with an exploration of the erotic component in the fieldwork enterprise, that comprise the focal points of this chapter.

I shall pursue this by investigating elements of the erotic which I will contend have a profound impact on what the ethnographer selectively learns in the field. This selective perception process also influences the ways in which a given land and its inhabitants are represented textually – the ripened fruit of the fieldwork process. These erotic elements include opening to sensory possibilities, confronting sexual and emotional passion as elements of the field experience, and allowing a language of passion to permeate the construction of texts. By contextualizing sexuality in the fieldwork experience, anthropologists may add elegant tools to their scientific and intellectual tool boxes. This involves working from the body, as well as from the mind. By funneling data gathered in this way through the senses, fueled by access to the full range of human emotions, it is possible to create texts which I contend will better enhance our understanding of other cultures (or groups within them) and of ourselves.

The Heat of the Field

The seductive nature of the field has been alluded to frequently by ethnographers who, at times, seem to radiate intensity as they speak of – or write about – their field locations and experiences.¹ Yet, as the introduction to this volume points out, the issue of the anthropologist's sexuality in the field has rarely been confronted as a focus of scholarly enquiry.² Newton's recent article moves in that direction as she explores elements of the 'erotic subjectivity' and experience of the anthropologist (1993a: 4). Arguing for inclusion of the erotic dimension in fieldwork accounts, she boldly claims that working with informants can involve working with potential sexual partners, particularly if one works, as she does, in what she calls a 'medium of emotion' (1993a: 10).

This medium, on a continuum as she describes it, moves from lively interest to passionate (although not necessarily consummated) erotic attachment (1993a: 11) and facilitates the fieldwork endeavor. It does so, she asserts, by motivating informants to enter into a relationship, rather than feeling intruded upon by the anthropologist's presence or questions. Newton's unconsummated 'crush' on Kay, an elderly woman she interviewed extensively for her ethnohistory of the gay and lesbian community of Cherry Grove (Newton 1993b), appears to have been beneficial to both parties. Of critical importance to the present enquiry, however, is her statement that the relationship significantly inspired her intellectual and creative work. She argues that 'the most intense attractions have generated the most creative energy, as if the work were a form of courting and seduction' (1993a: 15).

This sentiment is reflected in the earlier writing of Manda Cesara.³ It was while making love with an informant whom she calls Douglas that she experienced an epiphanic moment. It was at that precise moment, she claimed, that she grasped a basic truth about the Lenda⁴ culture. 'Body and brain were one, as were mind and flesh, the past and present, life and death', she wrote. 'I experienced the cerebral in the flesh. In Lenda nothing ever is purely cerebral, it is always mingled with flesh' (1982: 55).

Cesara wrote openly about her consummated sexual encounters in the field, claiming that 'it was inevitable that some ethnographers in certain settings should experience such an encounter' (1982: 59). Predating Newton's article by nearly a decade, Cesara's work asserted that the emotion of loving one individual in a culture allows one to lay hold of the culture itself by way of that individual person (1982: 60). Whether the relationship is consummated or, as in Newton's case, is contained as what might be called an affair of the emotions may be secondary to the fact that both anthropologists felt themselves and their work to be enriched by their passionate (and, of critical importance, reciprocated) attachments in the field.

What is it about the fieldwork setting that might foster an opening to erotic possibilities? As Dubisch (1995) notes, it certainly isn't the

academic preparation for the field, where the prevailing protocol still seems to involve the twist that one has to be in the field in order to learn about how to be in the field (p. 30). And as she rightly points out, advice about sex is not a part of the preparatory package for one embarking upon field research. Yet, as many anthropologists know, the most compelling ethnographic writings inevitably contain rhapsodic and sensual descriptions of people and places. What happens, on a subjective level, when an anthropologist and an entirely new environment collide?

It has been my experience that any new locale sends all of my sensory modes into overdrive in the initial days and weeks of my stay. I can recall the particular smell of the earth in the western wilderness as the snow receded from the trees after a long winter. I remember the pungent smell of sargasso seaweed fermenting in the shore break during the height of summer at a sea-lion refuge in California. The mention of a place can often trigger a cacophony of sensory memories: the taste of Greece, the sounds of downtown Washington, DC, the almost unearthly quality of the light surrounding the Sangria de Cristo mountain range near Santa Fe.

Unfortunately, perhaps, the adaptation process dulls the sharp sensory feedback we receive from our surroundings once we've been in a given locale for a time. And for the anthropologist, traditionally charged with the task of scientifically studying 'the Other' while dressed in the straitjacket of so-called objectivity, the insistent feedback of the senses has often been something to be denied, squelched, or, at very least, granted secondary status to the intellect. It's almost as if there was something not quite right about responding and writing from a reflexive stance – a personal place – unless one hastened to link an overarching cerebral tone to the affective to ensure credibility.

Even Van Maanen (1988), who has written eloquently about the writing of 'impressionistic tales' as a means through which to breathe life into the field experience, is reluctant to allow the neophyte to bypass the traditional ethnographic writing route to engage in such passionate writing. When it's all said and done, he states, 'On advice to students of fieldwork, my feelings are traditional. There is, alas, no

better training than going out and trying one's hand at realist tales' (1988: 139). Earlier in the text, he defines the narrator of the realist tale as one who 'poses as an impersonal conduit who . . . passes on more-or-less objective data in a measured intellectual style . . . uncontaminated by personal bias . . . A studied neutrality characterizes the realist tale' (1988: 47). That he finds this 'studied neutrality' feasible, or the notion of 'posing' as 'an impersonal conduit' workable, I find curious in light of his extensive exploration into the ethnographic enterprise. Moreover, I detect in his writing a hint of uncertainty about the true validity of more evocative texts, in spite of the fact that he ostensibly champions such efforts, and perhaps a dash of the old boot-camp mentality. But the subtext says: 'I had to do the cerebral [read linear and grueling] work before I got to write from the heart [the fun part, and I paid my dues to earn the right to have fun], so you should do that, too.'

I would contend that a healthy blend of working from the mind and the heart is in order, and is the logical compromise here for the scholar negotiating the mind/heart dichotomy. The ongoing myth that one can separate the intellectual from the emotional is reminiscent of the mind-body split that the Western medical institution has traditionally embraced philosophically (and is just beginning to question and move beyond, I might add). To compartmentalize is to master, it seems to claim, in the face of compelling evidence to the contrary, evidence that it is the interconnectedness of bodily and emotional functions which shapes the lives of both healthy and unhealthy individuals.

Anthropologist Catherine Lutz speaks eloquently to this issue in her recent (1986) article, which criticizes the Euro-American construction of emotion. The central tenet of this construct, which she flatly labels 'emotion against thought' (1986: 289), centers on the notion that the emotional is antithetical to rationality (1986: 290). As such, Lutz writes, the prevailing view holds that 'To be emotional is to fail to rationally process information and hence to undermine the possibilities for sensible or intelligent action' (1986: 291). The ramifications of this view have been taken to heart by anthropologists concerned with building a

base of professional credibility and respect among their academic colleagues. This has strongly influenced many ethnographers, who have traditionally striven to excise the affective from their ethnographies in order that the work be viewed as 'scientific' and, therefore, valid.

The logic behind this choice has become chillingly justified by the recent backlash against so called 'reflexive' writings, in which those who bring their emotions and personal biases into the discourse for analysis and examination have been accused of being 'too personal'.⁵ 'Self-indulgent', they sniff when a field account is particularly delicious – more like a chocolate mousse than a piece of dry toast – 'unprofessional', 'inappropriate'. Or, worse yet, some anthropologists are accused of 'going native', as if by immersing themselves in a culture they have been somehow caught with their anthropological pants down doing the wrong thing (getting involved to the point where they are enjoying their work, perhaps?) at the wrong time.

As for those critics, who perhaps have never had the nerve to skinny-dip in their own work (while trusting their brains to function simultaneously), or to write from the hip – or from any other body part below the brain, for that matter – those critics sharpen their No. 2 pencils and produce another barrage of unintelligible, but academically familiar, books and articles. Business as usual, they say. What a relief.

For when certain anthropologists began writing more self-reflexive and passionate ethnographies,⁶ a brief reprieve from the mind-body split occurred. The tight corsets were loosened, the mouth was allowed to relax, and a veritable flood of feelings and decidedly subjective materials came pouring out, mixed nicely with objective, rational perceptions and ideas into a fragrant, new intellectual stew. As though a fire hydrant in an inner-city neighborhood had broken on a sweltering August afternoon, some got to run around for a few minutes getting wet and having a ball. They also reached their goal, which was to cool down.

But, as one might imagine, it didn't take long for the word cops to come in with their sirens blaring, and their lights flashing. Before

long the water is turned off. The kids go back to playing desultory and predictable games of stick ball in the streets. The anthropologists go back to writing from the head, hiding their clamoring feelings under the heavy blanket of technical language comprehensible only to their own kind. The party is over. Is this what we want?

Some anthropologists appear to be caught in the trap, wanting to integrate the emotions and the intellect into the language of anthropology, but fearful of criticism, of not being taken seriously. Although we may subjectively know that our senses work together with our intellects to provide us with data in complex and elegant ways, we persist in asking fieldworkers to operate predominantly from their eyes and ears and – most certainly – from the waist up. Repressing or avoiding our own erotic and sensual responses, we work in a haze of sensory anesthesia of our own making.

Places Penetrating People: Opening to the Senses

I sit between two men, in a crowded roomful of men, listening to fire talk. The room smells of aftershave and leather, and laughter punctuates the space as they take a break from logistics to share an inside joke. Fire experts from Washington, DC, nod in agreement as local experts discuss their strategies for putting out four major blazes which have burned over 27,000 acres of forest in recent days. They talk a fire language that's rough and masculine. 'Most of the heat in the fire is out at the head, and it's running to the north', they say. 'We had another fire pop up down here at Cherry Creek and just bam! Right out of the clear blue sky. We pounced on this one down here with an engine and one crew that picked it up. I knew it would work. That guy's fire savvy. He knows fire and he knows his job.'

Glancing over at the man next to me – he smells like sunlight and oak – I startle when I realize he is studying me. For a moment we lock eyes. A man across the table says, 'Let's hope you have a wet year next year', and another responds, 'Yeah, let's hope it goes the way of the wet year!' As laughter fills the room, I feel my face flush. The man next to me

smiles a wry, winning grin and I return the smile, turning my face away, flustered. He's in charge of one of the fires, an Incident Commander, as they call it. I enjoy listening to his husky, earnest voice as he talks about his firefighting strategies. His hands move in swift, confident arcs through the air as he speaks. He says, 'If this thing gets bigger, we may need a few more people, but we try to keep it lean and mean, so . . .' When I am not taking my own notes, I study the bold blond hairs running up and down his tanned arms, the other voices in the room entering and receding from my awareness.

I struggle to integrate the cognitive dissonance I am feeling: the part of me that is attracted to these men who are, as a group, earnest and intelligent, charming and attractive, with the part of me that is unnerved and irritated by their blatant use of macho sexual imagery to discuss forest fires. The privileged sense of entitlement and ownership over a natural force which they appropriate by way of an insider's language seems, at times, to be both insidious and morally incorrect. Yet, as Cohn courageously admits in her essay on the experience of studying nuclear strategic analysts (whom she calls defense intellectuals), there is something thrilling about 'entering the secret kingdom, being someone in the know' in a realm that is both powerful and hidden from the outside world (1987: 704). Even as I struggled to analyze their 'fire language', and to situate it as a language of power and appropriation, I felt myself to be seduced by it, and felt privileged to be privy to it as a temporary 'insider', an experience both uncomfortable and intriguing.

Spontaneously, I ask this man if he will let me interview him about firefighting. When he says he'd like that and gives me the directions to his place for us to meet, I find my mind moving swiftly in two directions. One of them plans a list of fieldwork questions. But the other one . . . the other one fantasizes. And it is those fantasies which find their way into my dreams, causing me to awaken sometimes in the middle of the night as I work the fire project.

Nader (1986: 111) claims that ambivalent feelings are always involved in fieldwork. She recalls anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker

remarking that walking the line between detachment and involvement is a built-in part of a field relationship. Nader writes, 'The amount of nocturnal dreaming and the ability to remember dreams seems to have multiplied several times over my usual behavior.' Landes (1986: 121) echoed that theme when she noted that one cannot separate 'the sensuousness of life from its abstractions, nor the researcher's personality from his experience.' The fieldwork experience is, in other words, a highly subjective process, affected deeply by bringing to play all of the senses.

When I locked eyes with the fire fighter, I thought of Landes' essay on her fieldwork experience in Brazil. The Brazilians call that gaze '*jogo de olhos*' (the game of eyes), Landes wrote. Her mentor cautioned that this can be dangerous in the field, as it might signal 'love information'. He believed the direct gaze was improper in that particular culture (1986: 135). In my fieldwork experiences, however, it often seems to facilitate matters, enhancing the communication process between myself and others in an already highly charged environment. Opening to the sensual aspects in my field surroundings, I am able to feel the environment in multiple ways. This opening is not restricted to flirtatious interplay (which may or may not occur) but, rather, encompasses an expanded use of all of the senses and a willingness to allow myself to gaze openly at others.

What is it about the senses that make their synthesized integration into the fieldwork process so important for the anthropologist attempting to come to know a place and its people? The definitive writer on the power of the senses may be Diane Ackerman,⁷ who has painstakingly explored each sensory mode for its unique qualities and who informs us that, 'Seventy per cent of the body's sense receptors cluster in the eyes, and it is mainly through seeing the world that we appraise and understand it' (1990: 230). She points out that lovers close their eyes when they kiss in order to shut out visual distractions. 'Lovers want to do serious touching and not be disturbed', she writes. 'So they close their eyes.' Such is the power of the gaze, and the explanation helps us to understand why intense encounters with people in the field can have, at times, a seduc-

tive quality to them. Fieldwork involves coming into contact with many different people for the first time, a process which typically includes visual appraisal of the Other. Thus, the work itself brings with it possibilities for intimate scrutiny and the resulting need to confront our feelings as we strive to understand the workings of other minds in other places.

Ackerman doesn't stop at vision, in her exploration into the nuances of the senses. About smell, for instance, she writes, 'Smells . . . rouse our dozy senses, pamper and indulge us . . . stir the cauldron of our seductiveness, warn us of danger, lead us into temptation' (1990: 36). We bring our nose to the task, too: 'Odor greatly affects our evaluation of things, and our evaluation of people' (1990: 39). And, as if that weren't enough to contend with, our ears also fight for equal access to the environment. Ackerman writes, 'Sounds thicken the sensory stew of our lives, and we depend on them to help us interpret, communicate with, and express the world around us' (1990: 175). Finally, she reminds us that we have another powerful tool through which to view the world because, 'as sages have long said, the sexiest part of the body and the best aphrodisiac in the world is the imagination' (1990: 131).

As anthropologists have traditionally struggled to maintain an objective, 'scientific' posture in the field, is it any wonder they have perhaps experienced stress and confusion? Instead of blocking out this wealth of sensory (and sensual) input, or relegating it to private field journals, we might consider making room for our sensual responses in our work. The senses that we are equipped with are powerful antennae through which to experience, providing us with full use of what Ackerman calls our synesthetic abilities (1990: 290).

This involves opening to input from all of the senses, which combine to provide us with an enhanced understanding of others, of our surroundings, and of ourselves. In synesthesia, there is an intermingling of the senses so that, for example, one can taste a starlit sky or hear it, rather than only seeing it. Ackerman writes of how Rimbaud understood the power of synesthesia, as evidenced by his remark that the only way one can truly experience life is

to be prepared for 'a long immense planned disordering of all the senses' (1990: 291).

Is it any wonder that the social scientist might feel threatened by the rush of sensory input and emotions that floods in upon entry into a new culture? How are we supposed to collect data in the cool and rational fashion we have been taught to affect, when the senses are 'disordered'? It's no wonder that the erotic elements of the field are rarely discussed and often denied. Such a messy business, trying to tabulate data and cope with a barrage of smells and tastes and errant fantasies or desires at the same time! In a culture which tends to deny dissonance (and deity order) this sensory barrage can often be viewed as an unpredictable burden or liability. Yet one can only conjecture how the quality of ethnographic writings might be enhanced and refined if it were culturally sanctioned to write about the field from this vantage point, eliminating the need to repress or compartmentalize certain feelings and thoughts.

One has only to think of the infamous Malinowski *Diary* (1989)⁸ to wonder how his view of the fieldwork experience might have been transformed if he had accepted his own passions. The academic community's dogged focus on his sexual fantasies bypasses an equally compelling fact: Malinowski was a true synesthete. Throughout the *Diary* are descriptions such as this one: 'Marvelous sunset. The whole world drenched in brick color – one could *hear* and *feel* that color in the air' (1989: 67; italics in original). His ability to experience and to write in such a sensually descriptive manner allows us to witness the ways in which he was permeated by his environment. Perhaps his sexual stirrings, in part, were simply a byproduct of his sensual awakening in this new and exotic place. 'I went alone to Wawala', he wrote. 'It was sultry, but I was energetic. The wilderness fascinated me . . . Kenoria is pretty and has a wonderful figure. Impulse to "pat her on the belly". I mastered it' (1989: 153). One can follow, in these sentences, the way his mind moved from the sensual to the sexual in an organic, complex way, impacted by his intense emotional reaction to the landscape. To focus selectively on his comments about the woman he watched, by lifting it out of its environmental context, is both unfair and reductionistic.

The *Diary* is fascinating, in part, for what it reveals about Malinowski's extreme struggle to avoid elements of his own sensory input in order to affect the mask of the neutral scientist. This struggle was undoubtedly complicated by his Polish Catholic upbringing, as well as by an academic background in physics and mathematics that is likely to have predisposed him (by training, as well as perhaps by natural predilection) to privilege the rational and logical over the emotional or passionate. Moreover, he was engaged in a meaningful relationship with the woman who would later become his wife. His guilt at harboring what he apparently interpreted to be sinful thoughts about the women he saw in the field (while his beloved was far away) probably further fueled his conflict.⁹

It is highly unlikely that his academic training in anthropology – influenced by the British school of anthropology with which he was associated – gave him any way of understanding what was happening to him emotionally in New Guinea. Thus, having no context in which to house his erotic and sensual reveries, his writings disclose the incredible tensions with which he wrestled: 'I realized once again how materialistic my sense reactions are: my desire for the bottle of ginger beer is acutely tempting', he wrote. Then he confesses: 'Finally I succumb to the temptation of smoking again.' He manages to justify his behavior in the end by claiming, 'There is nothing really bad in all this. Sensual enjoyment of the world is merely a lower form of artistic enjoyment' (1989: 171–2). How sad, it seems to me, that he squelched his abundant nature this way, torturing himself for what could be construed as his natural reactions to his milieu.

Malinowski's efforts to repent for what can be called his 'sensual sinning in the mind' was militaristic in its rigidity. He wrote, 'I must have a system of specific formal prohibitions: I must not smoke, I must not touch a woman with sub-erotic intentions, I must not betray E.R.M. [his beloved back home] mentally, i.e., recall my previous relations with women, or think about future ones . . . my main task now must be: work' (1989: 268). The emotional hardship and pain he experienced, generated by the struggle with his own complex mix of

feelings, is a kind of human tragedy in the light of his obvious gifts of synesthetic awareness. Moved by the landscape, deeply responsive to both the place and its people, he was unable to utilize his sensual knowing without guilt, to unlock more fully the secrets of the culture he studied. His desire to leave the field as soon as possible can certainly be better understood when one comprehends the incredible tensions he wrestled with. Unable to reconcile his fantasies with his image of himself as a scientist, he suffered. One can only wonder about the ways in which his work suffered, as well.

Mariana Torgovnick, a writer and professor of English, has written compellingly about the Western discourse on the primitive, or 'Other', asserting that it has often been a rhetoric of domination and of control. She offers a penetrating critique of a kind of arrogance which creeps through the thinking of the Western academic, who looks at the world as if the Western way is central, with everything else being considered 'non-Western' or derivative. Torgovnick argues that this rhetoric often hides what lies underneath: our more 'obscure desires: of sexual desires or fears . . . masking the controller's fear of losing control and power' (1990: 192). This, she asserts, allows the Western scholar 'to document the intimate lives of primitive peoples so that we can learn the truth about us - safely, as observers' (1990: 8).

Regarding Malinowski, Torgovnick states that 'the need to forget bodies - his own included - is part and parcel of the kind of scientific objectivity [he] sought' (1990: 230).¹⁰ His disgust with the field (with himself?) emerged blatantly when he wrote, 'The life of the natives is utterly devoid of interest or importance, something as remote from me as the life of a dog' (1989: 167). This statement becomes even more disconcerting when one considers how moved he was by the field earlier in his stay, writing from a sophisticated level of synesthetic awareness. Yet, because he was denied a way to cope with his sexual fantasies, he censored rigorously, corseting himself into a narrow view of the place and its inhabitants. It is my belief that this could not help but weaken both his work, and himself, in the process; a high price to pay for being 'objective'.

Torgovnick vigorously defends Malinowski's passions, boldly stating that 'We should savor his unprofessional desires' (1990: 227), and calls for a 'rhetoric of desire, ultimately more interesting, which implicates "us" in the "them" we try to conceive as the Other' (1990: 245). This progressive viewpoint makes good sense when one considers that we are biologically wired to operate on multiple levels, possessing the capacity to use our bodies, hearts, and minds together to funnel and to interpret massive amounts of stimulus. By contextualizing our erotic responses and channeling them into the ethnographic endeavor, we might better represent those we study and claim to know. We would do this by fleshing out our accounts of people and places, openly bringing our own passions and insights to the task and articulating them in our textual representations.¹¹

What is particularly interesting to me about the Malinowski debate is not the fact that he lusted for the women he studied at certain very human moments, but the fact that the revelation that he did so triggered such an uproar in the anthropological community. This speaks clearly to the somewhat unbelievably repressed state the discipline (and its inhabitants) existed in and, I would contend, continue to exist in. What were they thinking? That Malinowski would be far from home, steeped in a foreign and exotic culture for a long period of time, and be dead as a sensual being? The fact that his private journals were seized upon - as if they, too, should have been strictly scholarly and scientific in their contents - attests to the denial that the field operates in, its residents sublimated in the ubiquitous voyeuristic frenzy of uncovering someone else's secrets while affecting an emotional distance from their experience.

Defining Sex in the Field: What Is It, Anyway?

This brings us to another problem, which involves the defining of sex in the field. The traditional stance in American culture holds that sex has occurred when penetration - preferably leading to male orgasm - has happened. Do we, as anthropologists, want to

restrict ourselves to that notion? If one becomes infatuated with someone in the field, or has a flirtatious fling with them that stops at deep kissing or intense longing, does that mean that sex didn't occur? Further, does that mean that it did?

The analogy of sex in the 1950s and early 1960s might be useful here. It is a well-known fact that in those years 'good girls' didn't go 'all the way'. While it was commonly understood that many 'good girls' were, in fact, 'doing it', the etiquette of the day called for energetic denial. Thus, the 'good girls' who were 'doing it' were lying about it, which made them apparently morally and socially superior to the 'bad girls' who were both 'doing it' and telling the truth. The irony here is obvious. And for the girls who didn't go 'all the way', but went 'almost all the way', one could argue that by privileging such a small part of the sex act (penetration), we bypass the obvious fact that the ones who went 'all the way' at least weren't pretending that they weren't 'doing anything'.

An anthropologist I met once told me about a 'flirtation' she had with a male informant, hastening to add that 'We never actually had intercourse, but it certainly got intense there for a while!' When pressed, she admitted that the encounter was 'certainly sexual', but pointed out that she had later reminded the man of her role as an anthropologist and his as the 'informant', as if somehow by so doing she could erase what had transpired between them. Her inability to contextualize her own feelings resulted, I would contend, in a messy situation in which she attempted to justify her actions, while struggling to find a logical way out of a mess she hadn't yet been able to acknowledge to herself, a difficult state of affairs to unravel, to say the least. Pressed further, she confessed that the man had been both confused and angry with her, prompting her to blurt out, 'I guess I didn't know what I was doing, did I? I thought I was being a good professional by calling a halt to it.'

This particular anthropologist was concerned that if anyone were to find out she had developed a sexual interest in an informant, her work would be discredited. She felt forced to hide her experience in order to protect herself and, in so doing, became unable to

analyze or to understand her own experience. An accomplished professional with a long list of publications to her credit, she will admit privately to 'involvements' with people in the field, while protecting herself publicly by claiming that her work is objective and unaffected by her personal feelings.

What are we afraid of? Do we make the assumption that an anthropologist who becomes sensually or sexually involved in the field can no longer think straight? I would contend that all relationships and events with which we are involved in the field change us in subtle ways and affect the way we perceive, and write about, the field. Does the anthropologist who plays at being 'objective' really create superior work to the one who immerses himself or herself in the field wholeheartedly? I am not advocating random and meaningless sexual encounters here, nor am I talking about situations where issues of colonialism and power imbalance enter into the discourse, which may be, in fact, most of the time.

But anthropologists today increasingly work in field situations where they operate collaboratively with so-called 'informants' (often called collaborators, in recent years) who are not inferior in terms of status or power. To hold on to the shield of 'neutral objectivity' in such situations, protecting oneself from being 'touched' by the field, might be unnecessary in certain circumstances. The validity and sanctioning of relationships which are not abusive and which are mutually desired need to be explored as possibilities, for what they might teach us about ourselves and our ethnographic endeavors. In order to engage in such a dialogue, as a discipline, it is critical that we step out from our hiding places and explore our feelings and beliefs.

The point is not to encourage sensationalistic, *National Enquirer*-type confessionals from the field, replete with descriptive close-ups and minute details about how a given anthropologist had sex in the field. But we might at least acknowledge that we 'did it' if we did (or that we wanted to 'do it', even if we didn't) and be open to the fertile possibilities for dialogue about the ways in which 'it' changed, enhanced, or detracted from what we felt, witnessed, and interpreted in the field. In a discipline where such encounters have taken place,

and have been kept, for the most part, in the realm of 'underground' stories or anecdotes, it is striking to consider how long the consideration of such relationships has been avoided and repressed by the discipline.

It may be that the pose of objectivity in the field is no more than another version of the folk tale about the emperor with no clothes. As anthropologists, we would do well to remember that we are all naked at times in the field – if not physically, then certainly emotionally. Therefore, despite our intellectual armor, we are inevitably somewhat open and vulnerable. And if it is true that the emperor really has no clothes on, then perhaps we should just stare openly at him, in the way of children, and see what he looks like. After all, it's just a body. And we might learn something.

Sexy Business: Immersion in the Field

The Warm Springs fire camp, an instant community constructed to meet the basic needs of 1,100 firefighters and support personnel, existed for sixteen days in August of 1992. Operating smoothly through hot, dry days and cold, sometimes snowy nights, it moved to its own rhythms under glaring sun or dangling stars, wrapped in the smells of pine and smoke. Huge generators provided electricity for light and cooking fuel in the camp, while semi-trucks housing portable showers gave weary firefighters a means to rid themselves of soot and sweat. Kitchens turned out hot, full-course meals three times a day and snack stations were located throughout the camp. The telephone company was brought in to hook up telephones, enabling those on site to connect with the outside world – to phone home. Portable sinks stood near the showers, equipped with mirrors and toiletry stands. While there were only approximately thirty females in the camp (and they were given separate showering and sleeping facilities), male and female firefighters and support personnel mingled socially with one another, moving from the showers to the sinks where the men shaved and men and women alike combed hair and engaged in friendly banter.

Under large, portable canopies, meals were taken and an ambience of warmth and camaraderie prevailed. At the long tables, it was not uncommon to see the sports pages handed from man to man¹² as each finished reading it, a gesture both friendly and surprisingly intimate, infusing the space with a quality of homelike domesticity. Throughout the camp, quonset huts provided sheltered stations for weather forecasting and map making, tool and equipment cleaning and dispersal, first aid assistance, strategy planning meetings, and the filing of disability insurance claims. A portable commissary dispensed razor blades and long johns, toothbrushes and shampoo, and T-shirts which proclaimed, 'Warm Springs Fire Camp – 1992'. At one end of the camp were the sleeping grounds, where large tents housed as many as twenty sleepers and small tents served those who preferred privacy.¹³ Paths between tents were lit with ground lights, which gave the area a glowing, dreamlike quality at night. Men and women stood around smudge pots after dark when the temperatures plunged, talking and warming their hands over an electrical, high-tech version of the traditional campfire.

During the day, the sounds of heavy machinery filled the air as helicopters, buses, trucks, and cars brought firefighters on and off the fire lines some fifteen miles away from camp. Competing with that of the generators for airspace, the noise was intense and omnipresent. This was in sharp contrast to the late evenings when, after nightfall, people sat in groups telling stories and laughing, walked the paths in the sleeping areas, or slept noiselessly in their tents after long, grueling days on the line.

My response to this environment was immediate and clear. Intense and complex, it was one of the most engaging environments I had ever worked in and I couldn't get enough of it. My senses were hit with a constant onslaught of sounds and sights, smells and tastes. Sparks flew off shovels being sharpened for use on the line the next day. The smell of chicken and potatoes drifted from the cooking quarters. Machinery and voices, mixed with the rapid pace of motion in a place where the mission is the reason for its very existence – it was an intoxicating little world within the world, far

from the realities of day-to-day life away from fires.

Unlike Malinowski's, my more progressive training for the field allowed me to relish the life of the senses while there. My graduate training, as well as my readings and writings on the anthropology of place, gave me a suitable context in which to house my own experiences.¹⁴ Consequently, I was able to immerse myself sensually in this new environment, feeling my way into a growing understanding.

In the Warm Springs fire camp, I found myself in a very sensual world where the body meets one of the most powerful natural elements known to humankind – fire. In attempting to analyze what it was about this particular place that made it so sensual and intriguing, despite the military-like uniforms and the ubiquitous heat and dust, I turned to some of the fire personnel for answers. Regarding the most direct displays of sexuality, one woman had this to say:

I'll tell you, after five days men get horny as hell and they will proposition anything they think they can bed. We call them fireline romances. You're very tight with people and shut off from the outside world.

It was this woman's opinion that such encounters were to be expected in situations where people are working closely with one another and are far from home. This is not to say that sexual activity is either condoned or commonplace in the firecamp setting. Indeed, official US Forest Service policy dictates that firefighters and support personnel refrain from engaging in sexual activity with one another. Further, policies are set in place which are designed to deal with accusations of sexual harassment, and the people I spoke with seemed to feel that little, if any (depending upon whom one asked), outright sexual contact took place in the fire camps.

As for the males, there were a number of men with whom I spoke who alluded to the fact that women 'came on' to them after days of working together. If men were 'coming on' to other men (or women propositioning other women) in that environment, such activities remained resolutely hidden in the recesses of an institution which reflects the military's strong homophobic predisposition.¹⁵

What is critical here, however, is the fact that men and women were working together for long periods of time, engaged in activities which they found meaningful in a way that was defined by their collective goal – in this case, putting out fires – and that these kinds of human engagement are sexy by definition. I often saw small clusters of people laughing or talking together with a kind of intensity and mutual affection that is born out of such settings, where life revolves around a clear purpose and people know that they are equipped to get the job done.¹⁶ By their nature, then, these types of setting are erotically charged. The issue is not one of men and women, but one of human and human, working together in a setting where everyone matters and each action signifies. There are few activities engaged in by people in more ordinary environments which have the kind of stark coherence and clarity of mission that one witnesses in the fire camps.

The similarities between people in a fire camp and anthropologists, who develop bonds with the people they study when immersed in a community far from home, can be teased out here quite readily. Moreover, in the case of the fire camps one can add to the mix the element of danger. One officer put it succinctly when he said, 'It's hazardous country, they're hazardous trees. It's hard to fight fire here. Fire fighters can get hurt. And, in the worst case scenario, they can die.' Therefore, these people work in an almost continual state of heightened physiological arousal. One woman said:

You're on a constant adrenaline high because you have something important to do and you have to do it right away and then you go back to the camp and you crash. But it's a nice crash, because it's all encompassing. When I get bored on my regular job, I tell my boss, 'I need a fire to go to!'

Firefighters, who often refer to themselves proudly as 'fire bums' (in reference to their willingness to drop everything to 'go to a fire'), seem to thrive on an adrenaline-induced state of vigilance and energy that the fire situation fosters. This arousal state was palpable and I found myself responding to it by bringing a different quality of intensity to my own work in the camp.

There is also a quality of ownership regarding the forest environment and the fire that is sexy in its expression. Firefighters often refer, almost possessively, to 'my fire', or 'my baby' (in reference to the fire itself), using a language of passionate attachment when they describe their commitment to the work they are doing. For me, this unremitting and focused attention to the task at hand had an extremely erotic quality to it, like a lover whose eyes remain fixed on my face during the act of lovemaking. And this attachment is not just a solitary connection between an individual and the land. There is a collaborative, interdependent quality about the firefighters' activities which is moving to witness. One man articulated it this way:

There's only us to take care of us here. And so people, being the creatures we are, tend to stick together and while we can be extremely independent, we also need, I think, that other human contact . . . and that reassurance that there are other people there working toward the same thing. So we go to other people for support even though they are relative strangers.

The vulnerability and need to connect with others expressed here add to the elements which come together to create a sense of place that is warm and inviting, yet crackling with excitement and potential danger. While there were occasions when I witnessed what appeared to be active flirting – three men laughingly throwing a cream pie on the shirt of a beautiful, blonde-haired woman (a cohort from the same management team), for instance, and her teasing, easy response¹⁷ – some of the most sensual behavior in the camp took place between the lines. One could witness it in the silent sharing of tasks, the looks of respect and admiration that passed from one person to another when progress was made, the way in which camp inhabitants shared small spaces in the easy manner of those who feel safe and familiar with their companions because they all know what they're doing and share the same goals.

Nor is this dynamic confined to cross-gender interactions. The warmth and connectedness fostered by common purpose in a charged environment operated palpably between men,

as well as between women. Back-patting, the tousling of hair, an arm thrown casually around a shoulder – these means of physical contact bespoke camaraderie, mutual respect, and friendliness in a setting where teamwork is the name of the game. Like the butt-slapping of football players in the NFL, these small physical acts which transpire between team mates signify 'insiderness' and connectedness in unique circumstances comprehended fully only by those on the 'inside'.¹⁸

For an anthropologist to enter such an environment and operate solely by asking questions and recording them on tape would be to miss the point. Some of my clearest insights into camp dynamics came while walking the paths in the sleeping areas at night, listening to the 'feel' of the place. Despite the codified and prescribed external structure of the US Forest Service fire system, there was a sense of expansiveness and softness that seemed to permeate the overall experience. In other words, the subtleties about what makes a given environment tick often go on in the spaces between the work and the words. By opening to the senses, I was able to move closer to the nuances of the place, and to sense its meaning to those who inhabited it. By immersing myself in the field, I began to understand this small subculture from the inside out, rather than from the outside (by way of the intellect) in, 'feeling the field' with my body and heart, as well as with my brain.

Perhaps it was in this frame of mind that anthropologist Paul Rabinow had one of his most sensual encounters during his early fieldwork in Morocco. His account of making love to a woman from another village during a day off from fieldwork has been written about and scrutinized for years by other anthropologists.¹⁹ This account is fascinating to me, not for what it reveals about his sexual behavior, but for his description of what led up to the sexual event itself. For it is here in his account that he describes how he left his fieldsite for a couple of days, let his guard down, and began to respond openly to his surroundings with the sensibility of the synesthete. He wrote, 'It was a beautiful, cloudless day, and we drove joyously away from Sefrou [the fieldwork site] into the mountain areas' (1977: 63). He goes on to say, 'As we left the highway, town, and

society behind, I felt a mounting excitement, as if personal inhibitions and social conventions were also being left behind.' He admitted then: 'I had never before had this kind of sensual interaction in Morocco' (1977: 65).

The heart of his problem as a self-defined objective 'scientist' is then revealed, as he continues: 'Although it was incredibly welcome it seemed too good to be true. Haunting super-ego images of my anthropologist persona thickened my consciousness as the air became purer and the play freer . . . I felt wondrously happy – it was the best single day I was to spend in Morocco' (1977: 65). This is a remarkable statement, in the sense that it leads one to question how he was recording his notions about the people and place he studied *before* he opened to the fuller use of his own senses. Shut off from the deeper part of himself, restricted – as Malinowski perceived himself to be – to the role of voyeur and recorder, he deprived himself of aspects of his own sensual awareness as a potent data source.

This is all the more interesting in the light of his confession that the sexual event itself was anticlimactic for him. What really moved him was his ability to let his guard down and open up to the sensuality of the weather and his female companions. 'Here we were, after an absolutely splendid romp through the mountains, sitting down next to some sulphur springs, and they were going swimming', he exults (1977: 67). Of the sex itself, he wrote somberly, 'Aside from the few pillows and charcoal burner for tea, there was only the bed. The warmth and non-verbal communication of the afternoon were fast disappearing. This woman was not impersonal, but she was not that affectionate or open either. The afternoon had left a much deeper impression on me' (1977: 69). In other words, when the visual and sensual elements were altered, and he was face to face with a woman with whom he had no true emotional connection – in a meager environment far removed from the sensual joy he had experienced earlier that day – the act of lovemaking was internalized as a diminishing act by comparison.

This statement is courageous, in my view, in that it not only breaks down the myth that sensual pleasure must culminate in sexual intercourse, but also highlights emphatically

the idea that the anthropologists can make conscious choice about how to conduct themselves if they understand their own sensual experiences and can put them in perspective. Perhaps Rabinow might not have chosen to make love with the woman if he had understood the nature of his own intense experience that day. Having no way to contextualize his feelings and responses, he carried through to the logical – although perhaps unnecessary – conclusion. Having sex while in the field is not something one can decide clearly upon if one is unaware of the sources of desire and alternative ways of handling those desires.

Words Melting on the Page: Writing the Erotic into the Text

My own fieldnotes from the firecamp days are peppered with sensual and sexual references:

8/16/92 The sounds of helicopters and heavy machinery move in me in a rhythmic way. I wonder what it would be like to make love in a helicopter. One man, one woman, and one engine . . . an intriguing triangle.

8/19/92 These people live in a world so elemental – in the grip of fickle weather patterns, at the mercy of the wind. Everything is about basic needs here: food, water, sleeping place, work. They work on the edge, reduced to focusing on the moment at hand as they confront fire. It seems to give them a directness and the ability to listen cannily and acutely – like forest animals – that is almost primitive. It's very seductive.

8/22/92 No one here is distracted by furniture or decor, by superficial tasks or by social niceties. It's pared down and lean, a world where words and acts are measured and channeled directly into the work. The quality of silence is intensely erotic, as if anything you say – any sound you might make – carries with it deep meaning. They listen with the rapt attention of the lover who doesn't want to miss anything, who is tuned to the nuanced. It's almost overwhelming at times.

In attempting to translate the field experience onto the virginal, blank, white page, I am

filled with ambivalence. What will my colleagues think if I put sexual fantasies in a chapter like this? I visualize myself reading a professional paper, standing in front of a large room full of anthropologists. Suddenly, someone shouts out, 'So, do you really think it's OK to have sex when you're working?' Another voice rings out aggressively, 'So, you're condoning sex in the field? How unprofessional. How could you?' And the feminists ... all this talk about men and erotic attractions. Where is the evidence of my twenty years of feminist self-identification here, hidden behind talk of macho machinery and locking eyes with male strangers?

If I'm going to write about sex, I tell myself, perhaps I'd better at least protect myself with some scholarly armor. Maybe I should retreat behind the cool, gray wall of academic language, haul out some big words. I could throw in a few of the top-ten favorites of the earnest anthropologist, for instance – problematize ... metacommunication ... de construction.

Margaret Mead (1972) once wrote of how troublesome Reo Fortune's (1963) passionately written account of the Dobuans became over time, fostering suspicion from many of his anthropological colleagues about the validity of his work. His immersion in the world of the sorcerer, and his choice of writing about it in a lively and subjective way, weren't considered appropriate by those who expected work produced solely from the precisely analytical part of his mind (Mead 1972: 184; cf. Cesara 1982: 136). As Cesara accurately points out, 'He [the practicing anthropologist] cannot escape passion, and yet he is not able to claim it as central to his knowledge' (1982: 100). Therefore, one is left with the impression that it's bad enough he had to feel it (passion, the heat of the field), but even worse that he couldn't keep it out of his writing (poor boundaries, bad judgment).

But there are others in recent years who see it differently. Paul Stoller (1989), for instance, speaks movingly about his long-time commitment to one particular place and its people, in one of his writings about the Songhay of Niger. 'In 1969 my senses were tuned to otherness ... my senses of taste, smell, hearing, and sight entered into Nigerian settings', he wrote. 'Now

I let the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of Niger flow into me' (1989: 5). By not restricting himself to the Western 'gaze', which he refers to as the 'privileged sense of the West' (1989: 5), he was able to produce a representation of a people and their lives that is vital, rich, and alive.

Stoller calls on the anthropologist to move beyond the dry and impoverished language of traditional academic writing, in order to give the reader what he calls 'the taste of ethnographic things'. This, he contends, can be done by writing ethnographies which attend to the sensual aspects of the field, ethnographies that 'will render our accounts of others more faithful to the realities of the field – accounts which will then be more, rather than less, scientific' (1989: 9). By allowing ourselves to be penetrated by the field, with all of the dissonance that may elicit, we might 'walk along our solitary paths in the field, exposing our hearts so full of excitement, fear, and doubt' (1989: 54–5).

It is important to note that Stoller is not suggesting that we relinquish the 'objective' data at our disposal, nor that we lapse into experimental forms of representation that render understanding difficult, if not impossible.²⁰ Rather, he contends that the anthropologist can choose to work from a place of vulnerability and acceptance of the emotional and intellectual dissonance which is part and parcel of the process of trying to come to 'know' a place and its people. It was the understanding of this dissonance which allowed me to integrate and to interpret my sexual fantasies and sensual reveries as a normal part of the fieldwork process, and therefore to set the limits that kept me from acting on them, particularly when tempted by the golden arms of a handsome firefighter.

Working from this place of vulnerability and acceptance can give the reader 'the taste of ethnographic things', Stoller asserts, with 'filmic or narrative images: the smells, the tastes, the sounds, the colors – lyrical and unsettling – of the land' (1989: 156). By so doing, we might enable the reader to sense what it is like to live in a certain place without having to pretend that we have mastered a culture intellectually while maintaining a detachment from it emotionally.

Outside of the academy, it is a well-known fact that there are those who accuse academic writers of 'linguistic constipation'²¹ or of being 'out of touch' with the 'real' world. The phrase 'out of touch' is particularly apt here, as it reflects the sentiment that there are those who cannot 'feel' the writing of academics who stay hidden behind a language form that, by its nature, is inaccessible to many.

This is a double-edged issue, it seems. We need to ask, first of all, whether we want to study a culture in a calculating, solely intellectual way, and then – when we turn to the task of bringing the culture to others – whether those whom we study would want to be represented in that way. Finally, if I dared, I would ask: who would want to read such an account? How many papers and articles have anthropologists read or listened to over the years from which every ounce of sensual and emotional content had previously been bled in the name of credibility?²² Do we really have to avoid lyrical description, subjectivity, and the personal voice in order to hold our place in the line-up of respected social scientists? Cesara, in a letter to a loved one, articulated her view clearly:

Deep inside of me something tells me that art and science are one . . . What happens to a man who sits outside his cage of rats and experiments on them? Does the interaction between these men and rats not affect the scientist? I think it does. I think such a scientist's view of the human condition becomes simplified, often deterministic: in some instances he loses all sense of the individual's wholesomeness, freedom, responsibility, and dignity. (1982: 193)

When it's all said and done, it seems to come down to a question of whether we work and write from the head or from the heart. And it is here where the logical compromise emerges. Is it not possible to forge an amalgam of the two, in which we allow ourselves to be immersed as sensual beings in each phase of the ethnographic endeavor, from project planning to final textual representation, while simultaneously employing our capacities to analyze and to reason? I believe that this is not only realistic, but is a highly beneficial way to conduct the anthropological enterprise. By

accepting ourselves as sensual – and yes, sexual – beings, we might harness all of our collective intellectual and sensory capacities for use in both the work itself and the written product created from it.

Erotics and the Field: Making Love to One's Self

So, where does this leave us? Do we make love in the field or don't we? And, if we do, how far do we go? How can we untangle the web of moral and ethical issues involved and explore, as well, the dissonance between the unspoken rules of the academy and our own personal beliefs and actions? When I say, for instance, that some of the best lovemaking I have yet experienced with my husband took place on my return home between forays into the world of the firefighters, does that trivialize or cheapen what we shared together? I would contend that the opening of my senses, in an environment which was passionately compelling, created a heightened level of awareness in me which served to bring me closer to myself. And it is that connection to self which allowed me to blend the images of smoke and helicopters, hard work and attachment to others, and which I then brought most advantageously to the marital bed.

Looking at field photos from that time, I notice that my face looks radiant, as women (and, sometimes, men) often look when they fall in love or become passionate about their work. My powerful attraction to the firefighters and to the world they dwell in excited me in a way that seems to have attached me more firmly not only to them, but to myself. In the way that the act of masturbation is a self-absorbed act which forms a closed circle between the individual and her or his own body, so the field experience can function in similar fashion. When the anthropologist works with an open heart and mind, allowing the senses to operate freely, an erotic place is created between the anthropologist and the place she or he studies. Undisrupted by the complexities of the 'outside world', the anthropologist has a rare opportunity to learn about the so-called 'Other' by learning to know more

about the self, with few expectations or distractions from the 'outside'.

In the fire camp, my very presence as a solitary female from the 'outside' was provocative, inducing specific sensual verbal and nonverbal responses from certain men. Golde (1986: 6) states that the very accessibility of the woman fieldworker can be considered provocative. In my particular situation, I came and went freely in the field, a fact that was widely registered by those whom I studied. Striding around the grounds, eating meals with the firefighters, I moved in and out of their living and sleeping environment in an obvious way. With so few women on site, I was a highly visible presence. As a result, I became more visible to myself – as a female – over time. Having my gender reflected so consistently by those with whom I came in contact brought me ultimately to a point where I became more aware of myself as a gendered being. This may be one of the most distinct and unnoticed advantages of the fieldwork endeavor: the opportunity to know the self better, particularly in terms of gender considerations, by seeing oneself reflected in the eyes of others.

Steeped in one's own senses, the boundary between self and other might slowly blur at times (see Geertz 1983). And while noticing difference, we might be able to feel – from the innermost part of ourselves – the power of similarity. For while the use of the word 'other' serves to separate us from other people, it is also likely that it separates us, in subtle ways, from ourselves. If it is true that our senses work synesthetically, in what Hiss calls 'simultaneous perception' (1990: 4), is it not possible that we are more connected to those we study than we might sometimes like to admit? Perhaps, by repressing our sensual feelings or sexual urges, we maintain a distance that – in the end – does a disservice to the sensitive work we claim to do as cultural recorders and interpreters.

Perhaps by acknowledging our own feelings and desires, we might actually look at other people and places more objectively, by being able to ferret out our own biases and distortions as we do our work. Hiss suggests that those who attempt to come to know a place should utilize simultaneous perception for just that reason. Bringing all of the senses to the

task in this way 'helps us experience our surroundings and our reactions to them, and not just our own thoughts and desires' (1990: 4). Unlike Malinowski, who was forced perhaps to dislike those whom he studied in a sturdy effort to propel himself away from his own overwhelming sensual feelings, we might then be open to interpreting from a more centered, stable vantage point. With the energy conserved by not having to fight our hormones or our fantasies, we could perhaps better grasp an inhabited landscape in a sensual, but more fully accurate, way.

To be permeated by a place – truly to feel its heart beat – is both a gift and the primary fringe benefit of the work that we do. To respond to that place and its inhabitants without holding back, and to represent them fully in the spirit of generosity and abundance, is the way we might return the favor.

On the last day of the fire project, I stand under a large ponderosa pine with two firefighters, protected from the direct glare of the midday sun. They express gratitude that I thought enough about what they do for a living to have given over a chunk of my own time to come and 'check it out'. Thanking them for their feedback, I ask if I might take a picture of the two of them under the tree. 'You know, end of fire – exhausted, but victorious firefighters prepare to return home', I intone in the voice of the television newscaster. Laughing, one of the men amiably throws an arm over his companion's shoulder, preparing to pose. But the other one objects, 'Hey, wait! I'm covered with soot, and my clothes are filthy. Wouldn't you rather get your shot after I clean up, so you can see how handsome I really am?' He sticks an elbow into his buddy's ribs for emphasis.

But the other man shakes his head and, turning to his friend, says this: 'What do you mean? This is how we look out there, man! This is what it's all about – men and machines, sweat and grit. Why wash it off?' Turning to me, his face opening into the grin of the heart-breaker, he adds, 'Hey, Katie, this is the way it really is, right? It's hot and heavy work. But, what the heck, it's kind of sexy, don't you think?' And then, looking me full in the face, he winked. And I winked back.