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Research Note:

Reflections on Giving Back and Giving Thanks

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Interviewee: They use the cattle and donkeys to pull the ploughs. If you don't have livestock, then you'd have to hire a tractor to use in plowing. Even if I had interest in plowing, I'm now old, I don't have a wife, even if I had a wife, maybe she'd just be as old as I am. Who would look after the crops? You see, when I saw her [the author] I thought she was bringing me money. To thank me and in recognition that I am struggling. I hope you have not just brought me free questions.

Translator: She is a student.

Interviewee: Yes, but she still has to thank me. She also sees that this old man is struggling. You can see that I am sitting here with this smoke getting into my eyes [laughter]. (Interview notes, March 2010)

As a human geographer, I study social relations—yet I find my mind muddled trying to navigate the social process of what in this special issue we term “giving back.” Fieldwork, and the relationships that accompany it, inevitably raise the question: What does it mean to “give back” to the communities within which we conduct research? How do we thank people not only for their time but also for their contribution to our academic advancement and, more fundamentally, to our own livelihoods? It is the stories and data

points of numerous individuals that enable us to obtain graduate degrees and advance our careers. What sort of token of appreciation could possibly be commensurate to what colleagues, friends, and subjects in the field give us? And how, as scholars of feminist methodology, can we begin to formulate and share our various experiential knowledges on this subject?

I have grappled with these questions since I first arrived in rural northern Botswana in 2008 to conduct fieldwork on the intersection of conservation policy, natural resource management, and rural livelihoods. I have since finished 18 months of fieldwork and am still not convinced I have the best, if any, answers. While in the field, I froze up when faced with comments like the one from the old man quoted above. I desperately wanted to be able to do more than just say “*ke a leboga; keitumetse*” (thank you; I am grateful) as I wrapped up an interview and ducked out of someone’s thatched house or neatly raked yard. Yet I also did not feel comfortable doling out money or presents as I made my way around the village with my clipboard and questionnaire in hand.

I spent a great deal of time thinking about how I could best give back to the two villages that gave me so much. At the end of my fieldwork, I remained without a very satisfactory answer. Unconvinced that my research would necessarily have a beneficial impact on the village communities, I sought to assist the villages in ways that felt more tangible. For example, I tried to help a women’s cooperative farming group develop a grant proposal, at the request of village elders I wrote a brief history of one village, and I gave rides to as many people as I could in my four wheel drive vehicle. Still, I felt as though it did not amount to much. Village residents wanted job creation and a reversal of the declining agricultural sector, but my utility appeared to be my ability and willingness to give lifts into town. I decided that if I could not come up with a way to initiate genuine positive change towards a much-desired higher standard of living in the villages in which I worked, the least I could do was to throw a giant music-filled feast to thank everyone who had directly and indirectly supported me. Who does not appreciate a good party? The excitement and anticipation that accompanies a community-wide festivity is, I think, universal. We slaughtered cows, hired local teenagers to cook huge steaming pots of rice, maize meal porridge, stew, and vegetables, and brought in several local dance groups to perform. Tickets were distributed beforehand (they did not have much of a purpose except to make the event feel more official) and word spread fast. The parties I hosted in each of my two village field sites were incredibly memorable for me, and guests seemed to genuinely appreciate the gesture. I use the word “gesture” because I am deeply aware of the fact that a village party may be a nice way to say thank you, but it did not make a lasting difference to the people whose lives I observed, measured, and scrutinized so closely as a researcher.

I thought a lot about giving back not only at the village-wide level, but also to those with whom I had developed close relationships. While many village members had given up an hour or two of their time to grant me an interview, a handful of village youth, one in particular, had devoted months to helping me carry out my research. I wanted then, and still want, to find ways to help these research assistants advance their own careers. A lead research assistant like Prince, a charismatic young man in his late 20s with a penchant for

gospel music and political discussion, does not come along every day, and I have been deeply grateful for his help. Without him, I would not have had a dissertation, and I would be short of one especially dear friendship.

When I left Botswana, I handed Prince a glowing reference letter and promised that I would recommend him to any future employers. Once home, I lighted on the idea that I would use my remaining grant funds to organize a conference at which he would be a key speaker and then sponsor his visit to the United States. I raised his hopes sky high—his excitement bubbled over during every Skype conversation we had and his e-mails were effusive. When his visa application was denied, after a day-long bus ride to the capital city and a grueling interview for which we had spent hours preparing, Prince's faith that things were looking up for him and his family plummeted. As quickly as it took one bureaucratic office to stamp a big fat "denied" ink mark onto his forms, Prince saw his dreams of visiting the US fizzle. I was deeply pained by the fact that I had put him through an emotional roller-coaster and that I had not looked more closely into the likelihood of him receiving a visa before I threw out tantalizing daydreams of touring around California and hosting a university-wide symposium together. My hastiness to throw grant money around in order to fulfill my own desire to provide Prince with a potentially life-changing trip to the US is something I regret, and as a result I have learned to be more cautious with promises I am not certain I can fulfill.

Now, months after Prince's failed visa application, I am waiting for a package to arrive from Amazon for him. It contains a computer battery and camera battery that I will then re-package and send to him, praying that it makes the journey to his dusty village post office safely without catching the attention of sticky-fingered customs officers. Prince wants to set up a photo business—there is a surprisingly high demand for family portraits in his village—and on my last trip to Botswana I brought him my old camera and computer. Unfortunately, the battery had died for the computer and I kicked myself for not remembering that for a person who lives in a place without electricity, a rechargeable computer—one that can be charged in a public place and then brought home for later use—is a necessity. Once again, I felt like a jerk. I promised to send him the required computer battery and a new camera battery as soon as I got home. Most people who work abroad know the unspoken guilt that comes from getting caught up with life at home and sending things much later than promised to overseas locations that many postal workers have never heard of. I am certainly one of those people. But even when (and if) the batteries arrive in Prince's hands, I have no idea whether his business will take off, and I cannot know the role that my electronic gifts will play, if any, in his career trajectory. I can hope that they will make a difference, but I sometimes need to remind myself that Prince, even without my help, is an innately enterprising and resourceful guy. It is a fine balance between trying to help a person get to where they were already going a little bit faster and clumsily pushing them in a direction that may in fact derail a process that would have gone just fine without heavy-handed "help."

My fieldwork experience in Botswana leaves me with more questions than answers regarding the most effective ways that we, as researchers and human beings, can give back to the communities in which we conduct our work. Despite this fact I would like to

think that sustained, reflexive engagement with practically and locally relevant fieldwork questions is leading me in some kind of forward direction. For now, I can only conclude that the answers to these questions about how to give back will require a continued dialog between researchers and research partners, within an academic community committed to ethical fieldwork practices, and within our own hearts and minds.

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