When, and why, do we hear the call of a new field site? What questions, what theoretical models, what emotional relations do we bring from our immersion in a former field site when we pick up stakes and embark on research in a new place? Does the art of fieldwork look different in midlife from how it looked in early research?

After conducting long-term field research in a place—and developing deep relations with members of a community—(how) do we maintain a connection to that place in a new modality, sans regular “return visits”? When aging bodies do not permit new visits to far-flung locales, how do we maintain our identities as fieldworking anthropologists?

The authors of the four essays plus afterword that follow broach these and related questions as they explore the decision paths that led them from North Dakota to North Sumatra (in the case of Edward Bruner), or from the Pacific island of Vanatinai to the Pacific coastline of California (in the case of Maria Lepowsky).

Such decision paths do not follow the straightforward, predictable outlines of a simple scientific script. Accordingly, the essays that follow offer stories of a discipline that is above all—though perhaps oxymoronically—a human science. They are stories of moving from conducting research in the home field to the outfield, as Linda Seligmann phrases it; stories of the role that our own moves across the human life cycle plays in our fieldwork careers, as Edward Bruner explores with the wisdom that only six-plus decades of a fieldworking life can provide; stories of the unexpected twists and turns down which the fieldworking road takes us in the all-too-human quest to find a centered sense of well-being amid our often-restless spirits, as Paul Stoller reminds us.

The four essays plus afterword in this special section began as talks presented in a session at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in 2012. But their history takes us back to 2007, when the five scholars of these essays delivered a different set of talks delivered at an earlier Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association. Those original talks developed into full-blown essays that joined several other, newly commissioned essays that, together, saw the light of day as an edited collection, The Restless Anthropologist: Crossing Borders to New Fieldsites.
Restless Anthropologist: New Fieldsites, New Visions (Gottlieb 2012). Those essays highlighted both the challenges and the joys that new fieldsites offer fieldworking anthropologists. Now, two years after that book’s publication, the conversation continues, as the authors of the articles in this special section reflect further on the issues that they first broached in their earlier essays. In the pages that follow, I invite you to join five prominent colleagues’ thoughts as they reflect back on their travels from one place to another, as unlikely as a move from the Andes to the world of international/interracial adoption, and as they contemplate the craft of writing about such fieldworking moves—writing that, as Michael Herzfeld suggests, may resemble more the work of the sculptor than that of the lab scientist.

Reference Cited
Gottlieb, Alma, ed.