Afterword:

Concluding Thoughts on Fieldwork and Friendwork

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In

Reciprocity Rules: Friendship and Compensation in Fieldwork Encounters,

ed. Michelle C. Johnson and Edmund Searles

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The sacrosanct gift of invitation into others' lives brings with it the equally sacrosanct obligation to consider appropriate ways to repay that gift. In that sense, Marcel Mauss not only lies at the heart of every one of these chapters—in one way or another, his early masterpiece, *The Gift* (2016[1899]), lies at the very heart of the ethnographic endeavor.

But that obligation is, itself, multi-stranded. As Mauss recognized, reciprocity may be immediate or delayed; equal or unequal; secular or underpinned by spiritual foundations; financial or social; optional or legally binding. Accordingly, in essays that are as lyrically written as they are refreshingly (sometimes, brutally) frank, the uniquely riveting chapters of this collection remind us that reciprocity takes many forms. Moreover, in some cases, "gift" *per se* may not be the most accurate trope for imagining the complex relations that undergird the ethnographic project (as one contributor, Carolyn Rouse, explicitly outlines). Attentive ethnographers forge locally appropriate models of reciprocity in the ethnographic cauldron in which they live and work.

In her chapter in this volume, Michelle Johnson confides that in a village in Guinea-Bissau, a holy man's prognosticatory dream about her eventual arrival "raised questions . . . [she] still struggle[s] to answer today." That is a productive place from which to begin this final discussion precisely because questions about how we go about doing the intimate work we do as ethnographers go to the heart of our discipline . . . and, therefore, demand continually to be addressed. If extended fieldwork distinguishes us from our sister social sciences, what obligations does that fieldwork entail at the human

level—both for us, and for our interlocutors? It is critical to remember, as Josh Fisher

writes in these pages, that "We are not 'experts' because of our position as

anthropologists. Rather, we owe our expertise to the bundles of relations that make, and

have made, our knowledge possible" (p. 39). In economistic terms, what are the costs

and benefits of the debt that is inevitably created for all ethnographers from any

ethnographic engagement?

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We now have a robust corpus of fieldwork memoirs that chronicle the actual

experiences of "being there," as one collection of short memoirs is titled (Konner and

Davis 2011). These experiences range from friendship (Grindal and Salamone 2006) to

danger (Howell 1990; Ice, Dufour and Stevens 2015), including rape (Moreno 1995), and

everything in-between. Individual works sensitively think through the specificities of

fieldwork challenges, including classic memoirs (sometimes semi-fictionalized and/or

written pseudonymously) by Behar (1995), Bowen [Bohannan] (1964), Cesara [Poewe]

(1982), and Stoller and Olkes (1987), and many others since then. Thankfully, we have

come a long way from the day back in 1985 when a dean asked me during an interview

for a tenure-track job to list the courses I might like to teach, and my first thought was, *A

course in field methods*—precisely because no such course had been offered during my

own graduate school training, and I sorely missed its absence while conducting my

challenging doctoral research in rain-forest villages of West Africa (cf. Gottlieb and

Graham 1994).

Once I accepted that teaching position, creating such a course became one of my

first commitments. I taught versions of the class over a dozen times—but the more I

taught it, the more I concluded that, for students, taking such a seminar was just the

beginning. Far from walking away from the classroom with everything they needed to

know about "how to do fieldwork," students, I determined, should walk away with a

sense that they could never learn "how to do fieldwork"—at least, not in any formulaic

way. Rather, they could—and should--learn how to think critically about the challenges

posed continually by such research. And, after an intense semester's worth of readings in

fieldworking anthropologists' experiences and reflections, students would emerge with a

repertoire of headnotes that, in the best of circumstances, could intelligently inform the

decisions they would have to make, often at the spur of the moment, concerning the

future dilemmas that they would inevitably face in their own fieldwork–dilemmas that

might well encompass ethical, emotional, political, financial, legal, and other challenges.

In fact, every time I taught the course, I rebalanced the ratio of time I spent on

pragmatic vs. ethical challenges--always moving in the direction of ethics. After several

years of teaching the course, ethics entirely eclipsed pragmatics as the focus--precisely

because ethical issues lie so centrally at the heart of the work we do as ethnographers. As

such, ethical issues may sometimes feel overwhelming, because of competing claims

from different people and institutions within a single "fieldwork community." That

"inconvenient truth" (as Al Gore might put it) brings us to this collection.

Despite the now rich corpus of fieldwork memoirs chronicling individual

experiences of ethnographic encounters, still missing from much of this corpus is a

systematic discussion of the ethical responsibility of the engaged ethnographer. How

does the mandate for reciprocity actually play out--both during the ethnographic encounter (whether the fieldsite is distant or nearby), and after we leave? The complexities of our multiple relations with women and men, children and adults, each inhabiting their own social spaces and subjectivities, may make for a troubling fieldwork experience. In this volume, Josh Fisher hints at one scenario embedded in this critical question, in the title of his chapter: What happens when the ethnographer risks becoming perceived as "brother [or sister] to a scorpion"?

Regardless of the complexities of specific scenarios, at base, the lesson of ethical challenges is simple: As ethnographers, we must commit to remaining engaged. As Fisher also writes, "Becoming an anthropologist means creating a debt that can never, really, be dispatched. It is a life's work" (p. 40). The scholars whose thoughts are collected in this important volume have all shared their candid and moving reflections on the many contours that such debts--and their partial repayments--may take.

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The authors of these chapters have each had long engagements with their host communities: if I've got my math right, 10 years for Chelsea Wentworth, 13 years for Josh Fisher, 14 years for Caroline Rouse, 24 years for Michelle Johnson, 29 years for Ned Searles, and a whopping 53 years for Anya Royce. And counting. That's a grand total of 143 years, collectively. As such, these scholars represent the opposite of the dreaded, commando-raid style of fieldwork that sometimes gives anthropology a bad name and earns us the dreaded accusation of neocolonialist. You know the now-notorious model: Go somewhere exotic for a year, write a dissertation, build a lucrative

career based on that thesis, and never return to the community.[1] Sadly, few

anthropologists manage to keep up mutually productive relationships with the members

of their host communities across multiple generations. In that sense, the authors of the

chapters in this volume represent the ideal scenario. Their decades-long commitments

allow them to remain, as Royce put it, "engaged in the hermeneutics of learning . . . and

once you admit the possibility of dialogue, you open the door to the unknown and the

unpredictable" (pp. 107, 109).

Splashing through the choppy waters of "the unknown and the unpredictable," the

stories we have read across these pages all chronicle multi-sensory experiences. Their

ethnographers have not just scooped up data like a vacuum cleaner, put them in a theory

processor, and pressed *Blend* to produce theoretically informed analyses that speak to

disciplinary models. Rather, they have tried, as Royce has put it here, to "plant your feet

in the earth of the path, listen to the songs of the prayer-leader, feel the heat, smell the

wild, eat the tamales offered pilgrims along the way, arrive at the foot of the

mountain . . . " (p. 111).

Even so, immersing oneself in the multi-modal experiences of another place is

just the beginning. The more immersed we become, the more our hosts expect of us.

And, rightly so. Why should they accept an uninvited stranger into their communities

and homes without expecting appropriate compensation? But the forms that such

compensation may--and should--take can diverge dramatically even at the material level.

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[1] For a different perspective on the decision to end conducting research in one fieldsite and move
to another, cf. Gottlieb (2012b).

The authors of these essays have recounted forms of compensation ranging from bars of soap or packs of cigarettes to vehicles and large amounts of cash. But even this wide variety does not encompass the options. At the more immaterial level, our authors' efforts at compensation have ranged from names to quotidian kinship obligations to ongoing support of education. Let us begin with the material plane.

During his first stay with Inuit communities, Ned Searles wished he could have bought plenty of locally valued commodities for his hosts. However, his meager graduate student budget proved hopelessly insufficient. Ruminating with rare honesty about the constraints of his graduate student-era economic situation, Ned relates that, in the end, he emerged with substantial credit card debt, so as to be able to contribute to community well-being. Ned found a valuable ethnographic lesson in that financial commitment. He writes: "feeling like I never had enough money to do what I needed or wanted to do enabled me to better understand the pecuniary predicaments faced by Inuit living in a world in which one's earnings belong to the family as a whole and not just a single person" (p. 149).

At the same time, if capitalism emphasizes gifts of monetary value, nevertheless, as Searles points out, gifts of monetary value may not be whole-heartedly welcomed in communities that prize social ties more than individual accumulation. In Nicaragua, as Josh Fisher points out, individuals who indulge in excesses of capitalist accumulation are unflatteringly dubbed "scorpions."

As Fisher elucidates, for Nicaraguans, humans-as-scorpions represent a powerful anti-model for prized behavior. In explaining his interest in totemism, Lévi-Strauss

(1963:89) once wrote, animals are "good to think [with]" (cf. Tambiah 1969). Keeping Lévi-Strauss' homily in mind in analyzing Beng myths about dogs, I once described animals as:

> creatures that can resonate symbolically . . . [insofar as they present] a ready sense of "Other" that humans have often taken as a contrast or counterpart to themselves. Put another way, we have used animals to present to ourselves the negative traits of our own humanity (Gottlieb 1986:485).

Paying attention to the morality tales contained in animal narratives such as the "selfish scorpion" can inspire us to think creatively about how best to forge locally appropriate means for going some way to repay our hosts for the invaluable gift of their welcome, their multiple forms of knowledge and expertise, and even our adoption into their families.

How do we appropriately compensate such host communities, while avoiding creating social rifts among community members jealous over unequal gifts? Searles wisely opted for the extended loan of a snowmobile, as an appropriate way to help a family as a social unit--rather than gifting smaller objects to individuals, which might have pitted them against each other. Only when we discern such ethnographically critical values, and study local gifting practices as a basis for operationalizing those values, can we contribute as respected, and respectful, participants in our host communities—rather than, say, as resented "scorpions."

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In her chapter here, Michelle Johnson acknowledges the importance of

economically valuable gifts, but she also points out that "priceless" gifts lacking monetary value—including the gift of a name--can provide different forms of mutual satisfaction. As anthropologists, we know how symbolically potent names are in virtually all social settings.[2] In Johnson's case, a little girl named after her ended up feeling empowered not only to pursue but even excel in a local Qur'anic education normally only available to boys. In this case, the unplanned gift of a name transformed a young girl's otherwise gendered fate. "Money often gets lost or stolen," Michelle writes movingly, "mud bricks collapse and paint fades over time, but names outlast them all: transcending distance and even death, they prevent people from forgetting" (p. 68).

My husband, Philip Graham, and I learned a related lesson when our son Nathaniel was re-named "N'zri Denju" in a Beng village. This was no ordinary "day name," as my husband and I had been assigned (Kouadio/Tuesday for Philip, Amwe/Sunday for me). Rather, Nathaniel received the name of a revered matriclan ancestor ("Grandfather Denju"), whose reincarnation our then-six-year-old son had suddenly become. That gift—bestowed on, rather than by, our family--had permanent repercussions for our childrearing practices, as the elder who conferred the name outlined the parenting requirements for a child-who-was-also-an-ancestor.[3] Our son, now an adult, relates that it also affected his own sense of self for many years into his childhood.

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[2] For two classic studies, see Geertz and Geertz (1964) and Lévi-Strauss (1966); for later collections of essays on the subject, see Tonkin (1984), vom Bruck and Bodenhorn (2006), and, more recently, Hough (2016).

[3] We chronicle this component of our fieldwork experience in *Braided Worlds* (Gottlieb and Graham 2012).

And just this month, some 27 years after that naming ritual, a reverse naming practice has entered our lives, as our informally adopted Beng son (now, a professional living in Abidjan) has e-mailed me that his pregnant wife was requesting permission to name the daughter still in her womb, Alma. Of course, such honors come with obligations, and the cycle of reciprocity that enmeshed us across these decades will take a new path as I contemplate what gifts will best honor this future namesake across the ocean.

Two-way naming practices such as these constitute rich ground for ethnographic inquiry. What are the sociological implications for anthropologists when they (or their accompanying family members) receive local names in host communities? Or, when they decide to name their own children using names from their former host communities, as Johnson and Searles have also done? Or, reciprocally, when members of host communities name their own children for visiting anthropologists? In all those scenarios, what obligations, gifts, entanglements, and misunderstandings have flowed in both directions from these cross-cultural naming rituals? The ethical, financial, legal, and emotional implications of this multiply-complicated social praxis beg for further discussion.

In this collection, Chelsea Wentworth tackles related questions with admirable honesty in the context of her own fieldwork in Vanuatu. In her chapter, Wentworth revisits a venerable topic in cultural anthropology, that of "fictive kinship."[4] Rather than

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[4] The classic, early case for all kinship systems being "fictive"—in the sense of being culturally constructed, rather than biologically given—was made by Schneider (1980) and developed by his student, Wagner (2016). A few more recent discussions of different components of the "all-kinship-is-fictive" model include Anderson (2012), Kim (2009), Levine (2008), McKinnon and Franklin (2000), Schneider (1997) and Weston (1997).

taking at face value the common practice of fieldworkers being "adopted" into host families in their research venues, Wentworth looks critically at what host families expect of such "adoptions."[5] Not only does she chronicle the continuing responsibilities she faces toward her adoptive family in Vanuatu, but she has invited her host/adoptive sister, Julie Kalsrap, to author a section of her chapter addressing this important question from her own perspective.

To date, few anthropologists have embraced this sort of reciprocal writing strategy. Yet, as Wentworth's chapter exemplifies, if the circumstances are workable and the relevant parties agreeable, co-authorship may prove a mutually rewarding option for scholars seeking creative means to collaborate with fieldwork consultants on an equal basis. And, as Wentworth also points out, such collaborations should also make for far more ethical engagements. A recent book coauthored by a Spanish duo exemplifies just such a refreshing collaboration. Anthropologist, Gay y Blasco, has partnered with her long-time Roma fieldwork consultant-turned-friend, Liria Hernández, to co-author a full-length, joint ethnographic memoir about their decades-long relationship; that remarkable book may well serve as a model for future ethnographic writings (Gay y Blasco and Hernández 2020).

Yet, commendable as they are in theory, such co-authorships may not prove practical in all ethnographic situations. A given anthropologist and field collaborator may lack the technical means to remain in the continued close contact that co-authorship

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[5] For a recent, brief but provocative look at unexpected "host family" experiences of an American anthropologist in Jordan, see Patterson (2012).

requires. (Wentworth mentions this as a troublesome hurdle for her and her Vanuatu co-author, Julie Kalsrap, although the pair resolutely managed to find effective means to communicate and collaborate across great distances.) An otherwise engaged fieldwork collaborator may lack any interest in co-authorship. Drastic disparities in formal educational backgrounds may make co-authorship awkward. The latter challenge finds discussion elsewhere in this volume.

Several contributors to this collection seek means to level out the world's unequal access to resources via education. Given that (as of 2014), only 43% of the planet's young people had completed high school (UNESCO n.d.), the common claims we see in the mass media that we now live in a "hyper-connected, global village" are, as Johnson reminds us in her chapter, as yet entirely un-met for much of the human population, especially those in the global south. Providing means to pursue education, especially at higher levels—whether locally or abroad--is one richly rewarding strategy that visiting anthropologists might provide in some ethnographic settings. As Johnson relates in her chapter, she and her anthropologist husband supported an education in Algeria for a young Guinean man that eventually yielded the student a lucrative government position back in Guinea-Bissau. Similarly, Wentworth relates that she has paid local school fees for the three young children of her Vanuatu collaborator. Such laudable efforts transform individual lives.

In this collection, Caroline Rouse chronicles an extraordinary endeavor at another level. With brutal honesty, Rouse records the many political, economic, logistic, legal, and emotional challenges she has confronted as she worked to create a private high

school in Ghana. Those struggles ranged from sexism and racism that unexpectedly

faced Rouse in Ghana, to charges of neocolonialism that she faced in engaging with

scholarly colleagues in the U.S. Caught between a veritable Scylla and Charybdis of

trans-continental critiques, Rouse persevered, motivated by a commitment to do what she

could to help offset what she terms the "existential debt" created by the Euro-colonial

invasion of Africa. Rouse's ability to envision, raise funds for, populate, administer, and

sustain a high school in Accra while permanently based in New Jersey was, doubtless, the

result of multiple factors, including personal grit and resilience, for starters, combined

with the powerful resources of her home institution of Princeton University.

In contemplating how to forge the widest possible impact in our fieldwork

communities, few anthropologists likely have such resources on which to draw.

Nevertheless, an inability to create systematic opportunities can gnaw on our conscience.

Key to envisioning realistic projects is one's stage in the life cycle. It is hard to imagine

how an untenured assistant professor might have implemented the sort of project that

Rouse undertook. Likewise, it would have been more challenging to build a school by a

scholar based on a campus with far fewer economic resources than those of Princeton.

Being realistic about what we can do at different stages in our career--as well as different

stages in the lives of our ethnographic interlocutors, and different moments in the

political histories of our fieldsites--is critical to crafting projects that are not only

admirable but also viable.

Early in my own fieldwork in Côte d'Ivoire, my husband and I committed to

investing in community projects in the Beng villages that had hosted us. Philip and I

eventually created a non-governmental organization dedicated to this goal, but it took some 35 years before the right circumstances aligned for this plan to become both politically feasible and pragmatically workable. In the meanwhile, we privately funded development projects in two Beng villages, and we supported the eldest son of our third village host in Bengland, bringing him to the US to continue his college studies. Bertin's parents agreed to the plan only after Philip and I consented to serve as Bertin's American parents.[6] In the end, Bertin stayed in the country for 19 years—completing a B.A. in political science at our university, then an M.A. in African studies there, then a Ph.D. in international relations at another university. Playing the role of proud mother, I flew to Florida for Bertin's Ph.D. graduation, then watched with more maternal pride as he started a tenure-track position teaching at a small college in Pennsylvania. Soon afterwards, Bertin drove to Illinois to attend the high school graduation of our daughter— his quasi-adopted sister.

These long-term bonds of reciprocity were immensely satisfying at the individual level for all of us. But behind this gifting of funds into one individual lay a longer-term, community-level plan. Eventually, we hoped, Bertin would return to Côte d'Ivoire, where he could parlay his prestigious US education into systematic help for his natal community. The plan became delayed for many years due to alternating political unrest and out-and-out civil war in Côte d'Ivoire. Likewise, many years have passed since Philip and I last lived in Bengland. During the nation's difficult years, we struggled to stay in touch with, and maintain our obligations to, our village families, friends, and

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[6] This episode finds fuller discussion in Gottlieb and Graham (2012).

hosts. Once his home country became relatively stable, Bertin gave up his US

professorship and moved back to Abidjan, where he has taught at local universities and

has held a high-level position in the government. When Bertin returned to his home

country, Philip and I were finally able to legally establish the Beng Community Fund

(BCF), thereby entered us into a new chapter in our engagement with the Beng.[7] The

BCF now enacts village development projects organized and administered by Bertin, and

the story of our lifelong relationship with the Beng continues. Perhaps our "delayed

reciprocity" is a variation of those inter-generational marital systems of family and clan

alliances analyzed long ago by Lévi-Strauss (1969).

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If it feels hard enough to maintain support—emotional, financial, and otherwise--

for a single host community over the course of our lifetime, how can we possibly

maintain such support in multiple communities when we do multi-sited research?

In fact, multi-sited research projects are now becoming more the norm than the exception

for many anthropologists (e.g., Balasescu 2007, Coleman 2006, Falzon 2016, Hannerz

2003, Marcus 1998, Wulff 2002). The question of how to uphold ethically engaged

relations in more than one community therefore deserves extended consideration. My

own current research faces this challenge. For the past ten years, I have been working

with Cape Verdeans in diasporic sites around the world. The project began in Lisbon,

expanded to New England (where I am now based), and has encompassed short research

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[7] For more about the BCF, see its webpage: http://almagottlieb.com/research-publications/bcf/;
and its Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/bengcommunityfund/

trips to Paris and several Cape Verde islands, as well as interviews (some, online) with Cape Verdeans in places as far-flung as Rotterdam and Arizona (Gottlieb 2012a). The challenges of maintaining meaningful forms of reciprocity when conducting fieldwork in such multiple and distant sites constitute a pressing contemporary issue that the authors of these pages do not address at length. Perhaps that will be the focus for a sequel.

For now, I expect that the insightful chapters of this collection will stay with you as you contemplate the next phase of your own fieldwork commitments. Whether you are currently planning a new fieldwork project or are already immersed in one or more long-term fieldwork engagements, the stories you have read in these pages should provide ample thoughts, perhaps even models, for forging your own continuing bases for reciprocity with those in your host communities.

Nowadays, most cultural anthropologists acknowledge that ethnographic research by definition revolves around not just social relations among residents of a "field community" but also social relations that enmesh the "observing" anthropologist. And, as virtually all philosophers would assert, human relations by definition involve ethical challenges. Braiding together the hermeneutic foundations of ethnography with the ethical foundations of hermeneutics leads us to a particular vision of the ethnographic project. That vision itself suggests the discipline of anthropology as one rooted in an ethical imperative stemming from both the knowledge gained from the ethnographic endeavor, and the human relations that "produced" that knowledge.

With these insights in mind, I consider it appropriate to leave the last word to Jane Addams, the American political reformer whose feminist and other social activism was

firmly based in critical reflection of the society in which she lived. I imagine the deeply

thoughtful contributors to this volume would heartily endorse Adams' claim of long ago:

"Action indeed is the sole medium of expression for ethics" (1902:273).

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