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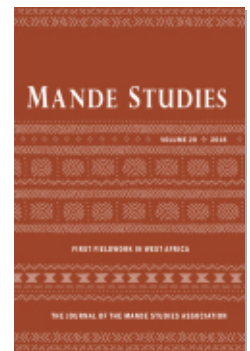
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Processing Privilege: Reflections on Fieldwork (Early, and otherwise) among Beng Villagers of Côte d'Ivoire

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# Processing Privilege: Reflections on Fieldwork (Early, and otherwise) among Beng Villagers of Côte d'Ivoire

ALMA GOTTLIEB

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**ABSTRACT:** *In this article, I reflect on the misconceptions and knowledge gaps that shaped my first fieldwork among Beng villagers in Côte d'Ivoire (1979–81). Focusing on issues surrounding race and class, I discuss the role that privilege played in my early ethnographic work and compare my naïve, early assumptions with the approach I took in return visits and in continuing, long-distance engagements. I conclude by emphasizing that ethical qualitative research methods conducted by (especially, but not exclusively, white) scholars from the global North in the global South require thinking in the first instance about the politics of race and class, and about the implications and responsibilities of privilege.*

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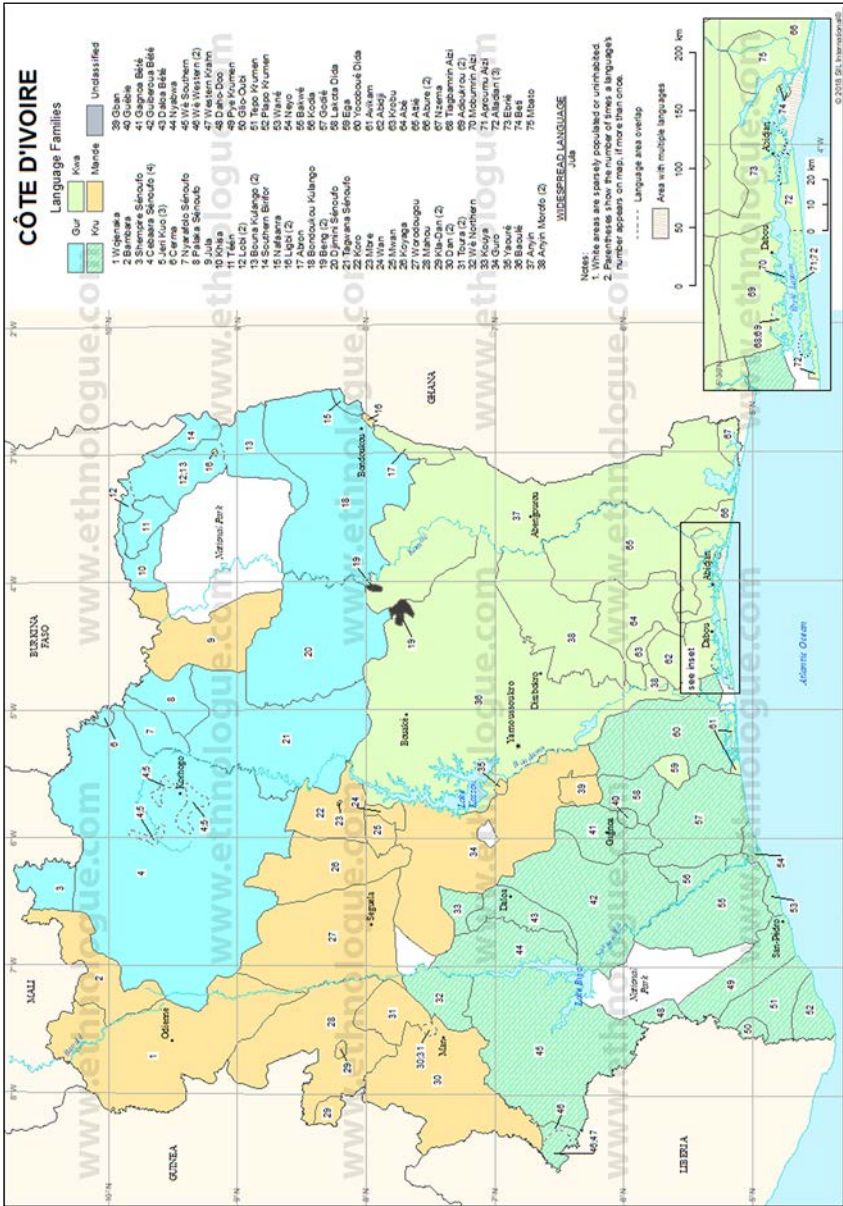
**KEYWORDS:** *ethnography, research methods, fieldwork, anthropology, race, class, privilege, ethics, Côte d'Ivoire, Beng.*

When I think back on all the mistakes I made during my first fieldwork among Beng villagers in Côte d'Ivoire back in 1979–81, it's easy to realize, after the fact, that they all stemmed from misconceptions, gaps in knowledge, and naïve assumptions that stowed away as invisible baggage alongside my (too many) suitcases. Of this outsized collection, the ones that most make me cringe all derive from my avoidance of the two largest elephants in the room: race and class.

I had spent my life as a white person engaged in many struggles supporting people of color. I grew up in a household with progressive parents who took me

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to speeches by Eldridge Cleaver and Stokely Carmichael during my teen years. I read Malcolm X's autobiography in high school and joined local rallies and national marches against racism and colonialism. I wrote a long masters thesis analyzing Dutch racism against native peoples of colonial New Amsterdam (Gottlieb 1978), and I chose Africa for my doctoral project and my life's research site. In the early 1970s, I trained with some of the major Africanist scholars of the time (Victor Turner, Joseph Miller, Mary Douglas, J. David Sapir, Roy Willis), read nearly every work of Africanist anthropology available in English and French (along with a decent dose of history), read novels and short stories by emerging African writers (guided by my writer-husband, Philip Graham), and listened to any tapes of contemporary African music that Philip could get his hands on. None of this came close to adequately preparing me for what I encountered in one small village in Côte d'Ivoire.

From the beginning, the residents of the Beng village I selected as the new home in which Philip and I would live for the next 15 months showed no interest in hosting us. When we showed up to move in, the Beng man who had grudgingly offered to rent us a spare building in his compound hadn't completed any of the promised repairs, nor did he offer any timeline for when they might be finished. While the residents of other Beng villages in which we'd considered living had greeted us with friendly welcomes, complete with gifts of oranges, chickens and beer, our new adoptive villagers greeted us with silence or avoidance.

To be sure, I'd selected for our home the village that was seat of the indigenous Beng religion for all 20 or so Beng villages. In fact, that was the very reason I had chosen it. Beng friends and acquaintances from other villages had warned me to expect a cool reception, cautioning me that these villagers might be careful to guard their religious secrets. I figured I'd avoid the topic of religion the first few weeks, focusing on neutral/secular topics such as families, farming, or the weather, and that my inherent friendliness would soon win them over. I couldn't have been more wrong.

As Philip and I chronicled in the book we eventually wrote about our difficult introduction to village life in West Africa (Gottlieb and Graham 1994), we spent most of that year continually trying to gain rapport, then losing it, then trying hard to regain it. In the end, we made some very dear friends, and when we returned twice over the next 14 years, we found genuinely warm welcomes, and even an apology for the earlier chilly treatment. But at the time, I took all those rejections quite personally. All I could focus on was what I could do to win over our neighbors.

For the first six months, whatever I did only made things worse. Prime among those efforts was learning to speak Beng—the first task of an anthropologist in a foreign land. All my professors, along with the senior members of my graduate cohort, had urged me to take this job seriously. Following their

advice would surely convince our standoffish neighbors of my dedication to understanding their lives.

During our early months in the village, I spent eight hours a day, seven days a week, working intensely with a young man I'd hired as a language tutor (using French as our common language). We began with the many sets of long, back-and-forth sequences required to say *Hello* (with endless variations, depending on gender, age, relationship, time of day, and host/guest status). After a month of drilling and embarrassing practice (greeting children as elders, or using morning greetings for the afternoon), I finally mastered the multiple sets of greetings (and all the kinship terms, age structures, time divisions, and etiquette expectations encoded in them). I spent the next month plumbing the grammatical structure of the Beng language (with its postpositions rather than prepositions, and the conjugation of pronouns rather than verbs, among other linguistic constructions exotic for a native English speaker). After that month of grammatical discoveries came a third month of vocabulary building and phrase expansion. By then, I felt vaguely confident about holding actual conversations beyond the *Hello* phase.

But the deeper a grasp of the Beng language I gained, the more nervous people seemed to become. No doubt, they worried that my increasing linguistic facility would mean that I would soon unearth their religious secrets. Instead of building bridges, my hard-won but increasing comfort in the language seemed to be building walls, as my questions alternately yielded silence, indifference, or implausible claims of ignorance (“I don’t know my name,” “I don’t know how many children I have,” “I don’t know the name of that tree,” “Those people aren’t arguing, they’re joking around,” “That’s not a trial, just a conversation”).

Things reached a climax when I discovered, through our single early confidante, that the male chief of the village had instructed everyone to boycott me. No one should answer any questions I asked on any topic, he’d warned everyone the first week of our arrival, in a village-wide meeting concealed from me. Anyone who violated this rule would have to buy the chief two cows, as punishment. With the local cost of a single cow some \$250 USD—easily, a year’s salary or more for these impoverished villagers—the prospect of that exorbitant fine convinced all but one villager to see me as Public Enemy #1. We eventually reached a workable *modus operandi* after a high-stakes trial we held in a village court (Gottlieb and Graham 1994). Slowly, people became more comfortable with us, moving from tolerating our presence to agreeing to answer innocuous questions to (in some cases) becoming close friends. But only five years later, when Philip and I returned to a different village, did we fully understand the many reasons behind our old neighbors’ initial reluctance to engage with us.

At the time of that first fieldwork, the phrase “White privilege” (widely disseminated by Peggy McIntosh in 1988) was not yet current. Through all my readings in the history of racism, I had not yet imagined how I might be implicated. Since I consciously challenged and rejected racism, selecting for

a career a discipline centered on the insistence that all humans have equal claims to philosophical sophistication (among other rights), I hadn't conceived that I might be perceived as the epitome of colonial domination, including spiritual burglary. While having given considerable thought to Western views of Otherness, I didn't yet have the conceptual vocabulary to consider the reciprocal issue of white people as Other, subject to the local gaze. With these conceptual gaps, I was far too shocked when, over the course of our 15-month stay in Bengland, Philip and I were the subject of a series of ethnic and racial stereotypes that included a wide and creative assortment of personages and identities.

**White spirit.** Some evidence for this assumed identity derived partly from our skin color: in the Beng pantheon, a particular type of forest spirit called *alufyã* is pictured as white.

Further evidence came from a more surprising source: our initial seeming lack of digestive processes. A few young men in the village had served in the national army. During their training, they'd seen some Western feature films. One of these young men once mentioned that none of the white characters they saw on the large screen was ever shown fulfilling the biological processes of urination or defecation, and these young soldiers concluded that all white people must therefore be spirits. Trying to maintain discretion surrounding our forest runs for the call of nature turned out to be a mistake, thanks to this invisible chain of associations.

As long as Philip and I occupied the role of *alufyã*, adults remained nervous around us; some young children cried and ran away when they saw us. All this was for a specific reason: *alufyã* spirits are supposed to live in the forest and only enter the village on specific religious holidays, or in the dead of night, when humans should be asleep. (If adults have sex in the wee hours after midnight and before dawn, an *alufyã* might enter the womb and implant a spirit child rather than a human fetus.) An *alufyã* spirit seen in the village during the daytime is taken as a sign of some unknown but impending disaster.

Thankfully, this characterization didn't last long—although, for an unwelcome reason. Soon after our arrival, the dysentery I'd contracted during our first month in Bengland (while living in another village) returned. While I can't say I enjoyed my frequent trips to the forest pit that served as a latrine, all this coming-and-going had an unanticipated payoff: it undercut the impression that I lacked normal digestive processes. Commiserating with my stomach ailments, one sympathetic neighbor disclosed the spirit theory that, he assured me, was now put to rest.

However, with "spirit" ruled out, our strangeness demanded some other explanation. Alternative theories abounded.

**Incestuous sibling couple.** While walking across the village during our first weeks, Philip and I occasionally held hands, as we'd often done back in the U.S. We'd only been married for about two years and still enjoyed our status as newlyweds. Although aware that West African village couples did not engage

in this somatic practice, I justified it to myself by reasoning that it might help us seem familiarly human. What I didn't foresee was that this bodily tradition did exist between a different kind of opposite-sex duo from ours: not husbands and wives, but brothers and sisters. To Beng eyes, the combination of sharing the same bed plus publicly holding hands clearly signaled incest.

We only heard about this disturbing theory months after our neighbors had abandoned it. But the theory contributed to the aloofness, even repulsion that some neighbors initially displayed toward us, my confidante ultimately explained to me.

Meanwhile another theory competed with this one in other neighbors' eyes.

**Catholic nun/priest.** The few white people who ever showed up in Beng villages included Catholic nuns and priests. Although neither Philip nor I practiced any religion (Philip is a lapsed Catholic, I am an atheist Jew), early in our stay in the area, we discovered that a Catholic priest regularly made yogurt for sale in the nearby town. Missing foods from home, we developed an early habit of buying two cups of yogurt from the priest during our weekly jaunts to buy supplies and food, and check for mail at the post office. We also discovered that two American missionaries living in the same town kept a freezer full of American foods, and we occasionally (against our better judgment) indulged our nostalgia for familiar meals by accepting their frequent invitations to join them for a lunch of hamburgers or salads. News of our weekly visits to the church, and our infrequent visits to the missionary women, somehow reached the villages, convincing our neighbors that we must be church officials. For a while, some people addressed us as *Ma Soeur* and *Mon Père*. We always balked and explained that we had no connection to any church. Our interlocutors often appeared unconvinced.

**Mourner, witch, or madwoman.** The evidence for these additional theories included a key facet of my appearance: the unkempt hair that, to Beng eyes, dominated (and marred) my appearance.

Soon after moving into the village, a few friendly young women playfully offered to braid my thick hair. The girls had a grand time pulling my unruly locks this way and that, and I managed not to wince at all the tugging, twisting, and tucking. Proud of their makeover, they insisted on walking me around the village to show off their handiwork. But before we reached the first household, my wavy tresses had begun to slip out of the wire guides the girls had inserted. My hairdressers tut-tutted at my smooth strands and coaxed them back to their intended new homes. But no sooner had the last wire been put back in place than more tresses asserted their independence. The girls tried to discipline my unmanageable mane a few more times before they finally gave up.

Unfortunately, this cornrow collapse had more serious repercussions than a simple hair malfunction. In the Beng imaginary, only three categories of person walked around with disorderly hair like mine: mourners, mad people, and witches. Since I didn't appear to be in mourning over anyone near and

dear to me who had died, that left two credible contenders. Of those, one was apparently more likely.

Witches (*blunã*) not only left their hair unkempt, they also exhibited telltale behavior in their daily lives—including inappropriate confidence because of their supernatural powers. Of course, I was neither using mystical powers to cause people to go mad, impotent, fall sick, or die, nor was I mystically protecting people from such evils—all, skills potentially possessed by (some) Beng witches (Gottlieb 1989). Unwittingly, however, Philip and I easily paraded such powers, thanks to the political and economic history behind our presence in Africa—a history that, in the village context, suggested a mystical foundation.

Every morning, Philip and I carried outside two wooden chairs and a small, wooden table outside into our courtyard, setting them up as a shared, outdoor desk, complete with our portable/manual typewriters, camera, notebooks, and pens. Whenever we left our compound to visit people across the village, our neighbors advised us to bring all these valuable items back into the house and lock the door. We routinely rejected their advice. This was a tiny village (pop., ca. 200); surely, no one would steal our belongings in such an intimate setting. Besides, we wanted to send a signal that we trusted our neighbors. Instead, we learned much later, we were signaling our status as witches. Who else would leave valuable property readily visible, to tempt passersby, if they hadn't mystically protected the objects with curses? Leaving obvious forms of wealth unprotected by material constraints (locks) meant that those objects must be protected by invisible constraints (curses).

Continuing this household practice confirmed our identity as witches. But, toward the end of our stay, one friend explained that even if we'd ceased the practice, the theory would likely have remained active. The other villagers assumed that all white people must be witches because of their mastery of complicated technology. Any plane spotted flying overhead (a relatively unusual occurrence in that rural landscape) was said to be either piloted by a witch, or an actual witch taking the form of a plane.

After returning to the U.S., one of the first conference talks I presented addressed this theme (Gottlieb 1986). Although it was unrelated to my dissertation and didn't make it to the published version (1996), I must have intuited the importance of understanding the issue. The process of writing that paper helped me understand how Philip's and my witch-identity fit into our Beng neighbors' world view. Setting aside its mystical foundation, the theory was founded in impeccable logic derived from historical reality. The unacceptable gap in technological apparatus between the global South and global North is inscrutable without access to deep historical data confirming, as Walter Rodney put it in his groundbreaking work, the many means of military, economic, environmental, sociological, and spiritual domination by which "Europe underdeveloped Africa" (1975).



**(French) post-colonial spy or government agent.** In the end, the above-cited theories came and (except for the witch persona) went, but for many of our neighbors, a final set of images remained credible to the end of our first stay. Most villagers assumed we were French; even if we were not, we were surely either spies sent by the central government in Abidjan to report illegal village activities, or actual government agents sent to reinstitute forced labor. As with the witch persona, the logic behind these associations was historically well grounded.

The evidence for our purported French citizenship centered on both language and phenotype: we spoke French, and we were white. Showing villagers maps of France and the U.S. made little impact, nor did our banter between ourselves in English. Our alleged French-ness was intimately tied in to the nation's (and Beng region's) colonial history.

The fact of Philip's and my non-French-ness seemed so obvious to me, I couldn't imagine how it could remain a matter of contention to our neighbors. Yes, I'd read critical accounts of the brutal history of French colonialism in Côte d'Ivoire and elsewhere (spending most long-ago Saturdays of my teen years protesting against US involvement in France's former colony of Vietnam). Yes, I'd read critical histories of US slavery. Yes, I'd read deeply in the foundations of Western racism. But somehow, my own whiteness remained invisible to me as a formative marker. As a white person, I was accustomed to enjoying the luxury of not having to think about my racialized identity and could easily prioritize citizenship over race.

Once, after several months living in the village, I was shocked to see a reflection of myself in a shop window, during a visit to the city of Bouaké. My first reaction: "Oh, look, a white person." Only after a few seconds did I recognize that white person as myself. Living amongst black people, and speaking with them in their language, wearing clothes that approximated theirs, living a lifestyle that vaguely approximated theirs, had all crept into my mindset at such a deep level that I must have unconsciously felt I could "pass." For the Beng, the luxury of such a fantasy was inconceivable; instead, citizenship and race easily coincided, making it patently natural to focus on what, together, they had wrought.

In a short time, the Beng had lost both tangible and intangible legacies to French colonial domination. The colonial regime had levied taxes on farmers whom colonial administrators compelled to grow new crops—to then sell for cash—to be used to pay those taxes. The new crops (and the new system of monoculture) transformed the ecological and nutritional bases of Beng subsistence patterns for the worse. At the legal level, the imposition of the French Napoleonic code meant that most of how Beng people lived their lives suddenly became illegal, from families arranging marriages, men marrying two or more wives, and heirs inheriting certain goods and positions matrilocally, to distilling spirits and hunting many kinds of wild animals. Imposition of a new schooling system brought with it the implanting of new values that Beng elders roundly rejected.

The elderly father of the male village chief once recounted to me his painful memories of being forced to work on grueling, road-building labor gangs, with the French overseer beating anyone who fell behind or protested. It sounded little different from the slave history of the American south.

In short, the distinctions between French and American citizenship and history that felt foundational to Philip and me seemed both trivial and irrelevant to our village neighbors. As white people with privilege, both French and Americans commanded power and acted with this knowledge. Philip and I had announced our privilege the day we drove the only car for miles around into our village, uninvited and unwelcome.

We worked hard to undo that imposition by trying to equalize the unequal power relations we recognized as pervasive. We learned to speak in Beng. I tried to display respect for local knowledge systems with questions about how our neighbors viewed the world. We never shared any skepticism about claimed medical etiologies (witchcraft causes Guinea worm infections), nor did we critique our neighbors' behavioral decisions, even the really tough situations that we found unethical (casually throwing stones at a developmentally delayed girl, forcing lovers to have sex in the forest under the scrutiny of two elders after violating the rule against forest sex). We lived without electricity and running water.

But if friends from our US life would have felt sorry for us for our privations, our Beng neighbors felt envious for our luxuries. The quarterly stipend I received from the Social Science Research Council insured that Philip and I could eat a can of sardines for dinner every night (something few villagers could afford more than once or twice a year), or fresh fish or meat whenever we drove to the market in town, a dirt-road hour away in our car. For minor health issues, we continually restocked our first aid kit, and for any medical crisis, we could easily pick up stakes and drive to the dispensary in town or, if need be, to a hospital in Bouaké or even Abidjan. The fact that we shared these medical supplies by hosting a daily, no-fee nursing clinic every morning for as many people as showed up only confirmed our status as endowed with unimaginable financial resources.

All these practices, Philip and I were convinced, would signal our humanness in general, and our sincere attempts to approximate equality, in particular. But, as Peggy McIntosh has said concerning the structural racism claiming all white people simply because of their whiteness, "niceness has nothing to do with it" (Rothman 2014). The variety of mystical, political, and other personae that our Beng hosts attributed to Philip and me constituted a symbolically rich means to explain our unearned privileges.

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How can you convince someone to release themselves from their intellectual framework for understanding the world through a set of preconceived

categories? In the end, perhaps longevity—the classic hallmark of the ethnographic method—is what really counted for the Beng relinquishing their stereotypes of Philip and me (Gottlieb 2006). By the time we completed our first, long stay, we felt accepted at least as human by our neighbors. When we returned, we brought a copy of my dissertation to show around. One of our former hosts leafed through the pages and beamed when he recognized his name in the acknowledgements. His reaction: “We threw it out into the darkness, and it emerged in the moonlight.” By this, he explained, he meant that when he and his village-mates had explained their lives to us five years earlier, they didn’t know what I would do with the information and sometimes feared the worst. I knew he had in mind the spectre of me revealing secret religious knowledge, or turning in names of nominal lawbreakers to the police or the mayor’s office. Now, with my dissertation before them, they could see that my intentions were innocuous (if not honorable), and they felt vindicated in their earlier decision to accept Philip and me in their midst.

At the same time, I reflected guiltily on how I hadn’t bothered to share my own anxieties during that first stay concerning the demands of the academic calendar. The countdown to the end of our stay had obsessed me daily, impelling me to ask questions at an increasingly relentless pace, as I worried about “collecting” enough “data” to write a coherent dissertation. But this vacuum-cleaner approach to “data”—as a set of things, rather than a conceptual process—was far too mechanical, and paid far too little attention to the political and historical implications of who supplies information to whom, and why. That strategy may have yielded “data,” but at the cost of further alienating villagers already long abused and exploited by the world’s powers.

As I further reflected on our first fieldwork, I also came to feel increasingly regretful about having made what I now saw as the wrong decision in selecting our village. I subsequently became increasingly sympathetic to the initial rejections with which those villagers had greeted us. It is now obvious to me that during that early fieldwork, I was intellectually and emotionally unprepared to enter a landscape suffused by racial and class privilege.

Our return visits to the Beng were informed by our belated acknowledgment of those privileges. For our next two stays, we selected a village whose residents were enthusiastic about hosting us (although, ironically, our former reluctant hosts now invited us back to their village with enthusiasm and expressed disappointment that we declined their invitation). I also chose to study a subject that people were enthusiastic to discuss (child-rearing) (Gottlieb 2004). The process of returning and, later, writing two fieldwork memoirs about our experiences ultimately allowed Philip and me to confront the issues caused by our privilege in a clear and (I hope) more honest way.

Writing those memoirs decided us on two other paths, as well. First, Philip and I recognized that we were forever engaged in Beng communities in a personal way. We had been formally adopted into three families—two in the

first village in which we lived, and another in the second village. We didn't take these adoptions lightly. Once we became parents (two years after our first return to Bengland), we determined that our son needed to know the African side to his family. A scant month after he turned six, we brought Nathaniel to Côte d'Ivoire. There, he was adopted into one of our host families—and not just as any ordinary child, but as the reincarnation of a revered matriclan ancestor, for whom he was named (Gottlieb, Graham, and Gottlieb-Graham 1998; Gottlieb and Graham 2012). At the end of that stay, we reciprocated by agreeing to sponsor a young Beng man, Bertin—the son of our earlier village host—as a student applying for admission to our US campus. Doing so meant agreeing to Bertin's parents that Philip and I would play the role of Bertin's US parents, quasi-adopting him into our own family while he pursued an undergraduate degree in political science. Although we have not been able to bring our daughter (born eight years after our last village stay) back to Bengland, Hannah and Nathaniel grew up with Bertin as a part-time older brother, joining in family meals and important, two-way life events.

Beyond that intimate braiding, Philip and I determined to remain engaged in Beng communities in more pragmatic ways to provide forms of help that our Beng family and hosts would value. We accept this as a lifelong commitment for one undeniable reason: what the Beng have provided us means that we have a lifelong debt to them that we can never fully repay. My career, in particular—from tenure-track job to promotions up the academic ladder—has been possible because of the research I have conducted among the Beng; a comfortable lifestyle has followed. Being permanently indebted means that we are, ethically, obliged to continually (if partially) repay that debt however we can.

When Philip and I sold our first memoir recounting our first two stays in Côte d'Ivoire to a commercial press, we devoted the proceeds to the Beng. The lion's share went toward several development projects that villagers requested (Gottlieb and Graham 1999), while the remainder went toward helping to support Bertin while he pursued a BA (and later, an MA and PhD) in the US. The process of chronicling the complicated but fulfilling nature of these processes (Gottlieb and Graham 1999, Gottlieb and Graham 2012) further deepened our commitment. We have created a tax-deductible, non-governmental organization, the Beng Community Fund, dedicated to supporting the interests of Beng villagers. A Board of Directors advises us with wisdom gained from their own professional experiences with rural communities and development projects, while Bertin (now back in Côte d'Ivoire) serves as a liaison between us and the Beng villagers.

The educator in me also determined to teach future generations of students to think carefully ahead of time about the politics of fieldwork, especially when conducted by scholars from the global North in the global South. Philip and I each had several goals in writing both *Parallel Worlds* and (years later) *Braided Worlds*; for me, this pedagogical function was a primary one.

While writing my dissertation back in 1981–83, I had already decided that if I ever gained a teaching position with curricular flexibility, I would create a course on conducting ethnographic research—an idea that had not yet found currency in anthropology programs in the U.S. During the interview for the teaching position I accepted in 1983, I proposed a research methods course as my highest priority. My new colleagues allowed me to design and teach this course right off the bat, and eventually it became adopted as a required course for all students of cultural anthropology, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Creating the course *de novo*, I first emphasized practical, ethical, and political issues in equal doses. Over the years, the ratio shifted in favor of ethical and political issues, which I came to see as critical concerns for all students to address, before thinking about the more pragmatic components of ethnographic research. In the 1990s, intersectionality theory<sup>1</sup> gave me a new theoretical vocabulary to further reflect on how my race and class intersected with my gender to shape those first village encounters.

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In the years since my first fieldwork, anthropologists (and other scholars who conduct qualitative fieldwork) have become more thoughtful about the racial and class politics of research and what those mean for conducting ethical research. than I was in the late 1970s/early 1980s. I don't believe that any young scholars today could or would inaugurate research in rural Africa with the same sorts of naïve lapses that marred (and, in many ways, shaped) my early fieldwork. For research conducted by (especially, but not exclusively, white) scholars from the global North in the global South, that means designing research whose methods are shaped in the first instance by thinking about the politics of race and class, and the implications and responsibilities of privilege.

#### NOTE

1. First named by black, feminist, legal scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991).

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