

# “You Brought Your Baby to Base Camp?” Families and Field Sites

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This paper focuses on the researcher’s own experience as a graduate student embarking on fieldwork in a remote and somewhat risky field site located at the foot of Mount Everest in Nepal and the complications that arose when she decided to bring her family along with her. Following other feminist geographers who challenge the conventional and masculinist modes of carrying out research, this author argues that these modes are no longer tenable, if they ever were. Using her own fieldwork stories, she tells how the ideal model of the lone, male, detached researcher broke down for her, and how her family’s presence complicated her research yet ultimately deepened her understanding of the spatiality and social contours of the landscape she was studying. The paper grapples with the related issues of whether or not family members who accompany researchers to research sites ought to remain hidden in the ensuing analyses and written reports, and how “accompanied research” can invoke theoretical insights. Throughout the paper the author addresses the broader question of how her status as a graduate student influenced her research choices and the considerable boundary crossings she made.

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**I**n feminist geography, much has been written about the need to be attentive to researchers’ subject positions (class, race, gender, sexuality, disability, etc.) in the structuring of fieldwork relations (see for example, Anderson 1996; Gilbert 1994; Kobayashi 1994; Stacey 1988; Staeheli and Lawson 1994; Sparke 1996). Less has been written about how, prior to entering the field, these positions affect the nature of the field sites we choose or how they actually play out in the field (although see Chouinard and Grant 1996; England 1994; Katz 1994). My own fascination with a particularly adventure-laden and masculinized site while carrying out doctoral research on the transnationality of Himalayan mountaineering created a number of unexpected difficulties for me as a mother, of two young children, in graduate school conducting costly field research on an unconventional topic.<sup>1</sup> While I originally intended to travel to Mount Everest Base Camp, located at an elevation of 17, 500 feet in the upper Khumbu region of northeastern Nepal, to carry out short-term fieldwork on my own, my spouse and our two children eventually joined me.

My rather complicated fieldwork experience can be attributed to, and perhaps dismissed by, my gendered positioning as a guilty Euro-North American mother, one who could not

bear to leave her children for an extended absence or to give up her ambitious research sights/sites.<sup>2</sup> In recounting my experiences here, however, my intention is to use my positioning as a way of critiquing a dominant ideal type of fieldwork in which “legitimate” fieldwork is carried out by solo, childless men or women who leave their families and home communities for long periods of time to live and conduct research. Not only is this model an unrealistic one, but one that perpetuates the notion that fieldwork is, or ought to be, a disembodied practice. My fieldwork story thus also provides a concrete example of the embodied entanglements that play out between our selves or subjectivities and our research sites, both before and while we are in the field. My own difficulties in navigating the research site I chose, a path replete with financial and practical obstacles from the start, has shed important light on the gendered dimensions of field sites. I have a much clearer sense now of why masculine spaces such as remote, high-altitude mountaineering camps tend not to be commonplace field sites for feminist geographers, in contrast to, for example, shopping malls (Longhurst 1998), dancehalls (Skelton 1998), and workplaces (Hanson and Pratt 1995) in urban centres. How do our positions as gendered subjects and as feminists shape our choices of research sites (see also, Hall, this issue)?

The brief autobiographical story I tell here about my fieldwork experiences thus serves as much more than a “confessional tale” (Okely and Callaway 1992). As the editors of this special issue, Brenda Murphy and Jennifer Hall, set out in the introduction, autobiography is a useful mode for analyzing structures of power and generating theory. My story challenges long-held conventions about fieldwork and families and both documents and theorizes the boundary crossing that we do as researchers, between our selves, our disciplines, our sites, and our research communities. My story also illustrates how reflexive analyses of our subjectivities can shed light on the spatiality of the places we choose to study.

Bringing the family, but especially a very young infant with me, to this risky and remote place ultimately caused me to confront two fundamental notions about fieldwork underpinning my training as a “fieldworker,” which I focus on in this paper. The first notion is that fieldwork is a stoic, solitary endeavour

that we must suffer through alone in order to prove ourselves, especially as graduate students and newly-hired professors (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Katz 1996; Wolf 1996). The second notion, linked to the first, is that those who might accompany us to our field sites ought somehow to remain out of our analyses (Flinn 1998). I discuss each of these overlapping analytical points in turn. In the conclusion, I address the possibilities arising from my fieldwork experiences. How do we use our own vulnerable positions as graduate students and new scholars in ways that challenge power-laden conventions about choosing research sites, carrying out field-based research, and writing up?

## The Idea of the Lone Ethnographer Breaks Down

The natural science model of fieldwork has been widely critiqued by anthropologists and geographers alike. The dogged archetype of “the Lone Ethnographer” (Rosaldo 1989) has been scrutinized in reformulations of ethnographic methodologies (for example, Flinn 1998; Gupta and Ferguson 1997). In geography, Matthew Sparke has recently noted that fieldwork has been sanctified and engendered as a masculinized “character-building rite of passage” (Sparke 1996, 212). Sparke notes that the field has been:

cast as a seductive but wild place that must be observed, penetrated and mastered by the geographer who, having battled with it, revealed in it, and, in the end, triumphantly risen above it, returns to the academy his education complete, his stature assured and his geographical self proven, definitely, *his* (Sparke 1996, 212).

Anthropologist Juliana Flinn has also criticized the persistent model of the lone, male researcher originating from the colonial era, a defining moment for anthropology, when, for example, Malinowski urged fieldworkers to properly “cut oneself off from the company of other white men” (Malinowski 1961, cited in Flinn 1998, 6). Many others share similar critiques of such a masculinist model, particularly feminist ethnographers (for example, see Bell et al. 1993; Rose 1993; Wolf 1996). My own experience serves here to illustrate at once the beguiling power and the implausibility of the archetype of “a lone, white, male fieldworker” (Stocking 1992, 59 in Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 11).

Initially, I longed to go off to a far-flung and exotic place like Everest Base Camp to carry out sit-in-a-tent kind of Malinowskian fieldwork. Such an experience and place held for me a certain “macho mystique” (Scheper-Hughes 1983). I romanticized the hardships I would undergo – cold weather, few amenities, dramatic landscapes, rugged living conditions, time away from urban life and from domestic responsibilities – viewing them as a desirable challenge. At the same time I was ambivalent about the base camp as a field site, particularly because it meant being separated from my family, if only for a short while. This is a key point. When I imagined carrying out fieldwork at Everest Base Camp I imagined myself alone, without my spouse and children. My geographical imagination had me spending a couple of weeks living and working out of a tent, roughing it in my down jacket and fleece, interviewing mountaineers by day, and listening to mountaineering stories by night, all of these activities as a solitary researcher. What sorts of romantic narratives about fieldwork and, equally important, about mountaineering base camps, were feeding my imagination such that family obligations, relationships, and other “complicated” subject positionings were bracketed out? My own culturally mediated conceptualization of fieldwork at base camp was, in retrospect, a rather quixotic one, based on longings for rugged outdoor adventure textualized and popularized in seductively-illustrated and highly gendered mountaineering literature. I did find adventure, after all, but in a much different form than the one I had conjured up.

Although I planned to travel to Nepal with my spouse, our eighteen-month old daughter, and my eleven-year-old son, my family was not going to accompany me to the high elevations of the mountaineering camp, but instead would remain lower, in the largest village in the Khumbu region. The plan we formulated before leaving Canada entailed a trek where we would remain together as far as Namche Bazaar (situated at 11,300 feet), where I would then continue on to Base Camp on “my own,” or rather, with a camp cook, a guide, and a Canadian friend of mine. (As I write this, I realize the embeddedness of the notion of singularity and yet how easily it breaks down.) In addition to catering to my own romantic longings for rugged adventure, we were heeding the advice of western trekking experts who strongly caution tourists about the medical risks of taking children to high places. Because of the potential fatality of altitude sickness, avoid

bringing your children to elevations much higher than 10,000 feet, the guidebooks read (Armington 1994; Bezruchka 1997). Our plan seemed like a reasonable one, indeed a prudent one, while we were still in Canada.

Once we were in Nepal, however, I grew increasingly unenthused about being away from my family. With each day that brought us closer to Namche Bazaar, I dreaded our inevitable separation. I was breastfeeding my infant daughter and suddenly my plan to wean her in an unfamiliar place, leaving her susceptible to gastrointestinal and other illnesses, seemed unwise. It also felt discomfiting for me to leave the care of both the children solely in my spouse's hands under challenging living conditions while I went off with hired help in part to indulge my own fantasies. Despite my uneasy feelings, we went ahead with the plan. On the morning that I said my good-byes, I experienced considerable distress. Torn, I stubbornly held on to my longings for fieldwork/adventure while at the same time I contemplated how I possibly could have underestimated the difficulty with which I proceeded. How did others manage the strain of missing their families, and especially their young children, when away doing fieldwork? I wondered. How could I manage the anxiety I felt? At the heart of the issue, I began to question why I ought to. What was I trying to prove, and to whom?

A few days after I left my family outside the guesthouse door in Namche Bazaar, I was on my way back to them. My well-intended fieldwork plan fell apart as my desire to camp out in Everest Base Camp as a (macho) solitary researcher with a tent of my own was outweighed by my wish to be closer to my family. A number of events caused me to quite literally flee from the base camp on a grey stormy afternoon as soon as I arrived there. With a darkening sky, snow falling, and nowhere to pitch my tent, I made the decision festering within me for weeks to forsake the base camp segment of fieldwork in order to return to my spouse and children waiting for me below. As much as it was a relief for me to turn around and head back to them, at the same time I felt the burden of responsibility that goes along with carrying out funded research. Nevertheless, I felt that, ultimately, ethics policies and guidelines apply to the researcher as well as to our research subjects and I trusted that my supervisor would agree with and support my decision. After literally running



**Figure 1:** Author and Her Family Posing at Everest Base Camp with Members of the Andalucian Everest 2000 Expedition

back down the rubble trail, I caught up with my family the next day and was very happy to be reunited with them.

I was ready to forego altogether the Base Camp phase of my fieldwork so that we could head back down to Kathmandu and continue my research in a safer, more comfortable place. It was my spouse's idea to give it another go, this time with everyone. I hesitated, knowing the gambit of health risks to which we would be exposing the children including altitude sickness, gastrointestinal diseases, sun exposure, cold exposure, diaper rash, and even SIDS. Yet, we reasoned that a slow ascent to the upper elevations, careful monitoring of their health, and a wait-and-see approach with regards to their acclimatization would minimize the risks to an acceptable level for us. Back in Canada, we were avid backpackers and the children had accompanied us on numerous backcountry trips. Moreover, we had stopped at the Himalayan Rescue Association clinic in the Khumbu to speak with the doctors there who advised us that both children appeared healthy and happy, to be aware of the symptoms of altitude sickness, and as with adults, to proceed with caution. A number of days later, with both children in good health and spirits, we made our way across the same rocky glacial moraine at the foot of Mount Everest from which I had fled.

My partner, my son, and I were able to get a camp set up quickly. Our Canadian friend was able to help out this time, soon locating a relatively flat platform for our tent and a latrine for us

to use. On our first night we received a warm, hospitable welcome from a neighbouring mountaineering expedition, a group of Georgians, who delivered fresh *momos* (dumplings) and apples to our tent. During the days that followed we were invited to many wonderful meals in numerous mess tents, which we gratefully accepted. I was able to use these occasions for research purposes, although not without complications, some of which I outline in the next section, as well as an excuse to escape our own meager family encampment. Intended for a solitary fieldworker, the tent in which we were living was barely large enough for the four of us to squish into at night.

Many of the images of Everest Base Camp, taken as both family mementos and fieldwork photos, are visible tracings of my not-very-solitary presence as a researcher (Figure 1). While some might view such photographs as evidence of a "family vacation" rather than of serious research, I suggest instead that critiques be more usefully levelled at the disciplinary boundaries upheld between vacation/field sites and family/work. In other words, why might a photograph of a researcher with a local child in a Nepali village be regarded as a "fieldwork photograph" while an image of my own children in Base Camp be regarded as an icon of a "vacation?" There are many possibilities here to unravel. The main point I want to make in this paper, however, has to do with the erasure of family from fieldwork practices. Since when are our children and spouses and friends not a part of our field sites in some manner, if only to complicate how we negotiate our research time and place? Perhaps this is much more of a concern for graduate students and new researchers than it is for established scholars. Yet, it still strikes me as somewhat taboo to acknowledge the presence of our families, in other words to blur and even violate the boundaries of our field sites with visible traces of our personal lives and relationships, however important these relationships and biographies are in enabling us to understand the phenomenon we are studying.

It was with some irony, then, that my fieldwork at Everest Base Camp was carried out in the end. I initially constructed

“my field site” and attempted to pursue it as a “seductive but wild place that must be observed, penetrated, and mastered” by the lone, macho, ethnographer (Sparke 1996, 12, paraphrase-direct quote above). The tent that “I” carried all the way from Canada (the truth is that porters carried it for much of the way) was big enough for me alone. I had formulated a plan to exclude my family from my fieldwork expedition, but it was only through their inclusion that the fieldwork eventually did pan out.

At this point, I think it is important to ask whether it is only the lone white male fieldworker, after all, who separates himself from his personal life in order to “do” science? What benefit might the marking off of an independent self from familial relationships, for example, provide for women? What do we give up by dismantling these boundaries? Within the male bastions of geography departments, women have long struggled for recognition (see Murphy and Hall, this issue). More specific to mountaineering spaces, in the nineteenth century, one of the first western women travelers to the Himalayas, Fanny Bullock Workman, fought hard to break down hard-and-fast gendered stereotypes about the “mere” female traveler and “scientific” male explorer (MacDonald 1999). In the late twentieth century, British mountaineer Alison Hargreaves was widely criticized for her attempts at making high-altitude mountaineering her profession while a mother of young children, and she fought hard to gain recognition as both (Frohlick 2001; Rose and Douglas 1999). Like Workman, who sought acknowledgement as a serious scholar within the male spaces of the Royal Geographical Society and to represent herself separate from her scientist husband who accompanied her on her fieldtrips, I too strive for recognition as a scholar and independent woman. At the same time, to render myself a disembodied researcher is to lose important ground that feminist geographers have won in challenging the geographical/masculinist imagination of field sites (see for example, see Rose 1993). I develop this point further in the following section.

## “Babes” in Base Camp

Critics of masculinist models of fieldwork have argued that, just as solitary fieldworkers are not solitary, the field is never a place

detached from social relations and commitments. Field sites are of course embodied spaces. Kim England (1994) and others (for example, Visweswaren 1993) have theorized about the impossibility of separating one’s embodied self from those who occupy our field sites, by showing how it is not always possible nor desirable to interpolate our bodies/selves into the communities we seek to know. I would like to extend this line of thought, by asking about the significance of the bodies/selves of those who accompany us into our field sites and the cultural engagements that come about through accompanied research. In other words, how does the presence of our family members impact the grounds on which we insert ourselves into the field and construct knowledge about it as a place? Linked to the issue of the mythical, macho lone fieldworker then is the complicated question of where the boundaries of embodiedness start and stop. When opening up our methodological framework to include others, whose bodies count and what might they have to do with the spatiality of our sites? Given the particular social contours of Everest Base Camp as a place occupied mostly by men and more generally by adults, I discovered that the presence of my young children highlighted these very contours and shaped my research in a significant way. “Babes” were a rare sighting indeed at the mountaineering base camp.

Before I left Canada, a colleague joked with me that as a lone female researcher I would have few problems getting male mountaineers to speak with me at Everest Base Camp. “Just think,” she teased, “all those men with nothing to do but sit around in their tents and acclimatize. They will be lining up at your tent.” Her crass joke accurately reflected the overwhelming masculinity and heterosexuality of my field site. In the spring of 2000, there were many more men than women occupying the temporary settlement (a rough estimate of the ratio of men to women for the Spring 2000 is 8:1). But age too needs to be examined as a constitutive feature of mountaineering spaces. Besides our two there were no other children present during the few days we were camped out (although we did meet a couple of older western children who had trekked to Base Camp with their parents and one who had remained a few nights with his father, a doctor with one of the mountaineering expeditions). These particular social relations thus influenced the reception I



received upon arriving at my field site and the subsequent interactions I experienced with my research subjects as a researcher accompanied by a spouse, an adolescent, and a breast-feeding infant. Clearly I was not the image of the unattached “babe” researcher construed by my colleague. My embodiment in the masculinized, adult space of base camp as a mother, and definitely not a single “babe,” and the embodied presence of my children and all their bodily needs, especially my breast-feeding babe, revealed to me (and others) the very out-of-placeness of such bodies in mountaineering spaces. I suggest that because I arrived with my children, the social contours of the mountaineering base camp became more crystalline to me than they might have otherwise. I also suggest that our presence in turn changed the geographical imagination of the place itself.

Our arrival sparked a flurry of gossip and controversy amongst the mountaineers and expedition support people who make up the temporary inhabitants of this otherwise barren landscape, including a number of western doctors and Sherpa and Sherpani mountaineers. Throughout our stay, stories of incredulousness and of disapproval made their way to us. The trek into Everest Base Camp is arduous, requiring many days of travel on foot over a number of passes eventually to an altitude of 17, 500 feet. Our children were often commended for their strength and fitness, even the baby who rode in a carrier on her father’s back all of the way! But Everest Base Camp is a space cordoned off for the serious adult pursuit and pleasure-seeking of high-altitude mountaineering. One male American doctor’s remark to me, “Oh, *you’re* the one who brought *the baby* to Base Camp,” illustrates how my young daughter’s presence underscored the exclusivity of the terrain. As a subject out-of-place, her body unwittingly became the locus of much of the dialogue and many of the social relations through which my understanding of the spatiality of the mountaineering encampment unfolded.

The concern appeared to be largely over my daughter’s risk for high-altitude sickness as a young infant, even though there were a number of other risks to which she was subjected in the rudimentary, remote camp. In a sense she became an object of medical fascination. One author of a popular trekking guide cautions,

The hazards of high altitudes are no less for children than for adults, and it may be even more difficult to

determine whether a particular child’s health problem is due to altitude or to some other cause... Families should limit their treks to 13, 000 feet (4, 000 metres). With infants, 10, 000 feet (3, 050 metres) might be a safe limit. Unless born at high altitude, children tolerate ascent to heights less well than do adults. All people with children who venture to high altitudes should descend immediately if there is any difficulty with acclimatization. It may be difficult to determine whether a newly acquired unnatural behaviour in a child represents altitude sickness (Bezruchka 1997, 109).

Medicalized discourse about the bodily dangers of traveling to high elevations pervades the upper reaches of the Khumbu. Along the trail there are signs posted in guesthouses and at medical posts, that warn travelers of the physical signs of high-altitude sickness and the proper ways to avoid the illness. Daily lectures are given for trekkers and mountaineers at the Himalayan Rescue Association clinics in the higher villages, including the one we stopped at to inquire about the children’s acclimatization. We heard a number of horror stories exchanged between trekkers; one particularly alarming story was about a middle-aged French woman who died of high-altitude sickness while on an organized trek at a relatively low elevation. The evidence regarding the impacts of high altitude on children is inconclusive (see [www.ismmed.org/ISMM\\_Children\\_at\\_Altitude.htm](http://www.ismmed.org/ISMM_Children_at_Altitude.htm)), but because we seemingly ignored these warnings, and especially those that allege a higher risk of altitude sickness for children, we were caught up in these discourses in a rather unfavourable way. It was difficult to avoid becoming embroiled in discussions over our daughter’s health and, to a lesser degree, my older son’s, even though we had taken extremely prudent measures to avoid altitude sickness by ascending very slowly, by closely monitoring our own and the children’s eating, drinking, and sleeping patterns, and by remaining at higher elevations for a short while.

Being situated in the uncomfortable centre of these authoritative discourses, despite their ambiguity, marked me in a particular way. Some of the western doctors I met did not hesitate to offer their unsolicited advice and expertise on the issue of bringing our children to Base Camp, even though they recognized that there is little empirical evidence of children being at higher risk than adults. A Canadian doctor willingly participated in my research queries, but only after he insisted on voicing his point

of view on the subject. He told me that while he was fine with the idea of an infant at such an altitude – after all, much of the research was speculative at best – doctors from another expedition had expressed to him their extreme concern about our young daughter's presence at that altitude. I found myself explaining to him that I knew for a fact that one of the doctors in question had brought his own adolescent son to Base Camp because we had spoken with the boy and his mother on the trek in. Catching myself being drawn into gossip in such a defensive manner, I recognized that my standing as both a good scientist and a good mother were somewhat at stake in these exchanges. I also realized that my embodied and highly visible identity as a mother had complicated the interactions I could thus carry out with my research subjects.

The concern over the children's well being was neither limited to white, Euro-North American male interlocutors nor specifically traced to western bio-medical discourses. Many Nepalis, mostly high-altitude resident Sherpas, offered their points of view as well. During an interview with a Sherpani (female Sherpa) climber, she expressed to me her worries. She told me that she had had bad dreams about both the children. Every time she had heard the baby cry, she said, her heart raced and she prayed for her good health. This same woman informed me Nepalese children tend not to be brought to the temporary summer settlements and yak pastures located in the upper reaches of the Khumbu, except for occasional visits. Whether or not this is actually the case, I interpreted her story as implying that as a western visitor I was transgressing local cultural conventions about parenting practices, children, and spatial boundaries. A Sherpa couple who ran a guesthouse in the upper Khumbu where we stayed said something similar to us. Delighted to see our daughter in the midst of adult trekkers, they told us how Nepalis often leave their young children with relatives in lower villages rather than bring them to the seasonal tourist lodges at higher elevations, for a variety of reasons. A Canadian woman, who resides in Kathmandu with her Sherpa husband and their children, told me how both she and her husband worry about altitude sickness, as do many lowlander Nepalis, when they bring their children to the Khumbu to visit relatives. These stories raise important questions about different cultural notions of family and motherhood at play here. I leave them aside except to draw

attention to the specificity of the Euro-American construct influencing my own parenting behaviour (see Flinn 1998 for a discussion of the impact of Euro-American social constructions of the family on fieldwork). What is also important to me in this paper is how we became part of the storied spatiality of the upper Khumbu through these cultural exchanges. The story in which a foreign anthropologist and her husband travelled with their children higher than lowland and high altitude residents do was circulated fairly widely.

My family's embodiment thus seems to have transcended a number of boundaries. Interest in my baby's well-being (and her bodily propensity for high-altitude) and inextricably my own identity as a particular kind of mother and scientist extended well beyond the material perimeters of the mountaineering base camp, as I suggest above. Back in Kathmandu, during interviews with a number of Sherpa mountaineers, I discovered that the news of my infant daughter in Everest Base Camp had spread quite a distance. Many interviews began with a dialogue like this:

"I am an anthropologist from Canada. I was in Base Camp last month."

"Yes, I know you. You are the one that brought your baby. Your daughter must be the youngest ever to go that high."

Or, "Yes, I have heard of you. I have never heard of such a young baby at Base Camp."

One of the Sherpas kidded with me, only half-joking, I think, "Surely, she will climb Mount Everest one day. She is already well-acclimatized."

Months later, while sitting in a hospital bed in an emergency room in Canada, the attending physician recognized me and my husband. We were the couple who had been in Base Camp with the two children. He had seen us – he had been there to mountain climb – and had been very curious about who we were.

We were also told that images of our children had circulated globally through the Internet. Trekkers and e-journalists often asked if they could take our daughter's picture, and some of these images apparently made their way to various websites. Like one of my informants, a well-known European mountaineer who complained about the unauthorized material that was written about her and dispatched through cyberspace in ways that she could not control, we too became involuntary participants in the global spatiality and imaginary of Mount Everest; we became

implicated in new spatial stories both in the local community and in cyberspace.

The contentious presence of my daughter and I as “babes” in Base Camp highlights my earlier question about the beginning and end of embodiment in fieldwork. How do these social interactions and cultural encounters spurred by, and contingent on, my subjectivity as a mother in base camp relate to the knowledge produced through fieldwork? Clearly, such visibility of both mother and child signals a number of overlapping complex relationships between the putative wild-ness of Himalayan expedition mountain spaces, culturally embedded notions about the emplacement of women and children’s bodies in space, and historically masculinized adventure-travel and fieldwork practices. Although opaque, judgments were made about me at least as an unconventional if not bad mother because I had brought my baby to the base camp. My fieldwork experience, complicated by the presence of my family, reflects a wider Euro-American discourse about the disapproval of women-as-mothers in mountaineering spaces. Somewhat in common with the female mountaineers I had travelled a long distance to interview, my strange presence in this landscape was at stake in different ways than for the male mountaineers and doctors, whose “footloose” occupancy in the remote backcountry was seen as somehow natural and certainly not questioned. Part of the discursive genealogy of women and Himalayan mountaineering in western mountaineering literature are stories about women who have struggled with their mountaineering pursuits as mothers of young children, constrained by domestic responsibilities, such as Japanese mountaineer Junko Tabei, or criticized for their “selfish desires,” such as Alison Hargreaves.

In this vein, many of the women I interviewed at Base Camp encouraged and celebrated my efforts to combine work and family in so adventuresome and masculine a space. Yet, as a vulnerable new researcher and now faculty member, I struggle with the strategic decisions required of me in my writing, of asking myself where I allow my family to enter the picture literally and figuratively, and how exactly their presence matters to my theorizing. These are not easy questions, but in grappling with

them in a provisional way my own conceptualizations of place and of feminist methodologies have been broadened.

## Family and Field Sites

My own experience as a graduate student conducting research at the base camp of Mount Everest was complicated by my decision to bring my family along with me. At the time, I felt considerable weight on my shoulders as a doctoral candidate to carry out sound as well as interesting and innovative research, which I envisioned my multi-sited approach, and in particular my fieldwork at Base Camp, would generate. Within the discipline of geography, as well as North American society more generally, travelling to such a far-flung and adventuresome place is still for the most part regarded in gendered terms, particularly to carry out “real fieldwork,” that is masculinized (Katz 1996; Sparke 1996). Purposefully choosing a masculine space such as the Himalayan high-altitude mountaineering camp was part of the feminist politics originally underpinning the construction of my field. Examining women’s marginality within a historically male-dominated space was the initial impetus of my research. Actually getting myself as far as the base of the world’s highest mountain would provide me with a novel approach in the ethnographic study of mountaineering, I reasoned, as well as challenge conventional “feminist” field sites. Yet, I neglected to consider the effects of my own marginality.

The allure of the model of the lone, solitary, detached fieldworker eventually got in the way of me achieving my objectives. I experienced guilt and considerable reluctance to be apart from my family in trying to reproduce this model under the circumstances. When, through a series of contingent, unforeseen events, the model broke down for me, I found “accompanied fieldwork” to be a rewarding albeit challenging experience. It was a family trip *and* a job and I continually had to navigate the boundaries between those domains, as many researchers do (Knowles 2000).

The complications that arose due to the presence of my young daughter enabled me to see more clearly the gendered spatial dimensions of the mountaineering site. Perhaps even more importantly, however, my own entangled presence with hers serves to challenge not only disciplinary boundaries about



normative field sites, but disciplining boundaries about children and high spaces and about women and motherhood. Even if only momentarily, my family's occupancy changed the contours of the landscape, as I have outlined in this paper. But one last story underscores my final point about the entanglement of families and field sites and potential theoretical insights. One of the western doctors with whom we spoke at length at Base Camp, and who took a photograph as evidence of our daughter's presence, referred to us as "pioneers." He expressed to us his belief that in trekking to Everest Base Camp with our children we were pushing the boundaries of family-oriented outdoor travel. His words to us, that other families might consider their own possibilities of backcountry hiking or trekking after hearing our story, struck us as undue and even excessive at the time. Yet while I resist any identification as a "pioneer" – in fact my story relates how fraught with doubt and self-questioning I was in making the choices I did – his words highlight the inextricable connection between my research site and my family life. Julianna Flinn has asked what I see to be an important question, why is it "that claiming family ties with hosts is a way of asserting authority in conventional ethnographic writing, yet writing about accompanying family has not been considered of theoretical significance?" (Flinn 1998, 2). Our research actions and choices as graduate students and new researchers, always embodied and political, take place in sites located *both* in and out of academia, and thus challenge the notion of research boundaries, an issue also raised by other contributors (see Murphy and Cloutier-Fisher, this issue and Nash, this issue).

## Endnotes

- 1 For my doctorate, I carried out multi-sited fieldwork on the transnationality of Himalayan mountaineering, which entailed tracing the flows of ideas, goods, and people across the borders of Nepal and North America. One of several field locations, Everest Base Camp in Nepal was a key site, chosen in large part for the accessibility it would afford me from which I could observe mountaineering activities. Other locations included Kathmandu in Nepal, and Banff and Canmore in Canada, communities particularly well-connected to Himalayan mountaineering.
- 2 Thanks to Jennifer Hall for aptly bringing this point about "guilty motherhood" to the fore for me.

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