

CENTRING THE DE-VOICED: Rethinking Personhood in Oral Literature Field Research

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What we learned most, of great value to us as we developed our voice, was to write ourselves into our text, to be there on the page with the reader. (Chiseri-Strater Elizabeth & Bonnie Stone Sunstein 40)

This paper opens up discussion on personhood and field research in oral literature scholarship. It revisits the debate on the text and context and objectivity and empathy in the fieldwork process. It advances the thesis that the traditional field research practice in oral literature de-voices the researcher and the researched in a field research enterprise. I argue that, traditional research in oral literature, by valorising distance between the researcher and the researched, canonises objectivity which divorces personhood from qualitative research ethos. The supposedly “objective,” “detached” and “impartial” fieldworker we meet in written fieldwork documents is an imaginary being, self-de-voiced and divorced from the research location and its attendant subjectivities. Having been self-removed from the location and subjects of study, the silhouetted field researcher, enjoying asymmetrical power relations in the research locale, courtesy of book-education and material economic status, proceeds to apply an imagined neutral lens in research which resultantly de-voices innocent and committed research participants from themselves in the research engagement. The myth of neutrality, impartiality and objectivity in research becomes a contagious infection that spreads from the researcher to the local research participants, infecting everybody, thereby making the study sterile and a mockery of real life situation. This paper raises many questions than it attempts to answer. For example, I ask: Are field researchers’ innocent as they present themselves to the reader? Are research participants as passive as they are made to look in the research reports? Are researchers see-all-know-all as they purport to be in their reports? Where is the epistemological centre in oral literature field research? What interferes with this centre? Whose voice(s) do we hear in a field research report? How have the voices of other persons been de-voiced? How do we re-centre the de-voiced to the mainstream of field research? Finally, I interrogate terms employed to push research participants to the periphery and propose contextualization and integration of field notes in field research to re-centre the silenced voices in research.