

Commentary: Riddim Me This, Riddim Me That

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LINKING PLATEAUS AND WHITENESS TO FIELDWORK

In “Riddims of the Street, Beach and Bureaucracy: Situating Geographical Research in Jamaica,” Paul Kingsbury and Thomas Klak have opened an ambitious effort to find a new way to think about our engagement with ‘the field.’ This effort is marked by two important moments, the idea of the ‘plateau’ as a site of situated researcher-researched interaction, and thinking about the ways in which a consideration of ‘whiteness,’ as thought through the critical geographic literature, might serve to decenter the researcher. If there is a regret I have about this paper, it is that the authors did not go as far as they might have to link these two moments into the important methodological critique for which I think they have opened a path. That is to say, the experience of moving through various plateaus as presented through the authors’ ‘riddims’ serves to highlight the relational character of one’s identity as a researcher, and as such serves to decenter this otherwise nonrelational identity and the politics that go along with it.

Kingsbury’s and Klak’s (2005, 252) presentation of the plateau as “a local space that regularly exhibits a distinctive combination of social forces” might, at first glance, seem unremarkable. Indeed, this definition seems quite similar to Doreen Massey’s (1994, 120) definition of place as:

particular moments in . . . social relations, nets of which have over time been constructed, laid down, interacted with one another, decayed and renewed. Some of these relations will be, as it were, contained within the place; others will stretch beyond it, tying any particular locality into wider relations and processes.

However, Kingsbury and Klak are after something other than a sense of place—the plateau is instead a useful means by which to think through these various forces not simply as acting upon those observed in the course of research, but also acting upon the researcher through the experience of these forces as they become articulated in a particular place. Rarely do we read of fieldwork as necessarily engaging with such things as desire, vulnerability and antagonism. Many of us who conduct fieldwork might be uncomfortable with these ideas as they imply an engagement with ‘the researched’ that certainly seems to prejudice the idea of objectivity. Further, perhaps because of the ever-present ‘fieldwork myths’ of communion with the Other that seem to shape our understanding of fieldwork, when we speak of fieldwork as marked by such things as vulnerability and antagonism, we seem to speak of failure. But the experience of these forces is only failure if we suppose that the researcher is somehow an objec-

tive outsider to that which s/he is studying, a supposition that is roundly rejected by the anthropological and geographic literatures (e.g., Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Moore 1996; Gupta and Ferguson 1997a,b; James, Hockey, and Dawson 1997). Therefore, the idea of the plateau, while building upon existing critiques of fieldwork epistemologies, moves into new territory, searching for spaces of engagement that engender the multiple identities already recognized in the critical fieldwork literature, and only loosely addressed in research based upon qualitative fieldwork (e.g., Escobar 2001).

But what is being decentered through the experience of a plateau? Here Kingsbury and Klak approach an understanding of the ‘researcher identity’ through the idea of whiteness, but I am concerned that this concept might muddy their central point. By focusing on whiteness, it seems to me that the authors run the risk of obscuring the most important idea they wish to draw from recent treatments of this concept—that there are situations in which particular identities are shaped non-relationally, and these situations breed particular politics and power relations that should be decentered and, wherever possible, addressed. This is not only true of white identity, but in the context of a discussion of fieldwork epistemologies it is true of ‘the researcher.’ I fear this point may be lost because the (white) authors are working in a ‘non-white place,’ where whiteness matters quite literally. However, this observation holds even in contexts where there is no clear white/non-white divide. The critical literatures on ethnography are concerned with how we represent the Other, but rarely do we concern

ourselves with how we are shaped by the Other. Thus, when we go to the field, we define Others in relation to ourselves while maintaining an illusion of self-fixity. This moment of blindness seems to me to be a hangover from objectivist research epistemologies, for in an objective model, shaping of the researcher and research by the other should not happen, but of course it does, as anyone who has conducted fieldwork in the Global South can attest.

In the discussion of whiteness I also think Kingsbury and Klak left the importance of the plateau too far behind in the text. The plateau challenges the idea of a non-relational identity by emphasizing the importance of particular local spaces, marked by particular and persistent social forces, in situating the researcher. The plurality of plateaus through which any researcher must pass to conduct his/her work affects the ability of that researcher to continually see himself/herself as part of a category that is not relationally constituted. In short, our experience of the plateaus described at the outset of this article, and then illustrated through the ‘riddims’ presented later, is a most powerful tool for decentering the researcher because it is an inescapable part of the experience of fieldwork. It is not that I think the authors do not understand this point—indeed, I take it as one of their central points—but that this point gets lost because the connection is not clearly made. As a result, a less-than-careful read of the conceptual framework might lead one to think that this article simply presented a series of fieldwork ‘stories’ in the form of ‘riddims.’ Instead, I think the authors have presented a rather remarkable illustration of the presence of these plateaus, and

their effect on the researcher and indeed the research.

RIDDIM ME THIS,
RIDDIM ME THAT . . .

What are we to make of this critique, and the tools that Kingsbury and Klak have employed to make it? I am struck by the implications for the idea of rigor in social research posed by the idea of the plateau. The unavoidable experience of the plateau in fieldwork means that we must think through qualitative methods to social research in a manner unlike the methods we apply to the study of biophysical processes. This is not to suggest that a quantitative approach to the study of changing coastal ecology in Jamaica is somehow less important, useful or interesting than a psychoanalytic approach to understanding the attraction of all-inclusive Jamaican resorts to tourists, nor is it to suggest that the former study will necessarily be more rigorous than the latter. Instead, this critique reinforces the fact that rigor in qualitative fieldwork on human subjects is a different animal than what we see in other areas of inquiry. Because both researcher and researched are positionalities that shift as they pass through various plateaus, all research becomes somewhat situational. We need to ask ourselves how we think about this situationality in terms of our own research, and in terms of training students to conduct such research. As it stands now, many researchers engaged in qualitative research on human subjects find the rigidity implied by the idea of a research proposal almost silly, as the shifting sands of qualitative research described in Kingsbury's and Klak's riddims make a farce of

research conducted through a simple, pre-concieved suite of questions or methods, and in their complexity preclude the inclusion of all possible situations and questions within the confines of a normal funding proposal. Perhaps it is time we shifted from teaching students to develop a fixed set of questions to address a given research question (and relying on their resilience in the field once that set of questions breaks down) to a mode where we train them to deal with multiple plateaus and use thesis and dissertation proposals to test their capacity to move between them productively. Further, we might evaluate funding proposals on the ability of the researcher to make clear their awareness of the different plateaus they might encounter, and their thoughts on how to deal with those plateaus in their research, instead of seeking a specific set of questions that could address the research question at hand. To make such a shift possible, though, we must convince the discipline that it is only in embracing the slippage, desire, vulnerability and antagonism inherent in this sort of fieldwork that we can conduct it rigorously.

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