Open to Disruption
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Published by Vanderbilt University Press

Nelson, Margaret K., et al.
Open to Disruption: Time and Craft in the Practice of Slow Sociology.
Vanderbilt University Press, 2014.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/34408.

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Breaching Boundaries and Dowsing for Stories on the Great Plains

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As I drove out to the Spirit Lake Dakota Indian Reservation for the first time, I was filled with trepidation. I had never been on an Indian reservation before, and I was searching for the spot where my Norwegian grandmother had settled in North America—a place she told me her mother had stolen from Native people. Who could possibly welcome my intrusion?

I was struck by the beauty of the prairies and the astonishing bird life coursing down the North American flyway. But nothing was familiar, and I knew no one. A gravel road headed to the Sheyenne River marked a border of my great-grandmother’s homestead: as I drove on it, after talking to local history keepers, I realized she had not been the only Norwegian living there. Nor was she the only woman landowner. The curious juxtaposition of Scandinavian homesteaders with Dakota Indians intrigued me and provoked me to ask: How did it happen? With what consequences?

Having just gotten tenure, I could ask these questions and contemplate a research project outside of my geographic and temporal areas of expertise, one that might take a while.

Could I, with integrity and equivalence, interrogate relationships between Scandinavians and the Dakota people they dispossessed? My feminist hesitation was grounded in a critique of ethnocentrism and academic voyeurism. A long history of antagonism between anthropologists...
and Native Americans has created a climate of mistrust, misunderstanding, and a well-grounded fear of appropriation. Not just social scientists, but photographers, tourists, and others have set out to observe—and even steal—secret rituals and objects, and in the process treat Indian people disrespectfully. They have sought in Native American culture a way to make themselves whole by absconding with something—a point of view, a prayer, an affirmation—absent in their own lives. What right did I have to intrude on cultures so distant from my own?

By breaching disciplinary and social boundaries, I commenced to study an uneasy coexistence between two peoples who were complete strangers to each other. In the wake of the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862 and U.S. military and legislative action to dispossess Native people, Congress created the conditions for White homesteaders to take land on Indian reservations. How did Dakotas, who had been promised territorial integrity, respond to the incursion of the flood of homesteaders, most of whom were Scandinavian? What are the communal consequences when one group’s acquisition of land is predicated on the dispossession of the other?

I now understand that stretch of sixteen years since I first visited the reservation as an evolution—a necessary condition for the viability of my project, *Encounter on the Great Plains* (Hansen 2013). Through doggedly returning year after year, piecing together small discoveries and new understandings, I was able to make sense of the reservation’s curious configuration and social relationships, and to overcome my initial reluctance. Importantly, through grappling with insights and insults, over time I embraced ownership of the project with greater confidence.

It was not the historical sources that changed over this decade (although they were hard to find), but rather my relation to the living, and hence to the dead. As I kept returning to Spirit Lake, people on the reservation became less reserved and more open; they seemed to understand that I was not casually passing through simply to glean surface understandings. In various ways they let me know that they not only felt fine about my project, they wanted to be interviewed; they wanted to show me their treasures; they wanted me to write my book. My persistent search for sources yielded many dead ends, but also long-ignored documents. My extended time in the field coincided with theoretical developments that enabled me to frame the project more squarely as a case of settler colonialism in an “entangled history.”
A Stranger in the Field

Norwegian homesteaders who began claiming land in 1904 were not the only strangers to the reservation. A few years after I launched a full-scale research project on the Spirit Lake Nation, I was interviewing a respected elder, Agnes Greene, when her son arrived to have coffee and inspect me.

He greeted me: “Good morning.”

“Hi, I’m Karen Hansen, visiting from Boston.”

“Oh, a stranger, in other words.”

Yes. I’m a stranger. I am foreign to these people—Dakota and Norwegian alike. I’m a female professor teaching at an elite eastern university. I talk fast. I travel thousands of miles with a university grant to pay for my rental car, my hotel, and the fancy equipment I use to record interviews. I’ve never been a farmer or a farmer’s daughter. I don’t speak Norwegian or Dakota. I had never been to a powwow or to a 17th of May celebration of the Norwegian Constitution. Before 1995, I had never been to North Dakota. As a result of my stranger status, some people simply denied me access. I have had people hang up the phone on me, not answer my letters or e-mail, and even threaten to beat me up.

A confluence of additional challenges made this research difficult, and perhaps even foolhardy. With institutional support for travel, I began making local contacts; reading multiple literatures; searching for letters, diaries, and other historical records; and learning all I could about Dakota history, Norwegian farming practices, and federal immigration and Indian policy. I was studying a remote past (1890–1930) that was not well documented, in a distant site—a three-hour drive from Fargo—while I lived in Boston. I quickly discovered that poor people in the Midwest were much less likely to keep diaries than their counterparts in New England, and that archives in Norway and the United States collected letters primarily from the nineteenth century, not the twentieth.

I began working with historical plat maps, which invitingly documented the jagged mosaic of racial-ethnic coexistence on the reservation. I assembled a large database of the names, ethnicity, and gender of property owners in 1910 and 1929 that allowed me to analyze patterns of landownership over time. But it could not give voice to the texture of daily life or the human face of coexistence after landtaking and dispossession. I read historical newspapers in microfilm, but they were notoriously unreliable,
biased in favor of the Yankee landowning class, and unapologetically prejudiced against Native Americans.

I would go to North Dakota for one week at a time—the most I felt I could be away from teaching responsibilities and my home with two small children. While each visit generated more answers, the data would seem tangential, oblique, and frustratingly vague. I kept struggling because the evidence simply did not answer my set of questions. My colleagues and members of my writing group urged me on, believing in me and recognizing the power of this unusual scholarly quest. As the years stretched into more than a decade, as my children grew up, and as I published a completely unrelated monograph and two anthologies, my thirteen trips to North Dakota generated a pile of interviews, observational data, insights, and sustained relationships with people living on the reservation.

Social science values doing fieldwork from an outsider status; it is a basic premise of ethnography in sociology and anthropology. But people in the field do not embrace strangers, nor do they immediately trust them. From the North Dakotan perspective, the only thing that gave me traction—any kind of legitimacy—was my grandmother. My Norwegian great-grandmother had homesteaded there. My grandmother grew up on the reservation. My quest to understand my grandmother's life stemmed from genuine curiosity and a desire to grapple with the moral dilemmas precipitated by her journey. In the field, it was not my academic credentials but my genealogical connection that prompted people to open their doors to me.

The absence of first-person primary sources led me to seek contemporary accounts of the past: memoirs, family histories, and oral narratives. Thankfully, in the 1960s and 1970s oral histories had been collected by the State Historical Society of North Dakota and the American Indian Research Project in South Dakota. Because those archived interviews only rarely spoke to my questions about land and coexistence, I decided to conduct interviews of my own.

When I first approached local scholars about the prickly coresidence of Dakotas and Scandinavians, they were a bit surprised, but encouraging. One professor at the University of North Dakota told me that only an outsider could ask these contentious questions and dare attempt to answer them. Diving into the middle of ancient hostilities fraught with racism and resentment necessitated breaking a taboo. History is alive, and of course, controversial.
Iterative Fieldwork

For historical sociologists, fieldwork typically means going to the archives. But a savvy anthropologist advised me early on that to understand the past, I had to comprehend the present. He recommended spending time hanging out on the reservation. He was right. Those years intermittently in the field were not a series of delays or explorations of tangents, but a time for establishing relationships with people, understanding their unique history, finding new sources, and deepening my ability to interpret the evidence. Although my focus centers on the pre-Depression era at the Spirit Lake Dakota Reservation, the descendants of those early landowners still live there.

I had been skeptical of using government records, though abundant, because they had been kept with the intention of monitoring, subduing, and ruling over Indian people. Fortunately, they allowed for multiple readings. For example, letters and annual reports from Indian superintendents to the Indian Office in Washington, DC, revealed the officials’ irritation at the persistent requests by Dakotas. I found this significant not because the superintendents were annoyed, but because it showed that Dakotas advocated for themselves and relentlessly insisted that the government abide by treaty obligations as well as verbal promises. When I rummaged through the Great Plains Regional repository of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), I discovered a batch of daily reports from 1913 to 1915 by the field matron, Carrie Pohl, hired to promote housekeeping and sanitation on the reservation. Her handwritten notes were still held together in clusters by slightly rusted straight pins that had never been removed. While Pohl’s accounts of her visits to Dakota households reflected her harsh racial judgments, they revealed more. It was possible to read Dakota women's resistance to Pohl’s admonishments and observe over time how they softened in response to her increasing empathy and efforts to provide resources like building materials and medicine.

After doing research at NARA, I was once again reminded of the potential chasm between historical evidence and current assumptions. My interest in women as landowners is but one example of how a contemporary vision of the past can be distorted through a gendered and racialized lens. I entered the “blue building,” as it is called, on the reservation, where tribal offices are housed and local allotment records are kept. I asked the clerk in the land office to show me the files of several Dakota women who had purchased land. She told me Indian women did not buy land. Excited about my recent
discovery, I gleefully reported that I had just been looking at Indian Office records of bids to buy reservation land in the 1910s and 1920s, and Dakota women’s names appeared among the bidders. I thought I had brought a gift of good news, but thereafter silence greeted my correspondence and queries. My requests for more information and copies of files went unanswered.

I set out to be reflexive, or “rigorously self-aware,” as Judy Stacey (1991) puts it. I tried to understand the ways that my “partial perspective” (Haraway 1988) has been shaped by my disciplinary training; my community of orientation; who was willing to be interviewed—what they remembered and what they forgot; my ancestry—Norwegian and Danish—and its cultural mythology; and my kinship ties to Norwegian homesteaders on the reservation. I grew up with stories about my grandmother’s ruggedness—how else could she have homesteaded three different times over the course of her life?—and admiration for what we called her pioneer spirit. But I possessed little knowledge about the life and family she left in Norway or awareness that her landtaking activities had concrete consequences for Native peoples. However well intentioned, I did not always know what I did not know.

Yet coming from outside the discipline facilitated an inductive approach. I was familiar with the hazards of generalizing from the literature, just as anyone who goes into the field and does not want to be biased by preconceptions. I knew that what held true for Dakotas or Scandinavians nationally might not apply to the local situation. My extended time in the field allowed me to learn the particularities of how Spirit Lake Dakotas interpret and appropriate national symbols and holidays. For example, coming from Massachusetts, the birthplace of alliances between Wampanoag people and English colonialists, I was sensitive to the politics of history and commemoration. Here Thanksgiving is a day of resistance to protest U.S. mythmaking and dispossession of Native peoples, and I assumed the same would be true at Spirit Lake. So when I asked Louis Garcia, the honorary tribal historian, how Thanksgiving was being observed, I was in for another shock. He told me that the tribe worked hard to put a turkey on every table, and people were counting their blessings.
Near the end of my data collection and deep into final revisions on my manuscript, I thought I had finally nailed my analysis of the differences in political activism engaged by Dakotas and Norwegian immigrants. I had mapped the legal dimensions of their contrasting citizenship status, read the national literature on indigenous activism, and interwoven evidence of farmers’ socialist electoral activism into my narrative. Cleverly, I argued that Dakotas had channeled their political activism through the federal courts and Norwegians through the ballot box. My writing group loved the neat parallelism and thought the chapter was brilliant.

Then I read a nonacademic book that led me to an article on November 20, 1892, in the Grand Forks Herald; it reported that hundreds of Dakotas showed up to vote at the Fort Totten precinct on the reservation (Diedrich 2009, 68). Startled, I had to rethink my analysis. Across the country, suffrage was not a major issue for indigenous activists. Unbeknownst to me and invisible in the federal records, Spirit Lake Dakotas had interpreted the allotment of land as granting them full citizenship. With their allotment certified just one week before the election of 1892, they immediately acted on their interpretation of that entitlement. My tidy analysis fell apart. It was only my persistent search for sources, even when I thought I was “done,” that yielded this more complex narrative.

My repeated visits to the field have been riddled with ambivalence. Sometimes flooded with a sense of affirmation after a particularly incisive interview, I would renew my commitment to the project. At other times, overwhelmed by simmering conflict between the two groups and frustrated by insufficient evidence, I would vow to abandon it. Nonetheless, something kept drawing me back: the kindesses of a few, the intrigue of the puzzle, my unreasonable determination. Stories give shape to history, to the incomprehensible chaos of life—to my life as well as the lives of those I interview. Unquestionably this research project offered a means for me to come to terms with the controversial processes that drew my grandmother and her mother to North America and landed them in the middle of a colonial project.

Even with the roadblocks and my occasional dispiritedness, I now think that returning year after year cumulatively had a positive impact. My iterative time in the field made me more sensitive to the Sisseton-Wahpeton Dakotas’ complicated relationship to the U.S.–Dakota War of 1862. I came to understand the particularities of place and that the lives of marginal Scandinavian farmers did not represent a “promise fulfilled” as some scholars
have suggested (Lovoll 1998). Through returning, I conveyed to people that my intentions were enduring and I was committed, not just episodically intrigued. Over time, local residents became familiar with me; some even developed a cautious trust.

Reciprocity and the Oral Tradition

Oral history interviews that reach back to a narrator’s childhood, or a time before she or he was born, dovetail with an oral tradition common to both Dakotas and Scandinavians. As I learned, both rely on reciprocity.

The oral tradition requires at least two people—a storyteller and a listener. Listening is fundamental to historical memory. Without asking, a person cannot learn and cannot hope to know. Some members of the tribe profoundly understood the principle. Ambrose Littleghost, pipe carrier for the tribe, told me of how he would stay up late and listen to stories being told by his grandparents when Canadian relatives came to visit. Perfectly illustrating this process, Dakota elder Grace Lambert told me, “I was a great listener when I was a kid.” She relayed an example: “My grandma used to tell me stories. One time she was telling me that they crossed the [river]. I said, ‘How did they take the kids across?’ I said, ‘Did they swim with them on their back? Or what?’ She said, ‘No no, that’s not the way’” (Lambert 1999). And then her grandmother proceeded to explain that swimming horses would pull a floating travois with children across the Missouri River. Grace Lambert actively listened. She would hear a story and then clarify aspects of it, asking questions, experimenting with theories about how things worked, and trying on the cultural logic for herself.

Old medicine men would not pass on knowledge to just any younger person, according to Louis Garcia, chronicler of Spirit Lake Dakotas. The person had to be worthy. The person had to want to know and had to offer a gift in exchange for learning. In the 1960s, when Garcia first came to the reservation, he witnessed a history in the process of being lost. While young people had a responsibility to listen, they had stopped being interested. So he made it his job to learn, to listen, to record. When I came to the reservation, I entered with a desire to know the past and a genuine interest in and respect for the people who lived there. But there was no question that potential narrators had to be convinced of that—I had to prove myself worthy.

Louis Garcia opened doors for me when I first arrived. He and his wife, Hilda Garcia, a Dakota tribal member, introduced me to Marcy Young
McKay, the director of the Senior Meals program on the reservation. After vetting my proposal with the tribal council, she connected me with some of the tribe’s most respected elders. She invited me to the Elder’s Day luncheon that honored veterans and aged members of the tribe, and generally facilitated my entry into the field. I understood the power of her sanction, and that of those who agreed to be interviewed.

One morning in 1999, my tape recorder jammed just as I was testing it before going to interview Grace Lambert, one of the most astute and highly respected history keepers in the tribe. In an utter panic, unwilling to disappoint a ninety-year-old woman and forego an opportunity to talk to her, my mind raced. Where could I possibly find a replacement recording device in time for my appointment? The casino-hotel where I was staying did not have one. The clerk suggested that perhaps the radio station KABU, “The Heart Beat of the Spirit Lake Nation,” might have one. I raced upstairs. Needless to say, they did. More amazing was that they lent their expensive equipment to a stranger, with nothing but my business card as collateral. After two stunningly illuminating sessions with Mrs. Lambert, I realized the power of her consent to be interviewed. Surely the generosity shown by the people at KABU radiated from the halo of her agreement. It was not until fourteen years later, however—as I was putting the finishing touches on the manuscript—that it completely hit me: Grace Lambert had decided, for whatever set of reasons, that I was worthy.

Anthropologists have long understood the gift exchange as fundamental to doing fieldwork. Social scientists debate what researchers should give subjects in return for their participation. Some think that listening is sufficient because the act validates the life of the storyteller. They worry that giving money can be a thinly veiled form of expropriation—dollars for answers. What if stories are tailored to monetary value, corrupted by the process of profits to be made from the opportunity?

In fact, paying respondents was the price of doing business on the reservation, as Louis Garcia had advised. I arrived bearing tokens of appreciation—calculators, flashlights, penknives, and small amounts of cash—to give narrators. But I was disconcerted by how clearly payment was expected in an exchange with Marcy Young McKay’s brother, Phillip John Young. One day as I was driving with him to a quiet coffee shop where we could conduct a formal oral history, he told me how delighted his friend had been to learn that Phillip John was being interviewed. Curious, I asked why. He rubbed his fingers together, intimating a cash payment. Startled, I took a deep breath.
While I had expected to pay him, I had not realized that nabbing a visiting social scientist was so commonly seen as a chance to make a quick twenty bucks. For six years, Phillip John had been a willing informant; he had escorted me to the site of my great-grandmother’s homestead, maintained jovial relations, and introduced me to the pipe carrier of the tribe. As one of a minority of tribal members who had earned his BA, and a strong supporter of education, he found me an interesting curiosity and expressed admiration for my having earned a PhD.

Never before had he mentioned money. I often hung out with Phillip John during my visits—we would eat lunch in Devils Lake or at the casino, and I would give him small gifts, like the petrified buffalo tooth given to me by my uncle. I thought of myself as a professional, dowsing for stories. But this was the first time I would formally interview him, and it radically altered our dynamic. I had to wonder, was I the one being taken for a ride? Phillip John was the informant who had volunteered himself. As ethnographers caution, it is important to understand why some people want to talk to you and what makes them marginal in their own right.

Then Phillip John assured me that he did not want the money for himself—that he wanted me to give it to a scholarship fund established in honor of his sister Marcy, at the Cankdeska Cikana Community College on the reservation. At that point, I relaxed. That was something I believed in and would have done in any event. But formally interviewing him laid bare the terms of exchange and turned the table in ways I had not expected.

Some scholars argue that the researcher should give back more than money. They insist that one should help mobilize resources for political ends, teach skills, or provide services. And some feminists go so far as to argue that you should give something of yourself—friendship or empathy—to equalize the relationship, to diminish the potentially lopsided gift giving. I sought that middle ground of respect and appreciation, but the sticky tentacles of encompassing fieldwork do not observe clear boundaries. My ability to give back has been hobbled by my stranger status and my acute awareness of the fine line I walk as someone interested in Native American history as well as Scandinavian immigrant sagas.

**Double Epiphany**

After being in the field several years, I had my first epiphany as my responsibility in the reciprocal exchange became clearer to me. I had been
worried—about appropriation, hostility, getting things wrong. I realized that my calling was to publish the narratives I was being told—these were my stories to tell.

As Agnes Greene had pointed out during our exchange, the interview was mine, not hers. Ending the interview, I had asked her a final question: “Is there anything [else] I should know?” She retorted, “Ask me. You’re the one who wants to know. Ask me. If I know it I’ll tell you” (Greene 1999).

I bristled at her sharp reply. In the moment, I didn’t know how to respond. But her clarity gave me a lot to ponder. I was not “giving her voice,” as some recovery projects claim to do. Ultimately, the interviews were mine. I directed the conversation; I asked the questions; I was motivated to publish. My challenge was to ask the right questions. But I should not make the mistake of thinking the story I was telling was hers. In the retelling, the accounts became my stories, reframed through my prism of interest.

Several years later, when Phillip John Young anointed me an “apostle,” I again became deeply uncomfortable. He called on me, as he put it, to “teach the other people what they don’t know” (Young 2005). The invaluable gifts he gave me—not just the star quilt, or the intricate feather powwow fan, but the stories—obliged me not to give up. But I did not want to preach; nor did I want to deliver his version of history, packaged and unquestioned. As Agnes Greene had seen clearly, the narrative was mine, constructed around my intellectual interests and my family history. Phillip John was reminding me that I had an obligation to convey what I had discovered.

The second epiphany came from my community of reference—academics. As I explored ways to interpret my observations, I quickly ran up against the limitations of theoretical models situated in colonialism. Although Europeans did colonize North America, the twentieth-century environment I was studying simply did not fit the assumptions or the time period. Racialization (à la Omi and Winant 1994) explained one aspect of the process of dispossession, but much more was simultaneously unfolding. I was interested in everyday practices: interactions, mutuality, collaboration, and coalition building, as well as prejudice, rejection, community divisions, and how people enacted racial hierarchies.

Settler colonialism, a developing perspective applied via illuminating international comparisons, opened a new theoretical door. Settler colonists relocated to find a place to make home, not to extend the power of the nation–state. They, like Scandinavians at Spirit Lake, intended to make farms and families and live on the land (Hoxie 2008; Wolfe 2006). As good
theory is supposed to do, this emergent frame clarified the intersections of 
economic structural processes and micro everyday practices.

One particular event crystallized the importance of what I had set out 
to do. I discovered that my research sat on the leading edge of a new field 
that Gunlög Fur (2014), a Swedish scholar of seventeenth- and eighteenth- 
century North America, calls “entangled histories.” In no other moment 
in my academic life was I more aware of the power of my interdisciplinary 
approach. Fur had organized a workshop titled “Immigrants and Indians” 
that brought together scholars from multiple disciplines. Her vision theo- 
retically and empirically brought immigration history and Indian studies 
scholarship into sustained dialogue. My time in the field chronicling and 
interpreting interactions on the land coincided with this new theoretical 
development. In that workshop, I suddenly saw that my struggle to bal- 
ance perspectives and multiple literatures was precisely what the group was 
urging. While not the first to study encounters of this kind (see, for example, 
Calloway 1991; Fur 2009; Jensen 2006), I nonetheless came to understand 
more fully how my case illuminates interactions between White settlers and 
Native people more broadly. Mine was not an obscure, irrelevant, or idio-
syncratic case, as I had originally feared.

On Interruptions and Long Gestations

My colleagues and students complain that historical sociology takes too 
long. Digging in dusty archives and searching for evidence that may not 
exist (in contrast to asking live people specific questions) can be frustrat- 
ing, and dangerously delay one’s professional progress. Like all ethnographic 
projects, slow sociology requires time for understanding a social context, 
observing deeply, and letting data percolate. It demands piecing together 
awkwardly shaped, incomplete puzzles—in my case, historical maps, photo- 
graphs, census data, and oral histories. It necessitates creatively improvising, 
using multiple methods, triangulating sources, and listening for silences. I 
have discovered through revisiting, rereading, rethinking, and reviewing that 
being open to disruption makes for good historical sociology.

I spent years searching for sources that simply do not exist. The evi-
dence I do have is lopsided, weighted toward the more thoroughly docu- 
mented Scandinavians. Persistence yielded more data, but never parity. 
Nonetheless, taking time to hunt, ponder, engage, and discover has made 
it possible to see the global in the particular, to link micro interactions to
macro processes, and to observe social structure in a handwritten name on a plat map. Sensitive that the tools of social science act in tension with postcolonial taboos, I was able over time to meld them respectfully and effectively. Embracing the fullness of my family history simultaneously with my scholarly position enables me to indeed be a messenger. I am still an outsider, although I am no longer a stranger in the same way.

The new field of entangled histories invites a breach of disciplinary and social boundaries. Entanglements are necessarily interactional, multifaceted, and just plain complicated. Listening involves more than hearing words. It requires remembering. It obliges one to respect and honor secrets, tragedies, triumphs, humor, and miracles, and to recognize the humanity of everyone’s struggles.

Note

My heartfelt thanks to Anita Ilta Garey for her inspiration and her commitment to the foundational idea of this book. Conversation and debate with her contributed to my insights at each stage of this long journey through the encounter. Rosanna Hertz and Peggy Nelson are remarkable not just as creative editors but as energetic people who make projects happen and friendship fun as well as meaningful. Debra Osnowitz and Mignon Duffy continue to see diamonds in the rough, and for that and their friendship I am forever grateful.

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