

## **THE OUTSIDER WITHIN – COMMENCING FIELDWORK IN THE KUALA LUMPUR/PETALING JAYA CORRIDOR, MALAYSIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This article explores an ongoing research engagement with a squatter settlement community in a period of large-scale urban modernization strategies in contemporary Malaysia. This study is part of a larger local/global community sustainability research project attempting to better understand how local (and particularly poor) communities respond to and construct viable livelihoods in contemporary globalization. By positioning oneself in such places, one is also inevitably drawn into the compromised conditions of the cultural and political processes of these experiences, yet is also distanced by the fact that one does not have these everyday experiences, simply by not living in these places. This article moots the idea of an "in-betweenness of research" as one way to reflect on the post-colonial problematic of subjectivities in fieldwork. It questions the situatedness of power and knowledge, the importance of place for both researcher/subject and informant/object; and suggests that to align oneself within such an "in-betweenness" geopolitical and "neither/nor or both/and" place, while carrying out research on issues related to that very struggle is to also occupy a space of deeper scholarly understanding. While the resulting contradictions make this sort of engaged research more difficult to carry out, they also generate insight that could provide some basis for analytical understanding and theoretical innovation in a wider temporal and spatial context.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Over recent years, the social sciences, including ethnography, have witnessed what Gubrium and Holstein (1995) remark as a "radical reorientation to the study of lives." This new ethnography responds to its subjects in the field as active interpreters who construct their realities through conversations, interaction, stories and the narrative. In such a framework, social phenomena are better understood as a mode of human practice undertaken by social agents or actors located within specific cultural and relational settings. Contemporary debates also foreground the ethnographer as an active participant in his or her research. Any ethnographer, whether native or other, (re)enters the field ensconced in

degrees of "outsiderness" created by temporal, geographic, demographic, intellectual, or emotional distance from the field. Within such necessarily unstable fields, researchers are inevitably negotiating their own mobility between and within their ethnographic spaces. Such negotiations have significant impact on methodological practices, particularly those which involve face-to-face interactions with communities within the changing nature of their locality. Negotiations are also reflexively linked to the interplay of discursive actions and the circumstances of face-to-face interactions, which in contemporary life are even more diverse and complex. Increasingly, the field of ethnography acknowledges the significant importance of careful preparation of not just background materials of the subject of study, but also the reflexivity capacity for researchers in making "sociological sense of the self" (Letherby 2003) in the research process and in thinking about research relationships as part of the "social relationships of sociological production" (Morga 1981). For Amit (2000) the researcher is central to the very construction of the field:

The notion of immersion implies that the 'field' which ethnographers enter exists as an independently bounded set of relationships and activities which is autonomous of the fieldwork through which it is discovered. Yet in a world of infinite interconnections and overlapping contexts, the ethnographic field cannot simply exist, awaiting discovery. It has to be laboriously constructed, prised apart from all other possibilities for contextualization to which its constituent relationships and connections could also be referred. (Amit 2000: 6)

Methodological considerations that arise through fieldwork are also actively constructing the very same field in which it works. In addition to challenges faced by qualitative researchers in general and field researchers in particular, researching communities, particularly group inhabiting short term or squatter settlements, brings with it unique challenges, dilemmas and opportunities, particularly when elaborated against the fixity of community that continues to underpin ethnographic research (Muir 2004). In places such as the site in Old Klang Road, as squatter settlement community groups were being resettled into several new low-cost housing commission style flats, it became apparent that the community was not being resettled in the same village groupings. In interviews, it was not possible to gauge how such allocations were made. At times, the age and profession of the main applicant appeared to direct the allocation; at times this was not the case. Allocations were not consistent and several of those interviewed pointed to community members (leaders) who had assisted them with getting their

applications into the local municipality organizations that were responsible for the processing of such allocations.<sup>1</sup> In such settings, where a process of relocation is happening, it is not possible to maintain a sampling constant, requisite of quantitative or a qualitative fixed track of place and locality. In this study, research was entrenched in current, ongoing constructions within the active social de- and reconstruction of the field (Amit 2000) and a study of the communities shifting lifeworlds.<sup>2</sup> The places these communities occupied also became the context within which their responses to contemporary life were being constructed. Traditional forms of participant observation begin from assumptions of communities are set in apolitical, bounded spaces. Rather than a focus on place, the focus is the community itself, the places they occupy or were allocated. Clearly, such a conceptualization of the fieldwork process rests uncomfortably within the framework of the new ethnography. The turn to biographical methods from the 1990s (Gunaratnam 2003) is which lives are seen as a vantage point onto broader social processes and social understanding has also brought with it a methodological environment within which researchers can position themselves in relation to their research, consider the influences and impact of research encounters and then on the consequent return and reiteration from the field. The realities of social settings and identities themselves are seen as being conceptualized as situational, narratively assembled through interpretative practices (Holstein & Gubrium 1995: 46). Then from this perspective, if all talk is situated and all meaning is contingent, there can be no "good" that is accurate, truthful authentic or bad data. What then does this mean in relation to the practical accomplishments of the research processes itself?

This whole process of building relationships with others becomes in fact a process of face-to-face dealings with "the cultural other" and about acquiring deeper understanding and new perspectives through listening and

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<sup>1</sup> The introduction of a "zero squatter settlements by the end of 2005" was possibly also prompted by a week of community clashes in the area in early 2001. Several academics and planners have suggested that these clashes were prompted much more by frustration and anger over poor living conditions and marginalization than over race issues.

<sup>2</sup> Sizoo (1997) uses the term "life-worlds" to describe what people (in her study, Sizoo focused on fifteen women) personally consider and appreciate as basic dimensions of their own lives, their sources of strength and the things that bring meaning to their lives. Rather than objectively addressing the socio-economic position of people in various cultural contexts, the term "life-worlds" encapsulates a more subjective perception of lives, the environment and the forces which drive people in shaping their lives the way they do. For more details of this study, refer Sizoo (1997).

talking. It may in fact be a human condition, to understand the everyday-life worlds (ibid.) that contribute to what Tomlinson (1999: 17–18) has called "people's ongoing life-narratives, the stories by which we, chronically interpret our existence in what Heidegger calls the 'thrownness' of the human condition." To come into conversation with a diverse group of people with varying cultural and epistemological backgrounds and locations can be a disturbing thing, exposing, altering but also aesthetic, imaginative and transforming (Mulligan & Nadarajah 2007). "Method" is not taken in terms of replicable procedures but as processes through which an exchange (conversation, engagement) is created and has bearing and potency. This process is a product of social interactions and interrelations, disrupted and disrupting upon itself, enabling an organic response to a contemporary globalizing world. The way research within and through communities is being discussed in this article is in itself the product of the intricacies and complexities of the trajectories between what is defined as a contemporary understanding of community and the intricate and profound connection of space and place with complex social interrelationships and issues.

One of the attempts to engage more deeply with communities has come more traditionally from action research and/or participatory research methods. But increasingly in such complex contemporary situations of community mapping and study, such methods are limiting. Initially conceived by Kurt Lewin (1951), action research proposed a methodology that enabled researchers to be directly involved with locally relevant and useful, applied research. One of the problems with this method is that the distinction between "outsider" and "insider" becomes ambiguous, and the skill and epistemological distinction between two distinctly different cultural knowledges usually collapses as a punitive effort of collaborative research. Given an insufficient epistemological consideration of the formulation of the research methods itself between the two distinct groups and its power dynamics; action research more often than not complicates the outsider-insider relationship, over simplifying it, distancing rather than deepening the quality of research and community relationships. Mulligan and Nadarajah suggest a concept of "community-engaged research" that tries to restore the distinctive roles of insiders and outsiders, providing perhaps a more open and fruitful dialogue between the research partners (Mulligan & Nadarajah 2007a, 2007b). Of course, such dialogues need to take place over a period of time, and allow for considerable negotiations and skills to move across cultural and epistemological boundaries. This is a challenge in itself, as increasingly research; particularly with a contemporary neo-liberal global climate is governed by short-term funding cycles, dominated by applied science and technology research preferences

over social science. Mulligan and Nadarajah (2007a) consider how a process of engagement over a period of time between outside researchers and community members can grow into a creative space for research engagement.

## THE RESEARCH PROJECT

In June 2005, I began conversations with groups of communities situated in and around what were until recently the squatter settlements along Old Klang Road, in Petaling Jaya, a rapidly developing satellite city in Selangor, Malaysia. By conversations, I do not mean statements that can be recorded, transcribed and used as documents. In fact, some of the most influential conversations were people's comments, in a group get-together, or in passing, about an event, a book, an idea or a person. Such conversations come and go, but always remain with you and introduce changes in the way you have formulated an argument or a hypothesis. Liker Mignolo who describes conversations as way in which he began his book entitled *Local histories/global designs*, similarly I found such conversations allowed me to pursue two parallel tasks – to begin an intellectual discussion with scholars in the field of Malaysian studies, particularly those located within Malaysia itself, and to tie my research agenda with community development objectives, particularly those of the NGOs and other organizations working in and around these area of study (Mignolo 2000). This fieldwork then became a journey of these conversations. There were around 12 villages in that area intermingled amongst a range of crisscrossing little streets and lanes. It was not always easy to know when the boundaries of one village finished and another began. Places of interaction and community gatherings were usually around little coffee shops and corners of lanes. It was a late afternoon when I first walked into one of the villages – Kampung Desa Hormat (what was once called Kampung Gandhi) with a social worker from a government community development organization and a volunteer from a local NGO. It was beginning to be overcast, the sound of thunder very distant. A little path winded its way from along the kerbside where we had parked the car, and we passed a couple of rubbish heaps and large piles of wood planks before coming into what seemed like the entrance to a group of wooden houses. I stood in the center, listening as the social worker and volunteer explained the work they were doing in this kampong. A couple of women strolled out of their homes, curious yet hesitant about a stranger in their midst. An older woman came up to the group, and looking up at me and asking one of the social workers who I was. She was wondering

whether I was someone from Special Branch or the police. I was quickly introduced as a colleague from an international college, keen to work together with these social workers and organizations in understanding community and how we may better develop ideas for community development programs.

There was some laughter. Why would someone from overseas be interested in our lives? What can we show her about our lives? Are you sure she is not from Immigration? How can we speak to her? We don't speak English. The questions came flying in as more women joined the group, and were quickly followed by a group of men. I walked to the shade that one of the huts threw onto the ground and asked, in my faltering Bahasa Malaysia if I may sit on the benches that was just outside this hut. There was a flurry of movements as someone pulled the bench further out. I sat down and began to tell this group the story of where I was from, and my deep interest as a scholar of community to understand how people in many places in the world led their day-to-day lives in the midst of great changes both locally and globally. It took many moments to explain how such understanding might possibly assist community development programs, development and planning strategies and social policies. Robertson (1984) argues that major 20th century structures and processes of national development planning have become routines as part of the apparatus of the modern state. His work across several countries has shown how plans have been made outside of lived realities and how when merged with everyday lived realities have become stillborn. Yet in many places, communities who appeared to be caught in the midst of development and globalization paradoxes, had established extraordinary ways in which their community life and neighborhoods remains resilient and peaceful in contrast to many other unsettled and failing communities. I was to repeat such conversations several times – over and over again – in the next two years as I visited these kampongs to interview community members, local representatives and associated community development groups. Such conversations would vary and always took much longer than one expected, but as time went by, they became valuable interactions for reviews of methodology, reciprocity, building trust, sense of place and cultural context. As a form of camaraderie grew with these groups and mapped their experiences through the demolition of their squatter homes, and then their resettlement into the low-cost housing flats, such conversations became even more vital in understanding how broader social issues and concepts such as mobility, neighborhoods, identity and development were translating in the contemporary world, and in this case study of a community settlement in modernizing Malaysia. Fieldwork, as I was to learn through hard work, does



not usually have some concrete shape. It is a long process and as Lye Tuck-Po (2005) has said in his own longitudinal study of the Batek community on the Kechau River in north central Pahang State, Malaysia:

Fieldwork is a long process of uncovering information, searching for patterns and connections and collecting, sometimes at dull, decelerated, monotonous speed [or in revealing spontaneous packed moments], bits and pieces of answers to the questions we ask. Shapes come only later, after fieldwork, when it's time to organise information, coherently, make insights, concrete, analyse, and write.

The Local-Global Community Sustainability research is an ambitious attempt by the Globalism Institute to come to grips with the complexities of contemporary community life under the fuzzy umbrella concept of "community" and the highly contested ideological and cultural dimensions of globalization just as much as its techno-economic aspects. The research is located at sites in Melbourne and regional Victoria, nationally around Australia and globally, with a particular emphasis on the Asia-Pacific region. Relationships in these sites vary according to the scale, depth and layers of networks established previously. Research has been undergoing over two to three years already, with the aim of maintaining at least initially a ten year relationship, first as an expression of an underlying ethic of commitment to a long-term relationship, and secondly to enable us to draw temporal as well as global comparisons. In each of the primary research sites, the researchers work towards the establishment of a Critical Reference Group that draws together locals who give relevant, independent advice on how to match research interests with local needs.

"Community", observed by Raymond Williams in his book *Keywords*, as either "the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships, or the warmly persuasive word to describe an alternative set of relationships." "What is most important, perhaps, is that unlike all other terms of social organization [state, nation, society, etc.] it seems never to be used unfavorably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term" (Williams, 1983: 76). Not surprisingly, community has become a pervasive term within much contemporary political, social and economic commentary analysis. Jim Walmsley began a recent review on the nature of community by saying that the word "community" is used widely and loosely, to the extent that it now has a "high level of use but a low level of meaning" (Walmsley, 2006: 5–12). However, he goes on to say that definitions of community range from relatively stable, place-based human populations that share "an awareness of common life and personal bonds" to

ideological expressions of "what should be rather than what is". For sociologists, the term "community" like anthropology, refers to a stable social. What are the base that legitimizes the existing social order? It may refer to communities of interest, or of practice, or communities of ethnic minorities, communities of solidarity, or communities of dissent (social movements), or as substitutes for locality, such as an urban neighborhood. In the study of the squatter settlement in Kuala Lumpur, about 40% described community as their neighborhood, whilst 50% responded that they did not know who their community was. Responses to the question on whether they felt they belonged to one main community revealed that more than 50% felt that they belonged to more than one community group, whilst 37% indicated that they did not know if they did belong to any community. In many ways, this project could be characterized as (Phipps 2005), "an attempt at something similar to the 'multi-site' ethnography of George Marcus, or the 'multi-local' fieldwork anthropology of Ulf Hannerz, the 'travelling theory' of James Clifford, or the global cultural studies of Arjun Appadurai and Carol A. Breckenridge's Public Culture journal project" (Appadurai 1996; Hannerz 2003; Marcus 1986, 1995).

The overall research methodology used for this study involves a careful integration of quantitative and qualitative methods, including both random and targeted questionnaires, short community profile conversations, lengthy *strategic conversations* with identified community members and leaders in the area, *photo narrative* techniques for exploring less conscious aspects of lived experience, and the collection of specific stories related to the background, history and lives of the people living in these villages. Containing 36 questions, the questionnaire used 10-point Likert scales, multiple-choice questions and open-ended questions to elicit more detailed information. The research also involved the collection of existing data relevant to the study (for example, extracted census data and other published surveys) and the ongoing construction of profiles relating to the history and development of the area from a squatter settlement to one of dense low-cost high rise flats. This local-global research collaboration in Malaysia is possible through the insight and research partnership with the Universiti Malaya (Faculty of Economics and Administration) and the various organizations in the area, including primarily the Yayasan Strategik Sosial (YSS), the Atmah Association of the Malaysian Hindu Sangam and the Persatuan Sri Ramakrishna Mission, and a couple of key government leaders interested in this area of research. It also assists in how research may better anchor development thinking and practice in the day-to-day realities and aspirations of local people, particularly those who may sometimes find



it difficult to have a voice given their own cultural, political, historical or economic positions.

The Globalism Institute uses the term "social mapping" to describe the way in which our forms of data collection are linked to forms and methods of analysis. Data is collected, as mentioned above, ranging from statistics to lengthy interview transcripts and revisiting stories that can be interpreted in many ways. Much of this data includes a subjective dimension – even in the way that people respond to our questionnaires – and the empirical analysis of the diverse sets of data (aimed at detecting emerging patterns in and across the data) includes a consideration of both the clear, "objective" outcomes apparent in the data and the subjectivities underpinning the ways in which people choose to articulate their lived experiences or tell their stories from where they are living. At one level, a Heideggerian approach to what constitutes a hermeneutic inquiry into the articulation of subjective, lived, experience is adopted (Mugerauer 1994; Crotty 1998). At another level, moving beyond the experiential, a form of *conjunctural analysis* aimed at relating local experiences to broader social processes and socially prevailing modes of practice is employed (James 2006). These different forms of analysis assist one to detect the specificities of what is happening within local communities and, at the same time, relate these findings to broader social themes, such as the changing nature of community life in the contemporary world. In this project, we are interested in extending the understanding of community through theories of nationalism and globalism, as well as through theories of social formation including tribalism, traditionalism, modernism and postmodernism. We thus take a broad conceptual approach focusing on a range of issues, not just ethnicity, while attempting to ground a discussion of these issues in the lived reality of people's everyday lives.

Three overall questions have guided our research with these community settlements in the Kuala Lumpur/Petaling Jaya corridor. These are questions that can be asked of all such communities undergoing change in the face of globalization:

- How have these low-income and poor communities and their settlements been affected or transformed by economic and social change, particularly changes connected with processes of globalization?
- How have these communities and particular households or individuals proved resilient to such change in ways that have sought to preserve

community cohesion and maintain channels of social connection and support within their communities and with the nation state?

- How can the cohesiveness of these communities and the physical, emotional and social well-being of households and individuals be facilitated as change occurs and lives transform?

This diverse set of research tools or ways of gaining understanding, all drawn from the "toolbox" of methods have been developed within the broader Local-Global Research Program. The questionnaire, which is being used in translation within a range of nearly eight communities across the globe, is allowing us to gain an initial understanding of some of the beliefs and needs of people within the communities we are studying. In a collaborative effort between the Globalism Institute, Universiti Malaya and the relevant NGOs in the area, project researchers have obtained over 500 completed questionnaires from people living in the KTM longhouse squatter settlement, Desa Mentari low-cost flats, and the Lembah Subang transit settlement. The photo narrative method used in this research was adapted from a variety of research techniques that utilize camera as a research tool. Other names include "reflexive photography" (Harper 1984), "photo novella" and "photo voice" (Wang & Burris 1994, 1997; Wang et al. 1996; Wang & Redwood-Jones 2001). At the basic level, photo narrative entailed distributing cameras to participants in the project and asking them to capture images which expressed their sense of community or at least some aspect of their community. While some advocates of this kind of research method argue that it can empower participants (Wang et al. 1996), our aim was more modest in trying to find non-threatening ways to explore the daily experiences of people living in the communities in which the research was conducted. Such a method can help people to give voice to experiences and perceptions that they may not have contemplated consciously before and it can blur the boundary between research and self expression. After the participants in the photo narrative research had the opportunity to take the images they wanted, semi-structured interviews (lasting 40–90 minutes) were conducted about their choices and the outcomes. Again this was a non-threatening process in that the recorded conversations were more like a process of sharing and discussing photos than a formal interview. In all, 24 interviews were conducted and community members were recruited with the assistance of the local community organization and NGOs.

## **ENTERING THE FIELD**

The nailed together corrugated sheets of tin that held together what appeared to be a popular tea and lunch stall at Kampung Lindungan became a meeting point. A couple of vinyl covered round wooden tables and a dozen or so chairs scattered under its tin sheeted verandah provided a spot where one could order a "glass of teh tarik (froth tea)", whilst initiating a conversation with those who strolled by either to chat with others or to enquire about a new face at a regular tea stall. Past a small counter, two concrete blocks on a raised platform form a wood fire stove. A middle-aged man stood stirring an old big aluminum pot three quarter filled with a dark brown sauce, from which emitted delicious aromas of fresh chillies, coconut milk and curry leaves. Inside the darker part of the covered shed, there is a long table, with a row of smaller pots containing different sorts of vegetables. A young girl, probably thirteen or fourteen years old (though I have very many times mistaken a much older woman for a much younger person) hovers over the table, waiting to serve any customer who wanders in for a quick and inexpensive meal. I would estimate that at least one person from every household visits this tea stall at least once a day. The wife might go in the morning and the husband in the afternoon or evening, very often to buy one or two small items of food or drink. Or the men would all congregate in the evening for a cup of tea or a snack and it is not a place of mere consumption in the sense known in larger more resourced communities, but a place of social activity, an opportunity to share information and find out about people in the village.

The setting of this study is a part of what was one of the oldest road links of the capital city of Kuala Lumpur to the port of Klang. This road is known as the Old Klang Road, in the suburb of Petaling Jaya in western Kuala Lumpur, sits almost underneath the intersection of three expressways. There are several squatter settlements off this road, and this neighborhood is characterized by plank squatter houses, longhouses, low-cost flats and terrace houses, largely populated by Malay and Indian ethnic groups as well as Indonesian and Bangladeshi migrant workers. A large majority of these settlers work in small factories and business or as messengers and sweepers. While no concrete statistics are available yet, many anecdotes refer to this area harboring a high rate of single-parent families, alcoholism, crime, prostitution, evident in many of the modern urban underclass. This neighborhood is enclosed by a growing middle-class suburb, affluent residential pockets, high rise buildings (including new housing commission style flats), an entertainment complex and a non-local tertiary institution.

After a while, we began to talk about what has been happening in this place. I asked if I might be able to interview one of them. We discussed this research project that I am part of, and also of my ethical obligations as a researcher. They all nodded, and are ready to talk. I switched on my digital recorder. They all shook their heads and teased me about being a "modern spy" – certainly the gadgets gave me a certain cachet and a touch of the "je ne sais pas de quoi"... Well, it all helped, especially when you know you can start a conversation (interview) with one person and found that you have about eight to ten people joining in. As I shifted from one person to another within seconds, into what has become a group interview, I am certainly glad for the sophisticated equipment. I provided myself with prompts and names of the people I interviewed, asked for their permission too at the same time. Sometimes, a member of the group took charge, and asked people to introduce themselves before they speak. In such relatively free-flowing discussions, where we met as multifaceted individuals, and not as "resource" persons, there was of course digression and meandering. And sometimes I would despair whether the main questions would be covered in the time available, but somehow they generally were (sometimes in the final inspired half hour of one of the villagers said, "let's hear what your questions are – and let's get on with that" – so that eventually one came away satisfied, as well as relaxed from the informality of chatting and laughing together. Informal rather than formal, expressive rather than instrumental, elliptical rather than linear, collective rather than individualistic, this process of engagement exploring the diversity and complexity of not just these people's reactions to and perceptions of their own "life-worlds", but also mine, provided such rich material through what Sizoo calls a "vivid and profound polylogue."<sup>3</sup>

Then I walked with two social workers from a local NGO through Kampung Desa HORMAT. The paths are no more than dirt tracks and I was greeted with smiles and an occasional greeting in Malay and Tamil. This was my third visit through the village. Some people came out from their homes and I stop to chat and say hello. Sometimes it took longer than

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<sup>3</sup> Sizoo (1997) uses the term "life-worlds" to describe what people (in her study, Sizoo focused on fifteen women) personally consider and appreciate as basic dimensions of their own lives, their sources of strength and the things that bring meaning to their lives. Rather than objectively addressing the socio-economic position of people in various cultural contexts, the term 'life-worlds' encapsulates a more subjective perception of lives, the environment and the forces which drive people in shaping their lives the way they do. For more details of this study, refer Sizoo (1997).

I think, and I kept worrying about Patti<sup>4</sup> who I had said I would visit at such a time. Finally we arrived at her home. It is modest, like the tea stall, sheets held together with some semblance of rooms and a kitchen. She was waiting for me in her main room, and rushed out to give me a hug. I met her in my last trip at her work place as a Municipal daily wage road sweeper near a school. She has made a large pot of chicken curry and asked me to join her for a meal. "Eat first, and then I can tell you everything about myself and how I came here." After some amount of gentle negotiations, we decided on a cup of tea and then I sat down next to her on the floor and we started our interview. The social workers sat down with me, and Patti gently reproaches them for not sending the monthly provisions (groceries which include a tin of milk, sugar, rice and a tin of Milo) on time. There has been a lapse of two months and she found it so difficult especially as she has been relying on these provisions for the last two years. The social workers explained that the donations have waned, and also it has become difficult to transport the goods. When they started to suggest that she might come to the organization (which is about 6 km away) to collect it for herself, she started to laugh. The social workers now began to reproach her, and suggested that she sends her grandson. She laughed again and said, "He will sell the provisions even before it reaches home – to buy things he wants to buy, cigarettes or something worse." The air was pregnant with resignation, and there was silence for a while. Then Patti turned around to me and said, "I remember being a rubber tapper. Even though the rains decided what we could eat everyday, I knew to look forward to the days when it did not rain. My stomach would not always know if it was going to be full. But I was proud to serve my country, my children."

Patti told me that she has come here, to this place, 40 years ago as a young bride from an oil palm estate in the district of Ulu Selangor, and borne ten children, her hut underneath the overpass. She had a hard life as a rubber tapper and she worked with her husband. Everything was taken care of for them, and they did not know otherwise. When the plantation closed down, she was already pregnant with her second child, and they had no where to go but to come to the "big city" – where people said there are many jobs. She now has a job as a road sweeper. All her children have grown up and now live elsewhere with their own families. Her husband passed away two years ago after a long illness. One of her grandsons lives with her. His parents are unable to cope with his moody and sometimes turbulent response

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<sup>4</sup> Patti is a pseudonym used to respect the confidentiality of the interviewee. A process of ethical permission is chosen with the subjects being interviewed, and endorsed by interviewee either verbally or in written form.

to a world which he thinks has abandoned him. She loves him and feels responsible for him. Patti supports him by working as a road sweeper on a day-to-day basis, for a local municipality one hour away from where she lives. And she looks forward to the Sunday afternoon, a bowl of spicy chicken curry and a Sunday afternoon Tamil movie on her black and white television. She is hoping her next-door neighbor, this lady who has emigrated from Indonesia more than ten years ago, and runs a small food stall in a school nearby, may visit her. While her friend does not understand Tamil, she enjoys the songs and music in Tamil movies, and also the taste of a spicy chicken curry.

This old lady knows that her children visit her when they need some money or have to leave their little toddler behind to be looked after as they have to be away from their home on work or a festival. They cannot afford to pay her for her time, so she shares her food with this grandchild as well. An extra mouth, but she is the grandmother and her sense of love and responsibility for this child, as she puts it "is in the blood". Things are changing though. There is a move to demolish these squatter houses under the freeway. Patti knows that she has to leave her home of 40 years. She knows too that she needs to put her hands very high up so that she gets counted when the new low-cost flats are allocated. She is also quite excited. Finally she will live in a house built of brick and mortar. No more the nailed together wooden planks that fluttered so dangerously whenever the rains pelted down or the winds found their way through the little lanes and corners of the squatter settlement. Of course, she, now at the ripe old age of 65, has to worry about mortgage and house payments, electricity and water bills. But she is hopeful that her grandson will "kick" his alcohol and other dependencies and start to look for a job and become more self-sufficient. I thought about what Sennett had said about such a kind of self-reliance having to be negotiated through the complexities of personal character as much as social structure; a social structure that has the capacity to accept in others what one does not understand about them (Sennett 2003). She is not expecting anything from her children, but is proud that she is able to leave something behind for them, even if there is a mortgage on the flat. As she said, "Well, I have got through this day. Who knows what will happen tomorrow? But I have survived today and I am happy." I guess it is in this twilight zone, in the unsettling embrace of tradition and modernity, experienced as a crisscrossing of connections and misconnections, breakdowns and compromises that Patti is trying to negotiate "some sort of" way to live on a day-to-day basis.

While in some instances, an interview was possible in a direct and informal way, there are also many situations where many levels of entry had



to be negotiated, or the many uncles and aunties and elders whose views had to be sought prior to conducting any interviews with their families or neighborhood. And even in these situations, individual interviews would soon spread into a collective, and in this case, with elders sitting in on the conversations, adding another complex layer of authority, yet provided rich material and insights on the nature of competing interests of an intergenerational community within contemporary Malaysia. Once, I was confronted by a carload of people, who drove right up to the stall. One man, presumably the leader of this group, demanded to know why I had not sought an interview with him. He was after all a very important leader of one of the main groups in the community. He was also investigating if I might be a "spy" for the government, whilst also censorious that my family had allowed an Indian woman to visit an unknown place on my own! Community leaders and heads of several NGO's and government representations more often than not, provided these critical links. Their presence at many of these conversations and interviews, including the conducting of a qualitative questionnaire provided one of the most valuable underpinnings of this research's accessibility and credibility in this area. Over a period of time, even as I developed trust with members of the community and the community leaders, NGO members remained a critical part of the research team, enabling us to build Critical Reference Groups with these communities.

## **BACK FROM THE FIELD**

As the British historian, Eric Hobsbawm has noted, the word "community" is now indiscriminately used at a time when actual communities in the sociological sense have become much harder to identify (Hobsbawm 1995). The notion of "community" is certainly in transition as a result of significant shifts in recent social, cultural and political developments. Our very understanding of what a community is has been challenged by developments relating in particular to the economic, social and technological aspects of late-modernity and globalization. There are now many expressions of "community" ranging from social entities such as tribes, clans, or small rural hamlets defined by kinship and face-to-face relations, to urban networks embedded in locality, work, ethnicity and identity in industrial cities, to virtual communities facilitated by the internet. On one level, community can be understood as a relatively homogenous grouping of people, living within a defined area and sharing an expression of a common life and some personal bonds. At the other end of the

spectrum, the term community can express an ideological sense of what should be rather than what is. In moving from rubber and oil palm estates and adapting to a complex urban life, for many people in the squatter communities off Old Klang Road, the "neighborhood" became (and remains) a meaningful entity through which to become part of a identifiable social group. It is not unreasonable, then, that 40% of respondents to the questionnaire chose the idea of "neighborhood" as a critical place of belonging and support as they battled new ways of surviving in a complex metropolis. Having worked in factories or estates in places like Batang Berjuntai and Kuala Selangor amongst others, a sense of neighborhood enabled these people to stay connected in a new environment. As one person commented during a community-based conversation:

I grew up in Batang Berjuntai. My parents worked in an estate there. We were there until I got married. Then I came to Teluk Intan and was working there for many years. My husband's sister suggested that we come to the city (Kuala Lumpur) as work was getting harder at Teluk Intan and they looked like they were going to close down. So we came down and I have now lived here in this kampong for more than 12 years.

For many, the neighborhood was and is their community, a place which is familiar and supportive at times of great difficulties. In moving across to new complexes such as Desa Mentari, where a sense of neighborhood has to be re-established, there is for a period of time, a sense of loss of "community". Such mobility presents the challenges of making new friends and sharing scant resources, especially in such a dense collective living environment. As one resident commented, "I feel alone now. I feel I have been left on my own – not even my children look after me. I feel abandoned. In the kampong, it was different then – we knew each other and had to rely on each other. I could talk to people and they would say hello."

Here, and in many other comments, the "old places" (the kampongs off Old Klang Road) become a powerful memory of "community", despite their dilapidated state. People thus remember a different sense of community in the kampongs and worry about the possibilities of constructing communities afresh in the new estates:

I don't have any quarrels with her. She is Malay but that doesn't matter. We were good friends [in the Kampong]. We had the same problems with family and children and money. She looks out for me and I look out for

her. I don't know where she is in this new place. I must find her. In the flat, there is no old neighbor at all; there is no neighborhood left. We go up and then we stay inside the flats and we don't know what is happening outside. In the kampong, we know so quickly. We know immediately when something has gone wrong. Even when we have a festival. We can hear the noise and the celebrations and everyone takes part. But of course now, we all have a flat now and we are owners with papers. Of course, our expenses are very high. We have to pay mortgages for at least 15 years more. People now have to work overtime and make more money. So people are so busy. There is no time to go out and meet friends or visit their neighbors.

While so much has been written about community and how it has changed over time and continues to change, there is still overwhelming evidence that the place where you live and your neighborhood are vitally important in life. One of the challenges facing community development policies in the context of squatter resettlement is therefore to conceptualize community change in such a way as to accommodate a sense of neighborhood (place) and a sense of belonging to that place. This sense of neighborhood and belonging needs to be much better understood and facilitated in the context of a plural Malaysian, and particularly in the context of the mobility of low-income groups.

Conducting fieldwork (employing the diverse toolbox I have described earlier in this article) I find myself moving through multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural, back and forth. And as I am conducting these interviews and conversations, I find relational and institutional stories affected by history, social structure and culture are themselves dialectically revealed through action, feeling, thought and language. Frequently too, I am drawn into these conversations as a fellow citizen, or as a person from the outside by these people. And most often, they also locate where they are at by comparing with where I am at. Research methodologies are never "objective", but always located and informed by particular and also shifting social positions, historical moments and their accompanying agendas. Drawing on field notes, interview transcripts and personal reflections I am attempting to capture the post-colonial problematic subjectivities in the production of knowledge; and the kind of borders and in-between places between subject and object that are generated, reproduced, contested, permeated and also transgressed. These various competing representations all rely on the construction of particular narratives in order to produce their respective political meanings – once back from the field. I am in this part of the world as a result of a longitudinal

research project studying the influence of contemporary globalization on community sustainability. In my work as a social researcher, I am at the interface between the existing federal and state policies with their development imperatives (Malaysia and Wawasan 2020), and the everyday living of these squatter settlements that appears to sit in the margins of these very development imperatives. The complexity in all of this is how the informant subjectivities subvert the researcher/informant relationship, especially how the agency of the informants put forward are complicated for the researcher as a post-colonial subject. What are the dialogical subjectivities in place and being played out as fieldwork is going on? At what point as researcher is one able to discern or articulate back from the field, the intricate fluidity within which informants/objects in their dual role as informants can also manipulate, shape, play or even subvert the researcher's subjectivities. For most of us researchers, even when some semblance of an insider status is achievable after a couple of visits and periods of immersion (in this study the periods of immersion were intense but short, lasting just under ten days each visit), there remain fields of ambiguity, pulling and tugging between subject and object, as much as that is also between who is subject and who is the object, as my position itself is invoked and orchestrated too by the subjects of the study.

In writing the notes and analysis back from the field, I have tried to combine a personal narrative with more analytic modes of writing, a process that has its uncertainties as well as its critical moments of research in which I address the struggle of this in what I term as "an in-betweenness of research" – balancing the context, the culture, the intersubjectiveness of the "researcher" and the "researched". In many ways, this essay is also a discussion in academic self-reflection, and raises the possibility of whether the notion of "in-betweenness" offers a possible terrain for further critical analysis. As an insider too, I understand that I will be frequently judged on insider criteria – family background, status, politics, age, gender, religion as well as their perceived intellectual capacity. So it is the culturally mediated and historically situated self which finds itself in a continuously changing world of meaning – a sort of a modified phenomenological process, in which hermeneutics itself is a bit of problem. It is as Ricoeur might describe as "a movement in which each cultural figure finds its meaning not in what precedes it but in what follows: consciousness is drawn out of itself and ahead of itself in a process in which each step is abolished and retained in the following one" (Ricoeur 2006).

## CONCLUSION

Fieldwork within this squatter settlement relocations and this ongoing research on community sustainability and globalization, provided an opportunity to follow this process that I term as the in-betweenness of research engagement. To think and speak from the geopolitical and historical location of Old Klang Road and the cultural differences formed within this location are processes that guide the research engagement processes here. By "geopolitical/spatial locations", I mean not only the physical space, but also the historical, social, cultural, imagined and what Mignolo (2000) refers to as the epistemologically situated spaces that provide the ground for political subjectivities, difference and struggles. The particular sites and the temporal junctures within which subjects are marked and constructed and where researchers write, matter. Locating ourselves in relation to places defined and taken up through experience, identity, and power (Mohanty 2003) and in relation to the subjects/objects that we are engaged with was, in a way, a process by which to think from the experiences and structures of day-to-day living of these people, by not so much restoring knowledges, but to find a way in which one could intervene in a new epistemological transmodern way. A place on the map is also a place in history where boundaries are formed, negotiated, transgressed, power and politics played out on both national and transnational terrains; and it is here in these spaces that diverse knowledges are generated, produced and distributed.

As a Malaysian and Western-educated academic who now lives and works in Australia, I might fit into the category of a "migrant intellectual", though I do prefer the term that Ang (2001) refers to as "translating individual". It enables me to accept a way of life that involves a process of crosscultural translation, as I move from one place to another, from one regime of language and culture to another. I am also caught in a struggle between my political desire to endorse this broader use of the term "qualitative researcher",<sup>5</sup> and the aspects of my research engagement within

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<sup>5</sup> The nature of qualitative research is characterized by the search for meaning and understanding, with the researcher as the primary instrument. Deciding on an appropriate research methodology is not an easy task for burgeoning qualitative researchers. Today there are many choices including action research, critical theory, discourse analysis, ethnography feminist research, and grounded theory to name only a few. Creswell (1998) for example has identified four traditions of qualitative research – biography, phenomenology grounded theory, ethnography and case study. Denzin and Lincoln (2000: 6) identify eight research strategies, stating at the same

my own country that also occasionally involves the narrower usage of negotiating between being an Indian woman in a culturally traditional and also, at the same a modern Malaysian world. Yet, who is native, and who is the other? As traditional notions of the extent to which anyone (native or other) can become an authentic insider is contestable. The contemporary anthropologist could be viewed only in terms of shifting identities and power relations (Narayan 1993).

My work and its requirements of moving between cultures and languages emphasizes this translating process of living, mapping the complexity of having to negotiate simultaneously the space between mainstream Western academic concerns and my own intellectual and geographical/spatial dislocation. I am also aware of the enormous complexities and difficulties involved in the comprehension of the other. As Rabinow (1997) observes, fieldwork is a dialectic process, of that between reflection and immediacy. Both are cultural constructs and neither the subject nor the object remains static. It is like an ongoing construction of experience and understanding, a realm of tenuous common sense and inquiry, which is also constantly breaking down, being patched-up and reexamined, over and over again. Central then to this struggle is the politics of representation that echoes the questions posed by the project itself. How does and should I present the interconnectedness of these stories? What should I highlight? What should I privilege? How do I recreate in the telling of the story and the experience, the immediacy or situatedness of the ethnographic encounter, interposed by the traversing between cultures and experiences and theory and lived experience. And just as the collapsing and contradictions of these lived trajectories were a constant and continuous challenge in the field, so too is it a challenge once "back from the field", in the writing of the text, the representation of the experience, the telling of the story. For most of us, some semblance of an "insider" can be achieved after a considerable amount of time and extended periods of visits and a deepening of that which is initially unfamiliar. Yet there is always a field of ambiguity – of moving between being an insider and also an outsider, or partial insiders – positions invoked and orchestrated too by the very participants in the research study. In that, as the deepening into the familiar starts to begin, one also becomes aware of the power inherent in these very locales where the study itself is happening, as lifeworlds mingle. At the same time, it is also the critical exploration of this "negotiation" that gives the contemporary practice of research methodology its vital and engaging

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time that "qualitative research does not belong to a single discipline, and nor does it have a distinct set of methods that are entirely its own."



quality. It is also a lively exploration, a process that at once demonstrates a commitment to the rigor of research, while at the same time, testing it, with necessarily proposing a fixed or determined process.

I want research that begins in a place of unknowing, with a leap of faith, a courageous willingness to embark on a journey. I want research that seeks out mysteries and acknowledges even the muddled, mad, mesmerizing miasma that rises up as a kind of breath and breathing, connected with the pulsing and compelling rhythms of the hear. (Leggo 1999)

In a sense, then what is at stake is not simply the navigation and renegotiation of the ideologies of power, but rather a profound reflexive encounter with the ontological and epistemological coordinates of the social-theoretical discourses that have underpinned the disciplinary terrain and political practice of Malaysia. How is the critical, imaginative investigation of aspects of daily life, with a particular emphasis on the problem of ambivalence and resistance, that is, the ways in which individuals and groups develop ways of appropriation and distance in response to modernity and its structures of domination understood? Our reflexive understanding of society and politics, this practical social theory we employ as social agents, is essential to the ways in which we cope with the complexities and the conflicts of the contemporary world. What are required are methods that allow researchers to analyze the sociocultural/political field around the issues of community life, methods attentive to the constantly shifting and ambiguous realm of Third World cultures and peoples, and an understanding that cultural processes of both integration and resistance are continually unfolding, evolving and ambivalent. The porousness of places and communities, and more importantly the fact that they evolve and take shape through multiple interrelationships with myriad differently positioned others (which includes the fieldworker) are by definition, constitutive of contemporary social life. These interrelationships, whether research engaged, professional, cultural or personal are never power free, never context driven and they cannot be avoided. They have to be constantly negotiated and associated with in different ways. To align oneself within such an "in-betweenness" geopolitical and "neither/nor or both/and" place, complicated by these dense layers of interrelationships, while carrying out research on issues related to that very struggle is to also occupy a space of deeper scholarly understanding.

There is great potential, but also challenges and dilemmas in the "in-betweenness of research engagement". This "in-betweenness of research engagement", what Ang (2001) says is the "neither/nor, or both/and" place –

the moving through the fusion and synthesis, but also the rigidity and discord, contestations and interrogations that go hand-in-hand in such a position. And the potential in such an engagement is also to learn as McLennan (1995: 90) states "how to live awkwardly (but also wisely and critically)" in a world in which that which distinguishes between what is "us" and "them" is complicated and inextricably twined.

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