

# Witches, children and Kiva-the-research-dog: striking problems encountered in the field

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*This paper examines how power, privilege and vulnerability can surface in unexpected ways during fieldwork. Drawing from my experiences working with indigenous women and children who beg and sell on the streets of Ecuador, I suggest that researchers do not always hold as much power as we might assume. By positioning myself within stories about witches and children, I discuss how multiple research identities can shift power dynamics in unsettling and unexpected ways. In this paper, I also reflect upon a particularly unorthodox research method: using my dog as a research assistant. My dog inadvertently became instrumental in providing access to children's life stories; however, her presence also highlighted some of the dramatic incongruities between their life experiences and my own.*

**Key words:** fieldwork, power, identity, pets, indigenous, Ecuador

## Introduction

In this paper, I take a very personal and reflexive approach to discuss power, privilege and vulnerability in field research. I base this discussion around my experiences working with indigenous women and children who beg on the streets of Ecuador's largest cities. Philo encourages researchers to

allow vulnerability into our *own* research and writing, being ready to admit our own intellectual vulnerability in the face of – even as a mark of respect for – the grounded vulnerabilities coming before our scrutiny. (2005, 447)

In this paper I take this challenge seriously to write a candid and, at times, troubling account surrounding some of the striking problems that I encountered during my fieldwork. Herein, I tell stories about witches, children and dogs to reflect upon the various scales of privilege and vulnerability that play out between the researched and the researcher. Admittedly, counterposing my own vulnerabilities (as a white, Canadian, middle-class woman) versus the vulnerabilities of indigenous beggars in Ecuador

may seem absurd. However, I would like to suggest that researchers do not always hold as much power as we might assume – particularly when conducting research in closed, inaccessible communities.

In this paper, I also reflect upon how power and privilege can crystallise in unexpected ways. When I moved to Ecuador, I brought my pet dog with me. Bringing my dog into the field fundamentally changed the nature of my research encounters and experiences. She became integral to my research methods, particularly since I was working with children and young people. Yet, I faced several interesting paradoxes and ideological dilemmas here. Using my dog as a 'research assistant', I was able to access children's life stories and experiences in a way that I could not have without her. In fact, my dog's power often superseded my own during the research process. Children were not interested in me *per se*; rather, they were much more interested in my dog. Like an academic version of Lassie-the-rescue-dog, Kiva-the-research-dog swooped in to steal the stage. Yet, while Kiva provided me with crucial access to children, her presence also highlighted the dramatic incongruities between their

life experiences and my own. When viewed through the eyes of the impoverished people with whom I worked, flying my dog from Canada to Ecuador was ludicrous.<sup>1</sup>

Incorporating pets into fieldwork is not a topic that others have written about. This may be because I am one of the few to bring a pet into the field; perhaps, of those, I am one of the even fewer to have found her pet's impact on her research important enough to consider writing about it.<sup>2</sup> To reflect upon the benefits and problematics of bringing pets into the field, I draw upon recent work in critical animal geographies. By writing about my experiences with my dog in the field, I hope to raise two key issues: the advantages of incorporating pets into fieldwork (especially when working with children) and the exacerbation of difference created by pets.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. In the first section, I tell a story about witches, which hints at the complex racial-colonial history of indigenous peoples in the Andes. I position myself within this story and draw upon Widdowfield's (2000) and Bondi's (2005) work on emotional geographies in order to reinforce how fieldwork can be emotionally fraught, particularly when dealing with issues concerning extreme poverty and cultural difference. The second section is about children and outlines the ways in which I was positioned by the adults and children with whom I worked. In the final section, I reflect upon how my dog's involvement shaped my research identity and consider how her presence facilitated my research but exacerbated difference between me and my research 'subjects'.

### Witches, outsiders and the white researcher

In 2002, I moved to Ecuador with my partner and my dog for a period of 18 months. We moved to the capital city of Quito, where the bulk of my research would take place. Shortly after arriving in Quito, I discovered that the vast majority of indigenous women and children begging on the streets of the city hailed from an isolated Quichua village – named Calhuasí – situated at 3400 metres in the central Andes. Consequently, a significant part of my research also took place in this small Andean village, located a few provinces away. Up until 1992, there was no road access into Calhuasí; the only way in or out was via a long and winding footpath through the mountains. Even with the road, access remained difficult due to muddy terrain and

precarious slopes that threatened to send trucks and their occupants plummeting into deep mountain ravines.

Calhuasí has long held a reputation as a closed and inaccessible community. Within the racialised imaginative geographies that shape the social terrain of the Andes, the perceived Indianness of rural places constructs them as dangerous spaces for whites (Weismantel 2001). When I began working in Calhuasí, people warned me that Calhuaseños were '*bravo*' – meaning wild, fierce or angry.<sup>3</sup> Until very recently, the community was known as a 'red zone', off limits to outsiders. An Italian priest, who worked in the vicinity in the 1970s recounted how during that time, 'When outsiders arrived in the communities . . . it was difficult for them to leave with their lives. The people were very aggressive, hostile to all outsiders.'<sup>4</sup>

Fears of this particular community were reinforced in 1996 when two white-mestiza<sup>5</sup> women were accused of being witches and held responsible for the deaths of over 40 Calhuaseños. These women had been preying upon community members' belief system and extracting large amounts of cash in exchange. Unfortunately, their predations coincided with a tuberculosis outbreak, an event that was blamed on the women's witchcraft. In an attempt to attain retributive justice congruent with indigenous belief systems, the women were held hostage in the community for eight days and nearly burned alive. In the end, their lives were spared due to negotiations with the local government; it was agreed that the women would be meted with an indigenous sentencing that included flagellation. Meanwhile, the local government agreed to imprison the women for exploiting Calhuaseños' belief systems solely for economic profit.<sup>6</sup>

Because Calhuasí has a reputation as a fierce, witch-burning community, it is regarded as a place that should be avoided by non-indigenous outsiders at all costs. Locals consistently warned me to be careful, lest I be lynched; yet, this joke was only somewhat tongue-in-cheek. When I began this research, I realised that I was venturing into a community where the differences between my life and their lives were tremendous. There were complicated power dimensions on all sides of this equation. I was a non-indigenous outsider from a vastly different cultural world; meanwhile, non-indigenous outsiders had been preying upon this community for centuries. In order to protect themselves from my academic predations, it would have been very easy for Calhuaseños to exclude me from their world or

to make my research extremely difficult or even impossible. As a white outsider, I brought forth imagery of profound difference, colonialism and mistrust, whereas my status as a white female associated me with the white witches. Had I been a man, I suspect that my access may have been equally complicated; throughout the Andes, there are legends of *pishtacos* or fat-suckers – large, white men who cut the fat off indigenous bodies – a metaphor for colonial and Western exploitation of indigenous peoples (see Weismantel 2001). I was painfully aware of these stories and proceeded into this community cautiously. However, I discovered that while Calhuaseños were initially cautious with me, they began to welcome me once I managed to convey what I could offer: I could record their stories, provide them with photographs and tell others about their struggles.

In what follows, I discuss how I negotiated my acceptance and entrance into Calhuasí. Again, I believe that my status as a woman positioned me in a particular way, especially since I was working with children. I was often perceived as incompetent due to my lack of Quichua fluency, my association with children, and my relative ignorance concerning the way things worked in the community. At the same time, my status as an educated, white, middle-class woman from the Global North positioned me quite differently.

### Children, power and the dependent (yet wealthy) researcher

During the first eight months of my fieldwork, I regularly accompanied a social worker on her bi-weekly visits to Calhuasí and its neighbouring communities. These visits allowed me to build trust as Calhuaseños gradually began to recognise me as a common figure both in Quito and in their village. Once the community's leaders had accepted me and my research goals, I was invited to live in the village for a period of one month. Upon moving to Calhuasí, I introduced myself formally at a community meeting. Prior to the meeting, I prepared a speech in rudimentary Quichua, hoping that this would facilitate my acceptance.<sup>7</sup> And when the time came to stand up in front of the community, I launched into my speech, which included a few jokes in the hopes of receiving a laugh or two. However, when I was met with dead silence, my knees began to tremble and I became concerned that I had already managed to offend the entire

community. I was later much relieved to learn that they had been instructed by the community leader beforehand that laughing at my Quichua would not be tolerated – despite the brilliance of my comedy.

After my unsuccessful Quichua speech, I launched into Spanish hoping to convey my message effectively in another language. I informed them about my research and let them know that I would be asking a lot of questions. I told them that I would bring this information to Canada so that I could tell others about their lives. To my surprise, within a few days, people were coming directly to me to do *grabaciones* or 'recordings'. Having already done a few interviews in the community with my tape recorder, I discovered that people were keen to tell their stories on tape. Mind you, the most keen (generally the presidents of newly formed community organisations) spent much of their time during these interviews speaking directly to the 'people of Canada'. They wanted to let Canadians know that they needed project money to help the people of Calhuasí. They observed me and my tape recorder as a link to external funding.

Power inequalities pervaded this project on multiple and intersecting levels. These inequalities pertained to the power I held during the research process, such as controlling and directing conversations, and to my ability to define, delineate and bound my field site and topic (England, 1994; Katz, 1994). They also pertained to my race, class and nationality (Anzaldúa 1990; Chow 1991; Gilbert 1994; Kobayashi 1994; Mohanty 1991; Spivak 1988). And because I was working with children, there were power dimensions concerning age and seniority (Barker and Smith 2001; Holt 2004; Matthews *et al.* 1998; Valentine *et al.* 2001; Young and Barrett 2001).

While I was unable to overcome some of these power dynamics, I would like to suggest that researchers may not always hold as much power as we may think. Hecht (1998) describes how he was initially very concerned about power inequalities during his research with Brazilian street children. However, he discovered that, although material inequalities were evident, his research was guided by a dynamic where he depended on children – and not they on him. Nast (1998) speaks of her research in Nigeria where her 'power' was subverted. Her interaction with three separate groups resulted in her being positioned respectively as a seductress, a master and a social inferior. Physically positioned as such, she states: 'I had to go beyond

the mirror to negotiate and live out identities I had previously never imagined could be my own' (Nast 1998, 108).

In my case, I was very aware of both my marginal and dominant position in the community. I felt marginal at times because I did not have a respected role in the community. Although I was perhaps a novelty, I asked too many 'obvious' questions, was unable to follow all Quichua conversations, and spent a lot of my time writing in my notebook and hanging around with children (none of which are particularly respected activities). While living in Calhuasí, I stayed with a family of six in a small, cement block house with a dirt floor. Their material possessions were very limited. They had a two-burner propane stove (although preferred to cook with firewood), a table, a four-inch black-and-white television, and two wooden bed frames cushioned with straw. I shared one of these beds with a 12-year-old girl and a 10-year-old girl. Bathroom facilities consisted of a hole in the ground, while water was obtained from a community tap. Bathing was accomplished by boiling large pots of water and scooping small amounts over your body. At an altitude of 3400 metres, the air temperature was rarely warm thus making for a rather cold bathing experience. I discovered it to be quite unpleasant; shivering naked on the dirt floor while a group of giggling children peered through the large cracks in the door was not something that I relished.

At one point during my stay with this family, the parents left for three days in order to help a troubled community member on the coast. This meant that 12-year-old Felicidad – not I – was left in charge. For three days, Felicidad took care of 10-year-old Nicola, 8-year-old Wilmer, 6-year-old Nuria and 29-year-old me. She cooked, she cleaned, she did laundry, she prepared the kids for school, and she even taught her mother's kindergarten class. I was not considered 'the adult' during these days; rather, I was perceived as the vulnerable outsider who needed help with the most basic of chores. While Felicidad took care of me, I could not help but reflect upon the vast differences between her childhood and my own. At 12 years old, I could barely take care of myself, let alone an entire family. Yet, Felicidad was deemed competent enough to head a household, something unthinkable in the Global North (for discussions on childhoods in the Global South, see Katz 2004; Kesby *et al.* 2006; Nieuwenhuys 1994; Punch 2003; Robson 2004; Robson and Ansell 2000; Swanson 2005).

That being said, I am very aware of the dominant position I held in the community. My race, ethnicity, class, citizenship and education positioned me very differently from community members. This dominance was brought home when I was presented with a letter from a community organisation asking me for much-needed funding for their day-care. Having already had experience with a handful of international NGOs, community members were well-aware that foreigners often bring funding. In this instance, I tried to reinforce that my role was as a researcher and that for the time being, all I could do was tell their story to a wider audience. I told them that I would disseminate my findings to academics, NGOs and policy makers in North America, Europe and Ecuador. They tended to agree that if their story was told, others (meaning foreigners with money) could be compelled to become involved in their community. While I know that I made no false promises and did my best to provide them with realistic expectations concerning my research, this has been a significant issue for me. I continue to ask myself who will gain more from this research: them or me? I suspect it may be me (see England 1994; Katz 1994).

The obvious material inequalities in this research also raised issues surrounding women's and children's economic vulnerabilities and my comparative privilege. Throughout my stay in Ecuador, I gave Calhuaseños many photographs and small creature comforts as tokens of reciprocity. The most significant of these was my cell phone, which I presented to my Calhuaseño host family upon my departure from Ecuador. This was a significant gesture that undoubtedly enhanced this family's status. During my last week in Ecuador, my partner and I gave away many of our belongings in Quito to children and young women who worked nearby or who came to visit. These included shoes, jackets, clothing and food. However, the day before I left the country, I had a very uncomfortable and awkward interaction (at least for me) with a group of Calhuaseño women. A few days earlier, I had spoken to Nelly, a woman the same age as I, and asked her to come by because I had some blankets, pillows and floor mats that I thought she and her children could use. However, when she came, she came with four other women whom I barely knew. As I emerged with my arms full of goods, they turned to their professional begging modes and began supplicating from me. It had been a long time since anyone in the community had begged from me. I had

perhaps naively assumed that we had created a balanced relationship: they gave me information and I gave them photographs.<sup>8</sup> After distributing my first armload of goods, I went back inside to find more possessions to give away. But despite my best intents, it wasn't enough; the reciprocity felt unbalanced. This incident was a harsh reminder that I was the wealthy foreigner, about to 'jet-set' out of the country; meanwhile, they were the impoverished locals set to return to their corners to beg for spare change.

Further complicating my positioning was my dog. In the following section, I discuss how Kiva inadvertently became my main 'prop' in the field upon my move to Calhuasí. Due to her playful canine behaviour, children perceived me as someone fun and wanted to spend time with me and my dog. This allowed me much more access to children than I may have had otherwise. While my research identity was largely shaped by my dog's personality, I believe it is important to consider how this identity may have changed had I been a man or if I had a more aggressive dog. My experiences may have also varied dramatically had I been working in a different geographic region. What if I had been working with Muslims, where dogs are considered dirty; in South Africa, where dogs are used to dominate black Africans; or in Vietnam, where dogs are considered food?<sup>9</sup> My experiences with my dog in Ecuador took a particular shape due to the circumstances under which I was working. In my case, my dog became instrumental to my field research.

### Dogs, props and the 'fun' researcher

Since I moved to Calhuasí without my partner, I chose to bring my dog with me for companionship, emotional support and, to some measure, physical security. As a qualifier, I take my dog most places (as I write this, she is lying beside me in my office). Because I brought her as a companion rather than as an intentional 'research assistant', much of what I'm about to recount was largely unanticipated. While I recognised that she might have a small role to play, I had no idea how substantial this role would become.

When we first arrived in the village, Kiva was met with fear. To some extent, I could understand this: she is a 70-pound Rottweiler-cross that incites trembling knees amongst many. Dogs are common in Calhuasí but most are half her size. Furthermore, most are trained to be guard dogs (whereas my dog

is trained to catch a frisbee). Enhancing people's anxieties were the numerous and regular public displays of dog aggression in Ecuador. I recall watching training sessions for dogs of the middle-class in one of Quito's main parks. While trainers shouted German commands, Golden Retrievers attacked men wearing outfits of foam. It was surreal and terrifying all at once.

Admittedly, bringing a Canadian dog to Ecuador is a strange thing to do. Bringing her to live amongst a community of impoverished indigenous peoples is perhaps even more questionable. Doing so raises a number of questions concerning pet mobility, class privilege and the valuation of North American pets. As work in animal geographies has discussed (Philo and Wilbert 2000; Wolch and Emel 1998), animals are 'placed' differently across societies given particular local contexts. The 'place' of dogs in Ecuador varies dramatically from how dogs are positioned in the North. Nast (2006a) argues that due to hypercommodification and rising social alienations, people in the post-industrial North are investing in pets (financially, emotionally and culturally) on a scale that is previously unheard of. Amongst the middle and upper classes in Ecuador, the norms of 'pethood' are beginning to shift to replicate those found in the North (as evidenced by increasing pet speciality shops and high-end veterinarians). Thus, much like the Ecuadorian norms of childhood are shifting to replicate those found in the North (see Swanson 2005), so are the norms of pethood. However, amongst the rural poor, the status of dogs remains low.

This contrast was reinforced when I moved to Calhuasí. People found it very odd that I should travel with this large beast. They found it especially strange that I brought her everywhere with me – particularly indoors. In this community, dogs are for hunting rabbits and for guarding property. They are rarely permitted indoors and are fed upon whatever scraps they can find. However, my 'bourgeois' dog (Howell 2000) was used to sleeping on sofas and eating high-end dog foods. Right or wrong, I have bought into the cultural construction of pets in the North. I brought my dog to Ecuador because I consider her part of my immediate 'family'. But when Kiva followed me everywhere, she was very much transgressing local understandings of how dogs should behave.

In terms of my research, Kiva's potential surfaced almost immediately upon moving to Calhuasí. While children were initially cautious with her, they quickly learned that she was a great playmate. On



**Plate 1 Children and Kiva on the school grounds**

our second day in the village, we encountered some children playing football on the road. After Kiva deftly intercepted the ball and ran away with it, these youth decided that this might be a fun game. While the kids kicked and tossed the ball back and forth in an attempt to keep the ball away from Kiva, I chatted with them and, in doing so, realised that this could be an ideal way to interact with children. Stuart Aitken describes how he became part of children's play worlds when he adopted the role of Urg the Caveman at a children's museum over 20 years ago. He states,

I was part of the play of children, and their trust enfolded me in an enticing and carefree space of belonging. It was as if, by doing nothing of any great importance, we were doing the most important thing that the particular moment could enable. (Aitken 2001, 497)

In my case, since I was the bringer of Kiva – a source of great fun and entertainment – it seemed that children willingly brought me into their worlds.

While living in Calhuasí, I spent many mornings in the school grounds during recess. Children would always crowd around Kiva and tentatively reach out their hands to touch her (and then quickly withdraw their hands if she made any suspicious movements) (Plate 1). They were astounded that she would sit, lie down, shake a paw, jump up or stay on command. They were particularly interested in her collar and identification tags, perhaps never having encountered a dog with more identification than they themselves possessed. Although initially cautious, children learned to love her. Many would spend hours throwing balls or, failing that, plastic

bottles for her to retrieve. This truly became a great time for me to 'hang out' and chat with kids. Soon enough, Kiva's fame surpassed my own; whenever we walked along the dirt road to one place or another, I would hear 'KIVAAAA!!!' yelled from some distant place up the mountain and eventually see small hands waving fervently. Her popularity in the community meant that by the time I left Ecuador, Calhuasí was overrun with puppies named or re-named 'Wawa Kiva' – 'Baby Kiva'.

All of these interactions made me ponder my relationship with my dog. Nast (2006b) argues that there is a rising groundswell of 'pet-love' in the post-industrial North. An entire mini-economy has been built around pets, which includes pet super-stores, pet hospitals, pet cemeteries, pet photography, pet yoga, pet magazines, pet airlines and more. Dog parks are worthy of an ethnographic study in and of themselves (see Laurier *et al.* 2006; Nast 2006c). Here, middle-class dog owners mingle while their dogs play with one another. When the dogs play roughly (as animals do), many owners rush in to protect the perceived fragility of their pets. In these parks, the conversation revolves almost entirely around dogs. Often, the names of the owners are unknown. These aren't important; only the dogs matter.

Contrast this to life in Ecuador at 3400 metres. Here, people are happy if they have enough food to feed themselves, let alone their dogs. Dogs feed on whatever scraps they can, which might include rice, bones and potato skins. Meanwhile, my dog ate packaged dog food, which I carted up from the city. However, I recall my dismay when after a few days in the community, one of the family's dogs jumped onto the table where I was storing Kiva's food, tore open the packaging and devoured approximately one-week's worth of food. I couldn't blame her – it was probably the highest meat content she had ever had. After this, my bourgeois dog had to eat like the locals.

Yet doing so almost killed her. Chicken bones are a key staple of Andean dogs' diets, thus helping explain the high canine mortality rate. After scavenging some boiled chicken bones on the ground, Kiva became increasingly ill. Concerned, I took her to a veterinarian in the nearest city. The diagnosis was intestinal trauma and severe dehydration; the treatment was hospitalisation with an IV for three days. The total cost for her treatment was US\$140, a bargain by North American standards. Yet, when people in Calhuasí heard about this, they could not

understand why I did not let her die. Why would anyone spend \$140 to treat a dog, especially when this was more than most people earned in a month? What possible utility did I get from this animal? She did not hunt, she did not guard and she did nothing of particular value. I discovered that in order to explain my relationship to my dog, I had to say that she was 'like my daughter'. Since I have no children, I told them, I treat her as if she is one. This would elicit curious looks and then knowing nods. I found it was difficult to explain the emotional value that I placed on my dog in any other way.

The 'special' nature of my dog was something that was brought home to me over and over again. As my 'daughter' Kiva was granted special status, a status I often found uncomfortable and embarrassing given the absolute poverty of Calhuaseños. For instance, my 10- and 12-year-old bed mates were most amused when Kiva managed to creep onto the foot of our bed each night. Recognising this locally inappropriate behaviour, I did my best to get her down. However, the girls quite enjoyed the novelty of sleeping with this hairy beast and so she was allowed to stay. Much like my status was elevated by nature of being a gringa, Kiva's status was elevated by nature of being a gringa's dog.

When I moved back to Quito, my work was significantly facilitated due to my experiences in Calhuasí. I typically walked around Quito with my dog. Subsequently, when we approached Calhuaseño children on the streets, I would hear murmured *Kivas* and then see big smiles. Within minutes a small group of children would form, some of whom would join us to play fetch in a nearby park. During these times, I would often interview one or two children while their peers played with Kiva. Sometimes I would sit in the park with one child, while either one of us took turns throwing the ball. Other times, children would come to my apartment for the express purpose of playing with Kiva. My dog's involvement in my research provided a very fun way to interview working children. An interview with me meant that not only did they get a break from work and a photograph to take home, but they also got to play with a big, fun dog – a definite novelty for many of these children (Plate 2).

When I returned to Ecuador in the summer of 2006 for the first time in three years, one of the first questions that I received from Calhuaseños was, 'Where's Kiva? Is she still alive?' Whether or not she was still alive seemed like an odd question until I learned that the majority of the dogs that I had



**Plate 2** Sitting in a park in Quito with a panting Kiva

known in the community were now dead. Few of the puppies named or re-named 'Wawa Kiva' had survived. One in particular had been killed by her owner for attacking a sheep. When I confirmed that my Kiva was alive and now eight years old, they shared looks of shock amongst each other. When I further told them that my dog was now living with me in Scotland and that I had flown her there in an airplane, they were incredulous. My very mobile dog has now flown more than most people, a poignant example of the profound class privilege of North American pets.<sup>10</sup>

While aware of the tremendous role that my dog played in my research, I remain conflicted over how her presence reinforced the vast differences between my life and the lives of those in Calhuasí. However, as a methodological tool, she became instrumental to my research. I found that my dog allowed me much more access to children's and young people's lives than I would have had without her. Without Kiva (as I found out during my most recent trip to Ecuador), I lacked a key part of my research identity or perhaps I lacked my shtick. Whereas before I was the gringa with the dog, now I was just the gringa.

## Conclusion

When I recently returned to Ecuador, the magnitude of the region's poverty struck me all over again. After living there for a year and a half, I must have become de-sensitised to the conditions of poverty and hardship that people endure on a daily basis. Upon my return, I was overwhelmed anew. My

feelings reminded me of a conversation that I had with a 14-year-old girl from Calhuasí, Malena, four years ago. We were sitting in my kitchen in Quito, looking at pictures on my laptop and chatting about the community when she said to me, 'We work like donkeys but we don't make any money'. Then, she looked at me inquisitively and asked, 'Why do other people have so much money?' Not knowing how to respond to this, I pulled out a map and magazine and began pointing at pictures in an attempt to illustrate the inequitable distribution of wealth throughout the world. But despite my best efforts, my words were lost on her. It seems logical to equate hard work with profits. This is supposed to be one of the mainstays of a capitalist economy. Yet, things are different in Malena's community. No matter how hard they toil on their lands, they cannot make enough money to live. After having spent much time in Quito (and interacting with gringos like myself), Malena recognises the dramatic incongruities between her life experiences and those of others.

This paper has been an attempt to discuss the often awkward, troubling and uncomfortable problems that can arise during fieldwork. I have tried to bring power, privilege and vulnerability to the forefront of this discussion, mapping linkages between power and vulnerability as they pertained to me, indigenous women and children and (perhaps most absurdly) my dog. Although I recognise that I held a position of power throughout much of my research, at times, I felt more marginal than powerful. For instance, when 12-year-old Felicidad became my caretaker for three days, it reinforced my status as a vulnerable and incompetent outsider. This status was underpinned on another occasion when an 8-year-old boy cooked my lunch in his mother's absence. From my worldview, our respective roles as 'adult' and 'child' were fundamentally reversed. Shouldn't I have been taking care of them?

I also believe that my dog superseded my power on numerous occasions, to the extent that people often referred to me as 'Kiva' when they saw me in the streets. My research identity became unexpectedly bound to my relationship with my dog and, in many ways, positioned me as playful and non-threatening. While using my dog as a research assistant is unconventional and perhaps objectionable to some (due to the resources required to fly my pet 5000 km), the truth is that the level of depth I attained concerning young people's experiences with poverty and injustice would have been difficult

to obtain without her. Yet, paradoxically, the almost grotesque privileges accorded to my dog made these injustices and inequalities all the more apparent. Her travels, her medical bills, her diet and her North American habits were constant reminders of the power and privilege that my entire fieldwork experience was riding upon.

In research, many of us hold multiple and changing identities which, at times, may position us in unanticipated ways. In my case, my entrance into a closed, hostile indigenous community positioned me as an intrusive outsider waiting to prey upon local 'naiveties'. My disquieting experiences with Nelly and Malena brought my economic power and privilege to light in a way that I had, perhaps, tried to repress. My experience with my 12-year-old caretaker, Felicidad, turned my power on its head to highlight my perceived incompetencies. And Kiva's role in my research illustrated how power can even be overtaken by a privileged pet dog. Power, privilege and vulnerability are constants in much of our fieldwork and overcoming these valences of power may be difficult, if not impossible. Yet, confronting some of the uncomfortable and awkward truths in fieldwork is important if we hope to continue unravelling how uneven geographies of power are produced and reproduced through our own lived experiences.

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### Notes

- 1 Although I should note that flying her to Ecuador cost US\$100 and the only health requirement was a valid rabies vaccine.
- 2 Interestingly, many people bring their children into the field, but few actually write about how this affects their fieldwork experiences. For an exception, see Starrs *et al.* (2001).
- 3 Mary Weismantel (2001) also had this experience when she began working in the rural indigenous community of Zumbagua, Cotopaxi in the 1980s. Peter Wogan (2004) describes similar experiences while conducting research

with the Salasaca in Tungurahua province during the mid-1990s.

- 4 Priest, Clergy member of Diós es Sano. Interview by author, 16 March 2003, Quisapincha. Tape recording.
- 5 White-mestizos belong to the dominant racial-ethnic group in Ecuadorian society. 'Mestizo' is a term used to signify racial and cultural mixture between whites, blacks and indigenous peoples. However, mestizos generally self-identify as white, hence the label 'white-mestizo'.
- 6 These women earned their livings as guardians of the *Libro de San Gonzalo*, a witch's book reputed to control life and death. In many central Andean indigenous communities, the *Libro de San Gonzalo* is ascribed magical powers. By paying the guardians of the witch's book a hefty sum, individuals are able to access San Gonzalo's evil powers to harm their enemies. The most critical act for activating this witchcraft is to have the intended victim's name and manner of death or misfortune written into San Gonzalo's book (Wogan 2004). The only way to avoid or stop this witchcraft is to pay the guardians. Unfortunately for these particular guardians, their involvement in the community coincided with a tuberculosis outbreak. No matter how much money community members paid these women, people continued to die – resulting in a death toll of over 40. Recognising that these women were preying upon their presumed ignorance and making light of their belief system, they decided to take action.
- 7 While living in Ecuador, I had over 180 hours of Quichua language and culture instruction. However, I conducted all of my interviews in Spanish since, with the exception of the elderly and the very young, all Calhuaseños speak Spanish.
- 8 After every interview, I took individual portraits of each person. Whether exchanging information for pictures is an equal exchange is certainly debatable. However, the pictures that I gave them were highly prized. Cameras are very rare in the community and few community members had ever seen representative portraits of themselves.
- 9 I'd like to thank Heidi Nast for bringing these questions to my attention.
- 10 In fact, my dog has travelled by car throughout eastern North America, has flown 10 000 kilometres to Ecuador and back and another 5300 kilometres to Scotland.

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