

## FIELDWORK IN THEOLOGY – INTEREST GROUP

- Topic: Ethics in Fieldwork  
 Conveners: Lorraine Cuddeback-Gedeon, Mercy High School  
 Jaisy Joseph, Villanova University  
 Layla Karst, Loyola Marymount University  
 Moderator: Lorraine Cuddeback-Gedeon, Mercy High School  
 Presenters: Laurel Marshall Potter, Boston College  
 Dorris van Gaal, Calvert Hall High School  
 Respondent: Edward P. Hahnenberg, John Carroll University

This session was comprised of two papers and one respondent, each approximately twenty minutes in length, followed by a question and answer period.

The session began with Laurel Marshall Potter's paper "*¡Que viva la ronda!* Dialogue as a Framework for Theological Fieldwork," which navigates the ethical questions of representation and intersectionality. She drew on both Linda Alcoff's 1991 article, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 1988 essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," to consider not only what it means to speak for those who are often deemed more marginalized than the researcher, but also how "anxiety over control" regarding self-perception presents an important triangulating factor in the field. Marshall Potter proposed a dialogical framework that pulls the theologian-researcher away from any presumption of objectivity by sharing control over perceptions and representations of self and other. By ceding control, "the researcher starts by opening themselves up to feedback from the beginning, and commits to round after round of vulnerable speech and accountability."

To demonstrate this principle at work, Marshall Potter presented a few examples from her fieldwork among ecclesial base communities in El Salvador. She noted how the value system of Salvadorian CEBs subverts how one expects to be read under hegemonic colonial systems. She cannot control how she is received into the community and what prior frameworks may be projected onto her—whether she is categorized as a well-meaning religious sister who facilitated scholarships for community members or seen through the lens of university groups that visit every summer. Here, Marshall Potter suggested, the dialogical models helps to clarify the need to cede control of how she is read and understood and to allow the iterative process of dialogical trust to be built as both parties continue to know one another. Dialogue "is a way of extending our first impressions, of allowing time to revise who I thought you were, or who I thought I was, or, perhaps more precisely, who we are to each other, who I am when I'm with you" and it possesses the humility of recognizing that "in the beginning . . . we are all wrong."

Dorris van Gaal continued the conversation regarding ethics in fieldwork with her paper entitled "Migration Experience as a *Locus Theologicus*: Qualitative Research in Migration Theology." She first reflected on the importance of engaging in qualitative research in the field of migration theology. As migration becomes increasingly incorporated into the study of theology, it is recognized as a special location of divine revelation. Because most of the field in the United States has been dominated by conversations on Latinx and Asian immigration, she specifically chooses to study

African immigrants, whose experiences remain distinct from those who were brought during the period of enslavement. Furthermore, she correlates the experiences of African migrants to the United States with John of the Cross' narrative of the Dark night to "gain a deeper theological understanding of transformation of identity and faith in the experience of migration." The rest of van Gaal's paper focused on the ethical issues that emerged during her fieldwork. The most important aspect for her fieldwork, she argued, is to do justice to the communities she has encountered. Two examples of adhering to this principle involved both ensuring anonymity and being intentional about not projecting her own migratory experience onto those of her research participants.

In his excellent response, Edward Hahnenberg situated himself as a Gen-X, post-conciliar ecclesiologist who agreed with the premise of both papers that "qualitative research is *theologically* productive." If anything, the "Fieldwork in Theology" interest group has forced theologians of the past three years to focus on the question of method and to be as rigorous about naming contemporary experience as they have been when using historical or philosophical methods. Hahnenberg raised important questions regarding the how and the why of correlation. For example, how did van Gaal choose John of the Cross as a correlative theological partner for exploring the experience of African migrants? At what point in the process of participant-observation did such a correlation become an obvious dialogue partner? He also addressed the point of dialogue mentioned in Marshall Potter's paper as both "refreshing and challenging." In many ways, the vulnerability present in ceding control resonates with the intercultural dialogue present in the works of Orlando Espín and María Pilar Aquino, who both draw on the seminal work of Cuba philosopher Raúl Fornet-Betancourt.

During the question and answer period, there was a lively discussion that engaged the questions raised by Hahnenberg and the process of correlation in fieldwork. There were about fifteen people present for the session.

JAISSY A. JOSEPH  
*Villanova University*  
*Villanova, Pennsylvania*