Chapter 1

Moving Fieldwork: Traveling with Americans to and from Africa

This is a study of a relationship, an encounter between two spaces, two groups of extremely diverse people, two ideas—America and Africa. Strictly speaking, this book is not an ethnography. I do not claim to study an American ethnos. While I draw on the experiences of a small group of Americans who traveled to South Africa, my focus is on how an imagined and encountered “Africa” is mobilized to support certain ideas about America and being American. It is, however, important to me that I did the research on which this book is based as an anthropologist. For twenty months between 1999 and 2002 I did fieldwork with travelers from California and elsewhere in the United States who went to South Africa and especially Cape Town as vacationers, political tourists, or study-abroad students. My goal was to develop long-term ethnographic relationships with travelers rather than defining my subjects by their presence at a particular place and at a particular time, when they would be defined purely by their identity as tourists/travelers.

Most of the Americans, whose journeys I use here to think about how American values are shaped were part of a generation that Farai Chideya calls “the face of the new America” (Chideya 2000, 15) and “the core of a massive transition” (Chideya 2000, 20). They were part of an age group that looks to every experience as an opportunity to define their identities and core values but were lucky enough to do their searching in southern Africa. In having this experience in Africa they became part of a long history of America’s search for self in Africa.
(Kaplan 1993). Their journeys also became part of a wider American landscape, as much as it is possible for a specific story to be a general one, through the medium of popular culture.

While I have been careful to position my interpretations within a specific historical and political moment in the United States, I have claimed the luxury of focusing on broad categories and cannot tell the detailed particular stories of the multitude of Americans represented in some way in this study. I hope that I can show how these ideas about Americanness are being expressed in multiple ways by the Americans I observed and through American popular as well as political cultures. My fieldwork was specifically defined by experiences outside of everyday life. Yet it shows that in doing research as much as possible with travelers as they travel, it is possible to understand the field of relations that are of significance to the everyday life of young and well-to-do Americans (McCabe 2002).

Indeed in a world increasingly characterized by the movement in space of objects and of people, the understanding of contemporary society requires thinking about tourists and other travelers (Dann, Kristian, and Jacobsen 2002). Anthropology has moved over the course of this century from a deep discomfort with hybridity to making the hybrid/border crosser the ideal subject—in fact the ideal global citizen. Ann Stoler has shown how encounters at the frontiers of empire could “confound or confirm the structures of governance and the categories of rule” (Stoler 2001, 833). Frontiers are places where ideology and hegemony clash and where culture is exchanged along with commodities (and bodies) (Comaroff 1985, Ortiz 1995, Pratt 1992). Contemporary travel across borders for leisure or study can also set up relationships with people elsewhere that are important in the traveler’s construction of home. The ability to cross borders as well as to move within the United States is a vital aspect of the social life of Americans as it entrenches itself in their identity and personhood, regardless of their reason for travel. As with studies of colonial encounters, an ethnography of tourists can and must be so much more than the study of a leisure industry or of a temporary moment in time and space for a group of privileged global citizens. Tourism, however, has generally been a stepchild to the theories that have circulated around borderlands as spaces where ideas of culture and geography are sufficiently disturbed so that hybridity is able to develop and identities can be constructed or resisted (Anzaldúa 1987, Rosaldo 1993).

Despite the fact that a crucial question for contemporary practices of ethnography is how to know about today’s mobile subjects, it remains a challenge to find good ethnographies of the travel