In Search of a Moral Compass
Mapping ethics as a chain of consequences from the liberal academy to the global south

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You go to university
and get a bit of paper
that says you are qualified.
Does it also say that you
have unlimited rights
to invade my space?

— Barbara Nicholson

The idea for this paper emerged from a question similar to that posed by Barbara Nicholson. As an incoming graduate student in the Department of Geography at a respected Canadian university, I found myself asking why a "bit of paper" should suffice to qualify me as an ethical researcher, giving me the right to invade another's space and culture under the aegis of fieldwork. Of course, earning the "bit of paper" from my research ethics board (REB) would require that I avoid positioning myself as an invader with unlimited rights. But if I could "pass" the ethics review (as more than a few colleagues suggested) by carefully wording my plans and following a fill-in-the-blanks guide provided by the university REB[1], then what claim might I rightfully make about the ethical constitution of my research? This paper engages that question in an attempt to map the politics of ethical scholarship, specifically with regard to research among peoples who have been historically and systematically marginalized by knowledges developed and maintained within the "liberal academy" (Howitt and Stevens 2005).

Embedded in this project are concerns over positionality and what some scholars have referred to as the "power gradients" (Scheyvens and Leslie 2000) of knowledge production. These power gradients implicate not only researchers and geography as a discipline, but also REBs and the liberal academy writ large. A literature review reveals that scholars tend to address the ethics of cross-cultural research among marginalized peoples from one of two theoretical positions, postcolonial (Butz and Besio 2004; Bell 2002) or feminist (Fitzgerald 2004; Sundberg 2003); and/or from one of two methodological perspectives, ethics as process (Hay and Foley 1998) or ethics as practice (Scheyvens and Leslie 2000; Mullings 1999). A number of scholars have sought to identify the critical connections between process and practice (Madge and Raghuram 2006; Howitt and Stevens 2005; Proctor 1998; Kobayashi 1994; Madge 1993); and a few have gone one step further, singling out geography as having a particular ethical imperative given the discipline's dubious history in the service of Western imperialism (Shaw, Herman and Dobbs 2006) and its capacity to situate morality in place and time (Smith 2001, 2000).

My own approach to this issue is informed, to some extent, by all of the above. I recognize the links between postcolonial and feminist theory; however, I draw more heavily on the former for its compatibility with a position that yields to what David Smith calls "the basic needs of the least

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[1] Sample letters of informed consent are posted on the website for the REB to which I am responsible. All letters are in English; none is appropriate for research among non-literate individuals.

advantaged" (Smith 2000: 9—10). Pluralist in scope, postcolonialism submits to a common project that seeks to "destabilize established Western assumptions about the centrality of the North/West in the production of knowledge and the exercise of power" (Loomba paraphrased in Bell 2002: 508). Enacted as methodology, postcolonialism "forefronts the ethical issues of who gains from this research and why" (Madge and Raghuram 2006: 275). I agree with those scholars who contend that geography as a discipline must improve its ethics record, and I consider here the prospects for bringing this about. In line with those who argue for a "spatially extensive beneficence" (Smith 2000: 93; Corbridge 1993), I urge geographers to take up the challenge of revealing how "space hides consequences" (Barnett et al. 2005: 24) — both in the world and in the academy.

To say that the scope of this paper cannot do justice to the topic at hand would be an understatement. That said, I am neither the first nor do I expect to be the last to tackle the politics of ethical research in the space equivalent to a short chapter or journal submission. What I hope makes this attempt a valuable contribution to the greater debate, however, is that it explores ethics from the position of a scholar-in-the-making. In this sense, the biases and misunderstandings which I bring to a discussion of ethical research may be considered both a proof of my own shortcomings and/or a possible comment on where the ethics regime in the liberal academy has gone wrong. This approach takes as its premise the observation of Clare Madge and Parvati Raghuram that "(r)outinized behaviour of individual academics must not be judged wholly by the norms of personal ethics without recognizing that these are institutionally produced" (2006: 283—284). In order to bring some specificity to the institutional production of ethics, I will reference the ethics protocol to which I am subject. This protocol includes two levels of ethics review, both of which are informed by the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (herein TCPS).[2]

The TCPS defines two essential components of ethical research: "(1) the selection and achievement of morally acceptable ends and (2) the morally acceptable means to those ends" (2005: i.4). In this paper, I question the rubric under which the ethical value of means and ends is adjudicated. I loosely adopt the concept of a "chain of consequences" (Barnett et al. 2005: 24) in order to explore our individual and institutional responsibilities to distant others. Of concern is substantiating the claim that cross-cultural research among marginalized peoples demands a special ethics protocol. The term "marginalized peoples" is used here as a descriptor for those historically undermined by Western knowledges, and is preferred to "indigenous," which is categorically narrow and essentialist in nature. This is not to obscure the argument that broadly similar indigenous epistemologies exist (Cajete 2000, referenced in Shaw, Herman and Dobbs 2006), nor to overlook that such epistemologies already form the

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[2] The TCPS sets the ethics protocol for research conducted under the jurisdiction of the following bodies: Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC), and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

basis for special ethics considerations (TCPS 2005: sec. 6). But a non-racialized, purposely fluid typology allows for distinctions to be made, for example, between Third World peasants and elites:[3] the former constituting an arguably marginalized group; the latter, ostensibly better-served by Western knowledges. To propose that cross-cultural research among marginalized peoples demands a special ethics protocol is not to idealize a marginalized other as "a source of some alternative universal truth" (Howitt and Stevens 2005: 35). It is, however, to uphold David Smith's claim that "(s)ome states of affairs are bad, and should be struggled against and changed" (Smith 2000: 2).

While all research manifests differentials of power that demand ethical sensitivity, Madge (1993: 13) makes the case that what enables the Western scholar to "be there" conducting cross-cultural research is "the history of violence and inequality" associated with the colonizing project. On this view, the Western scholar is positioned in what Smith terms "the place of good fortune" (Smith 2000: 3).[4] It is from this place that ethics protocols are written.[5] The fact that the TCPS acknowledges some special interest ethics is an indication that the institutional agents managing knowledge production in Canada are sensitive, at some level, to correcting for a "bad" state of affairs. Informed by the principle of procedural justice, the inclusionary policies of the TCPS impose "a duty on researchers not to discriminate against disadvantaged groups," including: "women, people of colour or of different ethnicity, the elderly, children and restricted or dependent people" (TCPS 2005: art. 5.1). There is an argument to be made, however, that such particularizing of historically excluded research groups may obscure the structural disadvantage imposed upon marginalized peoples as a class. David Harvey's concept of "spatial justice" (Harvey 1973) serves here as a heuristic tool for understanding the multiplier effect of systematic disadvantages and exclusions. As Audrey Kobayashi and James Proctor point out in a recent article on the geography of values, justice, and ethics: "For all the variety of interpretations of spatial justice, questions of class remain fundamental, and provide a moral starting point [...] for geographical justice, in common with issues of 'race', sexuality, ability and other markers of difference" (2004: 6).

Tellingly, there is no reference to class in the TCPS,[6] nor is there any specific discussion of the ethics of cross-cultural research among marginalized peoples in what we might refer to generally as the global south. In fact, the interests of marginalized peoples are little more than a footnote in the ethical protocol of the Canadian university system. A one-page "Review of Research in Other Jurisdictions or

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[3] This avoids the tendency toward "third world difference," which Chandra Talpade Mohanty calls a "reductive and homogenous notion" (1988: 63).

[4] Smith's *place of good fortune* incorporates three meanings of place: "the role or part played by good fortune in people's lives, position in some social structure, and place in its geographical sense" (Smith 2000: 3).

[5] The TCPS is said to reflect the guidelines of its agent bodies, as well as "more recent statements by other Canadian agencies, and [...] statements from the *international community*" (TCPS 2005: i.5). Italics mine. The "international community" is defined by statements released from international bodies located in Washington, D.C, Geneva, Paris and Oslo. No mention is made of ethics conventions originating in the global south.

[6] The word "class" appears only three times in the TCPS: twice in reference to the class(room) environment and once in reference to a particular class of health research.

Countries" (TCPS 2005: art 1.14) fails to address how what constitutes ethical research may differ between the developed and developing world. The researcher is encouraged to accept that the eight-point TCPS "Guiding Ethical Principles," which include a call for "Balancing Harms and Benefits" (2005: i.6), is of universal value. But, as Madge pointedly asks: "Is it enough that research does not 'harm' those who are 'studied' by fieldwork or by subsequent release of findings? Should research not also make some commitment to the improvement of the lives of the people 'studied'?" (1993: 25). Madge's question challenges not only the principle of distributive justice as applied in the TCPS, but also the position that "since researchers are not aid agencies, REBs should not try to force them to undertake aid work" (TCPS 2005: art. 1.14). I will address each of these issues in turn.

The TCPS defines distributive justice in the realm of ethical research as follows: "members of society should neither bear an unfair share of the direct burdens of participating in research, nor should they be unfairly excluded from the potential benefits of research participation" (2005: sec. 5). The nuances of this argument are important, because no demands are placed on the researcher to improve the life of the researched. Drawn from medical discourse, the standard of no harm, or "minimal risk" (TCPS 2005: 1.5), seems to suggest that the scholar's only ethical dilemma is to ensure that research participants are not caused to suffer as a result of research. But what happens if the researched are already suffering? Is this not also an ethical concern? As it stands, there is no imperative for those in *the place of good fortune* to carry out research that unsettles the balance of harms and benefits in the interests of the least advantaged. Yet competing interpretations of distributive justice, not mentioned in the TCPS, would demand just that. On R.G. Peffer's view, for example, value prioritization would require that "everyone's basic security and subsistence rights are to be met," and that "social and economic inequalities are justified if and only if they benefit the least advantaged" (1990: 14). [7] This position, adopted as a basis for research ethics, would order the Western liberal academy to address human suffering as a matter of course. In contrast, the current TCPS makes no excuses for the fact that "(i)n most research, the primary benefits are for society and for the advancement of knowledge" (2005: i.6). Exactly *which* society and *whose* knowledge accrues benefits is left unsaid.

While the TCPS stipulates that researchers should not be mandated to carry out "aid work," at least some individuals engaged in cross cultural research among marginalized peoples argue that scholars, in fact, have a responsibility "to find solutions to issues of inequality, inequity and social justice rather than simply (to) record and describe them" (Mercer, Mohan, and Power 2003: 418). That responsibility is consistent with the "emancipatory" project of postcolonial theory as described by Stan Stevens. According to Stevens, we must question the type of research that might rightfully be considered ethical. Postcolonial research, he says, moves away from (among other things) "a Western over-preoccupation

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[7] Peffer further argues that inequalities "are not to exceed levels that will seriously undermine equal worth of liberty" (1990: 14).

with 'self' and self-gratification (not excluding such selfish motivations as the pursuit of academic status or the satisfying of intellectual curiosity)" (Howitt and Stevens 2005: 36). With Stevens' criticism of selfish and curiosity-based research duly noted, Madge and Raghuram warn that we should avoid simply adopting postcolonialism "as a comfortable buffer of inclusion of some sites and knowledges whilst reproducing dominant northern paradigms" (2006: 284).[8] For Kathryn Besio, this position raises its own set of challenges, as it asks researchers "to negotiate between the poles of representational paralysis and research praxis, while making transparent the politics of the research and the contributions of the research subject prominent" (2005: 322). Such narrow emphasis on the positionality of the cross-cultural researcher has led Regina Scheyvens and Helen Leslie to declare a "crisis of legitimacy" (2000: 121) among scholars working with marginalized peoples. Building on the research of others, Scheyvens and Leslie argue that many scholars have responded poorly to finding themselves in *the place of good fortune*. Some have been prompted to "withdraw completely" from cross-cultural research (Kobayashi 1994: 74); others have adopted a wholly relativist standpoint, arguing that "only those who are of a particular race or ethnic group can study or understand others in a similar situation" (Wolf cited in Scheyvens and Leslie 2000: 121); and not a few have opted to continue researching cross-cultural issues, but have turned to textual analysis in place of fieldwork (Nagar 2002: 180). All of these responses, however, are problematic. Inaction is not only *not* value-neutral (Kobayashi 1994), but it represents "an abdication of responsibility with regard to global relations of privilege and authority which are granted, whether we like it or not, to First World women (and men)" (Radcliffe cited in Scheyvens and Leslie 2000: 121—122). Relativism romanticizes, promoting polyvocality while ignoring the structures that condition marginalization; while to avoid fieldwork is to evade "the essential geographic activity" (Sundberg 2003: 180). So what is to be done? "(H)ow can the 'colonial present' of one contemporary practice of imperialism — that of why, how and what we research — be decentred and relocated to make development research more postcolonial" (Madge and Raghuram 2006: 270).[9]

To start, suggest Iain Hay and Paul Foley, we must decentre and relocate research ethics. Rather than arguing for the augmentation of "prescriptive" approaches to ethical research, Hay and Foley urge us to consider the benefits of "moral *thinking*" (1998: 171). They argue for a pedagogy of ethics that asks scholars-in-the-making to internalize moral philosophy, to struggle with it, to recognize that it should not be treated as a remote or purely instrumental concern. Building on earlier scholarship, Hay and Foley set five goals for a pedagogy of ethics, which they say "might be meshed carefully into existing geography curricula": stimulating the moral imagination, recognizing ethical issues, developing analytical skills,

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[8] A similar argument is made regarding feminist research. "When we write about the experiences of a group to which we do not belong, we should think about the ethics of our action, considering whether or not our work will be used to reinforce and perpetuate domination" (hooks 1989, cited in Madge 1993: 23—24). See also: England 1994.

[9] Reference to the 'colonial present' is drawn from Gregory 2004.

eliciting a sense of moral responsibility and personal responsibility, and tolerating (and resisting) disagreement and ambiguity (1998: 173—174). These goals may be achieved, Hay and Foley say, by engaging students in the deliberation of moral dilemmas. Students of this approach must not only adjudicate on a given dilemma by assessing it against both normative ethical theory and social standards, but they must also be prepared to defend their decision by making a reasonably compelling argument to others. This exercise is not meant to teach geographers how to react to specific scenarios. Instead it is meant to facilitate a thought process that encourages an "authentic personal response to moral values" (Hay and Foley 1998: 172). The rationale is simple: empowered with a way to think about moral philosophy, students are better prepared to deal with ethics in both process and practice. A pedagogy of ethics takes up Proctor's call for reinforcing the links between "professional" and "substantive" ethics (1998). Moreover, by encouraging students to look both "inward" at themselves, the discipline and the academy and "outward" at the world, it supports Smith's view that making real "moral progress in human geography" involves "transcending the place of good fortune" (2000).

Juggling particular and universal notions of ethics in this way is not incompatible with the claim that cross-cultural research among marginalized peoples demands a special ethics protocol, nor is it incompatible with postcolonialism. According to Stevens, "postcolonial research [...] is grounded in the perception of other peoples as 'others' who are different but not intrinsically different or alien, who differ culturally but not in essential humanity and value" (2005: 36). Parsing essentialist terminology, we might understand Stevens' reference to the commonalities of human existence to include shared basic needs. These basic needs are fundamentally important, I would argue, to a pedagogy of ethics, which, as proposed by Hay and Foley, requires geographers to defend value prioritization (1998: 175). If we accept this position, then yielding to the basic needs of the least advantaged is an ethically defensible mandate. At this point, the commitment to cross-cultural research among marginalized peoples is more narrowly focused and we are asked to exchange mere curiosity in the particularities of difference for a genuine concern about disparities in universal basic needs. Terry Eagleton (1996) argues this point forcefully: "Differences cannot fully flourish while men and women languish under forms of exploitation; and to combat these forms effectively implicates ideas of humanity which are necessarily universal" (cited in Smith 2000: 7). Where *the place of good fortune* is transcended, space is no longer allowed to obscure consequence and we recognize that "(t)o the extent that these Other people could have been 'Us' (the affluent), and to the extent that their lives are inextricably linked to our own, there are good reasons for attending to their needs and rights as fellow human beings" (Corbridge 1998, cited in Smith 2000: 11).

Until the needs and rights of marginalized peoples become more than just a footnote for ethics protocol in the liberal academy, however, the prospects for our contribution to positive social change in the global south are limited. Ultimately, as Richa Nagar argues, "our ability to talk across worlds — to

align our theoretical priorities with the concerns of marginalized communities whose struggles we want to advance — is connected to the opportunities, constraints and values embedded in our academic institutions" (2002: 184). It is my position that students and faculty should actively endorse the need to decentre and relocate research ethics. Moving moral philosophy into the geography classroom encourages ethical thinking and epistemic humility. It speaks to ethics as a matter of intrinsic value, as something more than the procedural vagaries evidenced by a "bit of paper". The concern, of course, still exists that the moral philosophy with which a pedagogy of ethics engages will be a predominantly Western philosophy. Thus, scholars preparing to undertake cross-cultural research in the global south must be charged with the responsibility to challenge exclusions and biases, to engage alternative knowledges in their work, and to lobby for pre-fieldwork funding, so that participant action research is not picked up mid-stream but honored collectively from concept to conclusion. Changing the directionality of ethics from a top-down review to a bottom-up demand will require changes in the liberal academy, which has established a reputation for "allowing a small space of difference while reinforcing the status quo of privilege" (Howitt and Stevens 2005: 37). Nevertheless, Madge and Raghuram (in the tradition of Paul Cloke) correctly argue that "a consideration of the banal processes of production of academic knowledge has to be a first step in rethinking the possibility of activism and genuine dialogue as part of academic research" (2006: 283—284). If all of this sounds idealistic, then it is consistent with a postcolonial paradigm and, according to Stevens, should be regarded as a good thing (Howitt and Stevens 2005: 36).

That Barbara Nicholson should question our right to invade another's space and culture under the aegis of fieldwork and that Linda Tuhiwai Smith should call research "one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary" (cited in Howitt and Stevens 2005: 32) is proof of past ethics regimes gone wrong. In this paper, I have attempted to demonstrate that much moral work remains to be done in the liberal academy. This is reflected in the fact that ethics protocols like the TCPS consider cross-cultural research among marginalized peoples in the global south an after-thought, worth one page in one hundred. The time for scholars to concern themselves with issues of moral philosophy should not be measured by the deadline of an ethics review board. Ethics classes should be mandatory for all graduate students and they should emphasize both professional and substantive ethics. Perhaps more than any other discipline this should be true of geography: first, because of the discipline's long history in the service of Western imperialism; and second, because geographers are uniquely capable of revealing the ways in which space hides consequences. If I am wrong, I stand to be corrected; if I am right, let this be a manifesto for change.

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