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Julia Verne

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“Le terrain, c’est moi?” Reflections on the emergence of the field in translocal research

« Le terrain, c’est moi? » Réflexions sur l’émergence du terrain en recherche des connexions « trans-locales »

Julia Verne

Institute of Human Geography, Goethe University Frankfurt

Abstract

“Le terrain” or “the field” has long been a rather unquestioned and uncriticized dimension of geographical research. Nevertheless, over the last decades, with an increasing interest in qualitative methodologies as well as the rising importance of a reflexive approach, geographers have begun to examine critically the meaning of the field, fieldwork and the position and role of the researcher within the field. Generally it is agreed that the field refers to the specific location where the empirical research is done, including the people and objects in this place. Whereas in most cases the field is a certain region, city or neighbourhood, the recent interest in translocal connections and networks has led not only to multi-sited research but also to mobile methodologies which increases the complexity of defining the field. Seeing the field as a set of relations rather than as points on maps, defining the field also means to create the field! Following the ideas of Latour or Deleuze requires one to follow the established lines and connections, but where can the limits be set? Where is the centre of the network or rhizome for the research? And where should the study stop following the networks? Ultimately, it is the researcher’s decision how to delimit the field. Using examples from my own mobile ethnographic research on mobility, translocality and commercial connections of young Zanzibari, I will explore the process of creating the field. Considering ideas of Latour and Deleuze, I will critically examine the connections between methodology, the researcher’s positionality and the construction of the field, to try to open up discussions on the “arbitrariness” of the field and its relevance for the production of geographic knowledge.

Résumé

Le terrain est longtemps resté un champ non questionné et non critiqué de la recherche en géographie. Cependant, au cours des dernières décennies, témoignant d’un intérêt croissant pour les méthodologies qualitatives, les géographes ont commencé à examiner de manière critique la signification de leur terrain, leur travail de recherche, et leur position et leur rôle sur le terrain. De manière générale, le terrain est entendu comme l’endroit spécifique où la recherche empirique est menée, et inclut, ce faisant, l’étude des personnes et des objets qui s’y trouvent. Alors que dans la plupart des cas, le terrain correspond à une région, une ville ou un quartier, l’intérêt récent pour les connections et réseaux « trans-locaux » a non seulement accru l’intérêt pour les recherches multi-sites, mais a également permis d’introduire des méthodologies mobiles ce qui contribue à accroître la difficulté de le définir précisément. Plus qu’un point sur une carte, le terrain correspond à un ensemble complexe de relations, et le définir revient aussi à le créer. Suivant alors les développements de Latour ou Deleuze qui nous incitent à suivre les lignes et les différentes connections établies, mais où faut-il fixer les limites? En d’autres termes, où situer correctement le
centre du réseau ou du rhizome d’une recherche ? Et où doit-on s’arrêter de suivre les réseaux ? Au final, il appartient au chercheur de déterminer la manière de circonscrire son terrain. À l’aide d’exemples tirés de mes propres recherches ethnographiques sur la mobilité, la “translocalité” et les relations commerciales des jeunes Zanzibari, je vais tenter de mettre au jour les différents processus qui sont à l’origine de la création du terrain. Tenant compte des idées de Latour et Deleuze, j’ai comme objectif d’analyser de manière critique les rapports entre la méthodologie, le positionnement du chercheur et la construction du terrain, en essayant d’ouvrir le débat sur le caractère arbitraire du terrain, et sa pertinence pour la production du savoir en géographie.

Keywords  
fieldwork, construction of the field, ethnography, rhizome, relationality, translocality, mobility, positionality

Mots-clés  
terrain, construction de terrain, rhizome, ethnographie, relationalité, translocalité, mobilité, positionalité

“Our terrains aren’t territories, they have weird borders, they are [...] rhizomes.”

Introduction – Questioning ‘the field’

Should I book my flight to Toronto or to Dallas? Should I talk to people in Zanzibar or in Mombasa? Should I accompany some traders from Dubai to Bangkok or to Jakarta, or should I do both? Should I look at only one trade good? Or focus on a different one on each route? How far and up to where should I follow the flows of people, things and information through translocal connections? These and similar questions have regularly come to my mind when I began to think about the field of my empirical research. Looking at the translocal Swahili space with a focus on the ways in which mobility is lived, experienced and effects the sense of this space, it is exactly the translocal connections that are in the centre of the research, but how to discern and access them? How to demarcate and justify the boundaries of my field?

For a long time, “le terrain” or ‘the field’ has been a rather unquestioned and uncritical dimension of geographical research. Nevertheless, over the last decades, hand in hand with an increasing interest in qualitative methodologies and the raising popularity of reflexivity and ‘positionality’, geographers have begun to critically examine the meaning of the field, fieldwork and the position and role of the researcher within the field (cf. Calbérac 2010, 2011, Cook et al. 2005, Driver 2000, Lévy et al. 2004, Volvey 2003). In contrast to topics that are related to a particular site, possibly a street, a neighbourhood or a city and are dealt with by looking at what happens within it, it is topics like this one as well as most research related to mobility and globalisation studies, transnationalism and networks that very clearly amounts to having to make a choice. Here, it becomes evident that the field is not pregiven; it does not obviously result from the research questions.
Instead, it has to be actively and reflexively created by the researcher. And with more and more research questions obviously requiring an active decision by the researcher about the limits of the field, it seems comprehensible that Lamont and Fournier state in their introduction to *Cultivating differences* that “one of the most important challenges that we face today is understanding how we create boundaries and, [in this respect], what the [methodological] consequences of such actions are” (Lamont & Fournier 1992: 1).

Therefore, it is the aim of this article to engage with the question of *how* to define the field in geographical research, at a time in which the field is often no longer seen as a cohesive area on a map, but is more and more often regarded as a set of relations in which the mobility of actors, things and ideas and their connectedness over space and time have to be acknowledged. I will do this by taking up a relational perspective, a perspective that has become more and more popular in geography over the last years, and particularly emphasises the need to foreground lines and connections instead of regarding the world as consisting of separate entities. In order to create a more vivid image of how such a relational field might look like, I will introduce the rhizome as developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1976), showing how this can serve as an enriching metaphor to conceptualise the field, allowing us to better account for the relational, processual, heterogeneous and complex character of today’s research settings and topics. By drawing on my own research on the lived experience of translocality in the Swahili context, I will then illustrate how the ideas related to the rhizome can guide the process of constructing the field, helping the researcher to navigate through often sheer unlimited possibilities when trying to get to grips with translocal or even globe-spanning phenomena. Promoting to let go and become drawn into the field, rather than putting a static frame over a particular research setting, the article shows that following the image of the rhizome offers a consequently inductive alternative to often mostly deductive ways of defining the field. However, it also points to the central role of the researcher in this process. Thus, bearing in mind the geographical debates on positionality and reflexivity (cf. England 1994, Lussault 2003, Nagar & Ali 2003, Rose 1997, Sidaway 2000), I will conclude by arguing that, instead of seeing the field as a natural given, what is needed are more (self)-critical engagements with the research process that lay open not only the positionalities in respect to encounters with “the researched”, but also the construction of “the field” itself. Instead of claiming pseudo-objectivity, I therefore suggest that what might be accused of being a certain arbitrariness or under-systematisation of the research process should rather be made a virtue by reflexively accounting for the processes that construct the field. In this respect, as a contribution to the discussions about newly perceived challenges when dealing with translocal networks and mobilities, this paper can also be understood as a call for more inductive and interpretative engagements with “the field” more generally.
1 Developing a relational perspective

As Massey points out in her introduction to a special issue of the *Geografiska Annaler B* in 2004, “thinking space relationally has become one of our thematic tunes in our times in geography” (Massey 2004: 3). And, indeed, there have been numerous calls for a relational thinking in geography since the mid-90s (cf. Allen et al. 1998, Bathelt & Glueckler 2003, 2005, Boggs & Rantisi 2003). Nevertheless, it seems far easier to put relationality on the agenda than to actually pursue it in research practice. In general, it can be observed that most of the work is relational only in the thematic sense, meaning that it is concerned with the relations among actors and structures or different institutions and the ways in which they are intertwined and interact at different scales (Amin 1998, Bradbury & Lichtenstein 2000, Dicken & Malmberg 2001). This seems to be due to the widespread assumption that relationality presupposes binaries and that relational thinking intends to be attentive to the importance of interconnections between the different entities. As Yeung states, “thinking about relationality necessitates an analytical movement away from abstract phenomena to examine the interconnections between discrete phenomena and to transcend their dichotomisation (Yeung 2005: 44). It is Emirbayer in his “manifesto for a relational sociology”, who discusses the different applications of so called relational ideas, pointing out the differences between this focus on interaction and a genuinely relational point of view (Emirbayer 1997: 285). According to him, relationality is based on what he calls a transactional perspective, which acknowledges that the very terms or units involved in a transaction derive their meaning, significance and identity from the (changing) functional roles they play within that transaction. Thus, the crucial difference is, that the transaction is understood as a dynamic, unfolding process and becomes the primary unit of analysis rather than the constituent elements themselves. This idea has been elaborated on well by Cassirer when he writes that things “are not assumed as independent existences present anterior to any relation, but [...] gain their whole being [...] first in and with the relations which are predicated of them. Such ‘things’ are terms of relations, and as such can never be ‘given’ in isolation but only in ideal community with each other” (Cassirer 1953: 36). In contrast to the interactional notion mentioned above, thinking relationally therefore entails to reject the notion that one can posit discrete, pregiven units and see “relations between terms or units as pre-eminently dynamic, unfolding and ongoing processes rather than as static tides among inert substances” (Emirbayer 1997: 289). Or, as Rajchman (2000) puts it:

“We should no longer think in terms of lines going from one fixed point to another, but, on the contrary, must think of points as lying at the intersection of many entangled lines, capable of drawing out “other spaces” [...] The problem then becomes to “make lines” rather than to “make a final point” (Rajchman 2000: 100).
Doreen Massey’s *A Global Sense of Place*, first published 1991 in *Marxism Today* and gaining increasing popularity when being republished as a chapter in her book *Space, Place and Gender* (1994), can surely be regarded as one of the milestones in the development of a relational conceptualisation of place and space. Though primary elaborations on the role of relational perspectives mainly concentrated on understandings of place (cf. Allen *et al.* 1998, Amin 2004, Smith 2001), ‘recent years have witnessed a burgeoning of work on “thinking space relationally”’ (Jones 2009: 487). As Jones elaborates in his recent historical approach to conceptualisations of space:

“relational thinking is a paradigmatic departure from the concerns of absolute and relative space, because it dissolves the boundaries between objects and space, and rejects forms of spatial totality. Space does not exist as an entity in and of itself, over and above material objects and their spatiotemporal relations and extensions. In short, objects are space, space is objects, and moreover objects with all this being a perpetual becoming of heterogeneous networks and events that connect internal spatiotemporal relations” (Jones 2009: 491)

But how can such an abstract understanding of space be imagined? Continuous changes of position depending on the contents and power of the points and relations lead to its ever-changing and fluid form, holding together as well as being held together by a multiplicity and complexity of lines. It seems as if all efforts to grasp this kind of space as a stable formation have to fail. Instead, this space appears as a rather messy meshwork of multiple lines deriving from multiple sources that become entangled and intermingle with one another. It is this understanding of relational space that we find when looking at ‘the rhizome’ as developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1976).
2 Introducing the metaphor of the rhizome

“I tend to think of things as sets of lines to be unravelled but also to be made to intersect. I don’t like points.... Lines aren’t things running between two points; points are where several lines intersect. Lines never run uniformly, and points are nothing but inflections of lines. More generally, it’s not beginnings and ends that count, but middles” (Deleuze 1995: 160–61).

The idea of the rhizome is not new, but it is especially over the last years that it has gained considerable influence and is now increasingly mentioned in geographical discussions on networks (cf. Calbérac 2010, Doel 1999, Grabher 2006, Hess 2004, Jones 2009, Powell 2007, Schlottmann 2008, Smith 2003). Written as the introduction to *Mille Plateaux* (1980), Deleuze and Guattari suggest “the rhizome” as a toolkit to help you visualise processes of networked, relational, and transversal thought (cf. Colman 2005: 231). They oppose the rhizome to the vertical structure of the arborescent model that, in their view, stands for rationalistic, dualistic and hierarchical/scalar thinking, and is thus seen to evoke everything that rhizomatic thought attempts to turn away from.

In my opinion, ‘the rhizome’ serves as a promising starting point from which to look at dimensions of the field, which, so far, have not gained enough attention, or, at least, have not been addressed in this particular way. Of course, as geographers we are usually not researching actual rhizomes, but we can use it as a metaphor and transfer the characteristics generally ascribed to rhizomes to our fields. In particular, it enables us to account for the complex, dynamic and genuine relational character of translocal research settings, getting to grips with the questions of how connections are made, where they can lead us and how they manage to evoke a sense of the translocal field.

While some question if the term ‘rhizome’ really evokes the best image – Ingold for example prefers the image of the fungal mycelium and generally talks of meshworks (Ingold 2006: 13, Ingold 2007: 41) – I will restrict the following elaborations to the characteristics that have been ascribed to the rhizome instead of pondering on the best term to capture them. Taking inspiration from the rhizome’s central characteristics as outlined by Deleuze and Guattari almost thirty-five years ago and further elaborated by other relational thinkers, this article argues that the rhizome can serve as an enriching image to think about the field in geographical research, prompting empirical research that is better able to address the complexity, heterogeneity and dynamic character of translocal research contexts.

2.1 The processual character of the field

Any attempt to visualise a field always has to result in the representation of a momentary state of being of an actually fluctuating situation (Serres 1991: 9). This processual nature of research fields is taken even further in the idea of the ‘rhizome’
as it is meant as an image of thought which thinks of the world as a meshwork of multiple and branching roots, “with no central axis, no unified point of origin, and no given direction of growth” (Thrift 2000: 716). Accounting for the partial and constantly changing nature of the meshworks of connections, expressed by Deleuze and Guattari in “lines of flow and flight” (Deleuze & Guattari 1977: 34) and seeing the ‘rhizome’ as a series of transformations and translations (Latour 2005: 108) is the first aspect on which I want to elaborate here. Contrary to a static conception of the field at a given point in time, which often goes hand in hand with the assumption that this is how the field is and therefore can be analysed, the rhizome is imagined as a continuously changing process, thus reflecting more accurately the ways in which fields are developed, changed, expanded and restricted simultaneously in different parts. This multiplicity, which is advanced by Deleuze and Guattari as a central principle of the rhizome, corresponds to its constant proliferation as expected and unexpected connections are made. Lines that continually change, expand, resume, mutate and evolve into new constellations, forming what Serres and Latour call a ‘syrhese’ (Serres & Latour, 1995: 122, see also Deleuze & Guattari, 1977: 21; Henaff, 2005: 184).

What becomes clear by looking at this idea of multiplicity is that a rhizomatic language generally emphasises the becoming over the being by promoting the processual character of embeddedness and social relations (Ingold, 2006: 15; Hess, 2004: 179). Nevertheless, this focus does not imply that the elements are flowing infinitely within a network. Instead, there are lines of segmentation that stratify, mark, assign, organise and territorialise the rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari, 1977, 16). Movement and situatedness are therefore brought together

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Fig. 2  Rhizome of Cimicifuga racemosa (Source: Felter & Lloyd 1898, Fig. 72)
by indicating processes of embedding, through growth and the amalgamation of heterogeneous elements, as well as processes of disembedding.

Understanding the research field “as a verb, a process” (Law, 1992: 380), as entailed in the metaphor of the rhizome therefore allows us to examine ‘how it becomes’ instead of ‘as it is’ by being especially attentive to its development and changes in time and space. Despite presumingly analysing *a posteriori* how established connections work, this perspective therefore opens up more productive ways of dealing with questions of how and why translocal connections and forms of mobility are created and maintained.

### 2.2 The heterogeneous character of the field

The dislike of beginnings and ends that is expressed by Deleuze and other relational thinkers can respectively be understood as a general dislike of oppositions. Instead of seeing things as either one or the other, the rhizome attempts to overcome all kinds of dualisms through finding a way to address the ‘middles’. This so-called associationalist thinking is the second characteristic which I want to point out here, as it enables us to see fields as heterogeneous and multidimensional associations in which attention needs to be paid to all its elements in order to understand the way it is held together.

As Murdoch argues in his article on “a geography of heterogeneous associations”, “dualistic thinking is problematic in social theory because it tends to cleave theoretical perspectives into two distinct and incommensurable parts, thereby polarising whole fields of concepts and leading to a fractured view of the world” (Murdoch, 1997: 322). Nevertheless, it is still dominant in most socio-spatial analysis. In contrast to that, from its non-dualistic standpoint, a rhizomatic perspective wants us to overcome the established binary juxtapositions of structure/agency, global/local, human/nonhuman, economy/culture by “focusing on how things are ‘stitched together’ across divisions and distinctions” (Murdoch, 1997: 322). Understanding entities, their form and attributes, as results of their relations with other entities, “as outcomes and effects of processes of category making”, the rhizome allows us to follow “a route which permits a careful negotiation of the extremes and the development of a more sophisticated ‘in-betweenness’, a more nuanced, not quite here or there ‘kind of approach’” (Murdoch, 1997: 321).

For Latour and Callon, a central purpose of the rhizome is to apprehend the way in which people and things work together to create the world and therefore, to analyse the nonhuman in the same register that we examine the human (Callon, 1986: 200; Latour, 2005, 1999). De-centring the human and recognising the nonhuman contribution to making connections, translocal fields can then be seen “as the product of unruly materially heterogeneous assemblages” (Hinchliffe *et al*., 2005: 651). Even if it can be argued that, in the end, it might often be social forces driving heterogeneous sets of relations, this does not need to have the effect of assuming this *a priori* and denying the combination of social and material resources in networks. In this respect, as Whatmore states, a rhizomatic view simply “extends the register of
what it means to generate materials from one in which only talk counts, to one in which bodies, technologies and codes all come into play” (Whatmore, 2003: 97). Following a rhizomatic perspective, research is therefore turned towards the heterogeneous associations aiming to make sense of the way in which various actors and elements fit together by focusing on what will be linked to what and how the linkages will be forged.

2.3 The connective character of the field

So far, through the metaphor of the rhizome, the processual and heterogeneous character of research fields has been addressed. Both of these dimensions refer to the crucial role of connections and especially their making in order to understand the ways in which relational spaces are sustained. For this reason, the forth characteristic of a rhizomatic perspective, which I want to stress here lies in its strong focus on the connections themselves, avoiding to conceptualise the field as a fully covered bounded entity on a map.

Following Deleuze and Guattari, the ‘rhizome’ is based on a general connectivity, so that any part of a rhizome could possibly be connected to any other (Deleuze & Guattari, 1977: 11, see also Henaff, 2005: 181-185). Whereas far not all of these possible connections are actually anticipated and there exist different degrees and qualities of connections (Law, 1999: 9), what remains is an overall openness towards their formation (Serres, 1991: 11-14). Understanding the rhizome as being made up of multidimensional and constantly evolving connections that cannot be captured in any kind of static framework, it possesses neither a centralised nor a hierarchic structure that could be assumed prior to any research. As Henaff illustrates, with every site being or at least possibly being connected to all other sites, every point of the rhizome becomes a centre in the multiple intersections of the network, so that “each [...] point implies the [...] network and the [...] network is nothing without the multiplicity of the individual sites” (Henaff, 2005: 181). Therefore, the task of the researcher is to unravel the connections and uncover how associations are built and maintained, as well as showing the effort and power that is needed to do so by following them all the way along their connections.

This approach has been criticised for not paying enough attention to structural power relations and without a sense of wider social processes and global economic forces that constitute these relationships (cf. Dicken et al., 2001: 105; Leitner et al., 2002: 285). This criticism is justified only from a standpoint that presupposes the existence of clear power structures and thereby reduces any micro-level analysis to the effects of generalisable structural processes. On the contrary, rhizomatic research is guided by a general openness rejecting the view that the field of study is prearranged into certain levels of which some determine what goes on in others. As Law points out, “it will not distinguish before it starts between those that drive and those that are driven” (Law, 1994: 13). Instead, it attempts to gain detailed stories of associations and interdependencies, which then allow for an
interpretation of the hierarchies and power relations as they actually occur in and characterise the connections (Latour, 1986: 276).

Moreover, it is also of interest how such contested networks are held together in a way that makes them appear as a unity (Kracauer, 1995: 251f). In this respect, there is a central concern to understand the ways in which “actors mobilise, juxtapose and hold together the bits and pieces out of which they are composed [...] and how they manage, as a result, to conceal for a time the process of translation itself and so turn a network from a heterogeneous set of bits and pieces each with its own inclinations, into something that passes as a punctualised actor (Law, 1992, 385).

Although all research fields are the effect of multiple heterogeneous connections, these complexities are not always laid open. Therefore, the detailed research on connections, also helps to create an understanding of how the field is performed and made meaningful in processes of punctualisation. Dealing with the appearance of unity on the basis of a strictly inductive and open research process finally allows for some empirically informed generalisations about the characteristics of the field.

In the following, I now want to show how ‘the rhizome’ can help us in our research in translocal, relational spaces. Drawing on my own research on the lived experience of such a translocal space in the Swahili context, I will not only reconstruct and illustrate the emergence of the field, but also reflect upon what that actually means for the role of the researcher.

3 Researching the ‘translocal Swahili space’

As Pouwels formulates it in his review of the book entitled Les Swahili entre Afrique et Arabie (Le Guennec-Coppens & Caplan, 1991), the Swahili coast is generally conceptualised as an “intersection of multiple influences and networks from which individuals derive their identities, and through which they establish and maintain relations with others in their complex social universe through various forms of exchange” (Pouwels, 1991: 411). Although there still exist a number of contesting views about the time of the first contact between the Arabian Peninsula and the East African coast, what is certain is, that by 1700, after having successfully defeated the Portuguese in Mombasa in 1698, the Omani had managed to establish a loose hegemony over the Swahili coast. And, when Seyyid Said bin Sultan, the Sultan of Oman, in 1832 moved his capital to Zanzibar, this was followed by another wave of migration, especially of young Arab men, who started to make their living on the islands by engaging either in the plantation economy or in trade. Thus, smaller and bigger flows of migration, anticipated and followed by frequent movements back and forth between the East African coast, Southern Arabia or India, have long characterised life in the ‘Swahili corridor’ (Horton, 1987). During the second half of the twentieth century, it has been
movements out of this ‘corridor’ that resulted in sizeable Swahili communities in Europe, the USA and Canada, as well as on the Arabian Peninsula. Especially in the context of the so-called Zanzibar Revolution that took place on the 12th January 1964, a political upheaval towards a socialist pro-African regime, about 30,000 out of approximately 5,000 people of Arab origin were forcibly expelled or fled at their own initiative, many of them heading towards Arabia (Glassman, 2011, Gilbert, 2007). If a decisive part of the initial wave of Swahili migrants during this period was thus triggered directly by political persecution resulting from conflicts regarding Swahili identity, subsequent waves were more a product of economic problems and a sense of being extremely underprivileged. The often very close links these migrants are still maintaining to the East African coast as well as to Swahili people in other places are based on different forms of mobility, such as virtual communication and travelling, and therefore constantly (re)constitute and hold together what can be called a ‘translocal Swahili space’ (Verne, 2012, see also Topan 2006; Horton & Middleton, 2000).

Attempting to define clear boundaries surrounding the translocal Swahili connections in order to get a clear-cut field of research has to fail when acknowledging its dynamic and metamorphic character. Swahili people today are widely dispersed throughout the world, and while the highest density is surely still to be found along the East African coasts of Kenya and Tanzania including the islands of Zanzibar, there are also considerable numbers living in the UAE and Oman, as well as in many different cities in the USA, Canada, the UK and other European countries. Migration, remigration, demographic development as well as processes of ‘swahilisation’ (e.g. through marriage) constantly change, expand and restrict the connections in its different parts and render any clear fencing impossible. Translocal connections do not just end at a specific point, ‘they just get flimsier, more difficult to discern’ (Miller, 1998: 363), so that, as Inkpen et al. (2007: 3) point out, ‘distinguishing “external” from “internal” [would be] a matter of operational definition rather than a real distinction’.

Although such an operational definition of field boundaries might make sense and be helpful in other cases, bordering translocal Swahili connections would necessarily be based on an at least temporal (for the time of the research) ‘freezing’ of the connections and their mobile and fluid characteristics. However, it is exactly the dynamic and processual character of these connections that is crucial to any understanding of the ways in which translocality is actually lived and experienced. Thus, defining the field of research by drawing a clear boundary around translocal Swahili connections in order to distinguish where empirical research has to be undertaken would fail to incorporate the core interest of this study. The research interest does not necessitate in empirically addressing translocal Swahili connections as a whole or reducing research to particular places, but instead relies on a more detailed examination of particular connections. Apart from allowing for a deeper insight into the ways in which translocality is lived, this focus on particular connections also helps to avoid a huge field that would neither practically nor thematically be feasible for this study. Instead of setting
the field by defining where to do the research, in cases like this, I therefore suggest to first concentrate on how translocal spaces can be accessed empirically.

3.1 Finding an expression of the field

It is hardly possible to see, perceive or even examine translocality as such. Instead, one has to gain access to translocality through the ways in which it expresses itself. As Bourdieu and Wacquant argue, ‘we may think of a field as a space within which an effect of field is exercised [...] The limits of the field are situated at the point where the effects of the field cease.’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 100) Regarding translocality in its expression and effects guides the view towards the practices that make up translocal connections. These practices include a neighbourhood conversation in Zanzibar about the academic success of the family’s daughter in Toronto, the turning on of a stereo in Dar es Salaam which has been sent by a cousin from London, the communal watching in Mombasa of the DVD from the last big wedding in Muscat, the hour-long phone calls between Glasgow and Pemba of two separated lovers, as well as the longing of an old man in Kigoma to rejoin his family and dismiss the current emptiness of his house, and many others which stand for the manifold connection and flows that, in their intermeshings and interminglings create and constantly recreate translocal space. As Rajchman (2000: 58) points out, rather than covering ‘the whole’ by moving from a beginning to an end, empirical research should therefore start somewhere in the middle by focusing on the practices through which the field comes into being. Also Bebbington and Kothari argue that ‘engaging ever more deeply with the thickness of parts of the network can be immensely revealing in uncovering logics that reach far more broadly across the network’ (Bebbington & Kothari, 2006: 863-864). Defining the field guided by the question of ‘how’ instead of ‘where’ the network can be approached, therefore, requires to choose a particular expression or effect of the network, such as the practices mentioned above, on which the empirical research can be concentrated.

Having controlled most of the intercontinental commerce between the East African coast and the Persian and Arabian Gulf, the Indian subcontinent and Indonesia for more than thousand years, the Swahili have long inhabited and fashioned transnational spaces of trade (cf. Horton & Middleton, 2000; Middleton, 1992). Hence, people from Zanzibar are often characterised (and also characterise themselves) as a seafaring and merchant people, and it is, among other things, their engagement in commercial practices that has contributed essentially to a Swahili culture and identity (Le Guennec-Coppens, 2002: 56). Today, young Swahili continue to pursue livelihoods in these spaces of translocal trade, now further elaborated by the translocal connections of the Swahili diaspora (esp. in the UK, Canada and the USA) and a recent (re)orientation to places in Asia, such as Bangkok, Hongkong, and Jakarta. In this context, trade can thus be seen as having a special relevance to the ways in which social relations are formed and held together providing an insight into the mobility of people, objects and ideas and the ways in which they intermingle on their routes and
affect material and imaginative geographies of space and belonging. In contrast to solely centring on humans in the examination of translocal spaces, as still mostly the case, taking trade as the empirical access helps to address the material dimension of translocal connections, turning the attention to how not only humans but also material objects play decisive roles in the creation of translocal spaces and bringing to the fore the ‘binding quality’ of non-human flows (Bunell, 2007). Trading connections are not made of and by traders alone, instead they consist of complex interconnections of people, objects, and ideas that need to be examined in order to understand how translocal connections work and what they consist of. Overall, empirically engaging with contemporary Swahili trading practices thus seems to offer a way to explore the mobility of people, things and ideas as they come together in the constitutions of a translocal space – a space that could not be grasped by relying on a more classical idea of the field as a territorial, topographical entity.

However, despite narrowing the scope of the research and creating an important empirical focus, picking a central expression of the translocal Swahili space is only the first step in constructing a field that is manageable by the researcher. Deciding about the specific people, things and paths that should be included in the empirical research remain the subjective decision of the researcher, as it cannot directly be derived from the research focus. In the following, I will therefore continue along the lines of Deleuze and other relational thinkers to now concentrate on the creation of a doable field in its physical-spatial extension.

Fig. 3  A rhizomatic image of the translocal Swahili space in relation to my field
3.2 Reflections on how to further navigate in(to) the field

“To make connections one needs not knowledge, certainty, or even ontology, but rather a trust that something may come out, though one is not completely sure what.” (Rajchman, 2000: 7)

Gaining access is sometimes presented as an incisive and dramatic rupture in a researcher’s life, as a step that needs to be carefully prepared and that means a significant cut to one’s life before. Whereas this may be true and also unavoidable in certain research projects, gaining access can also develop a lot more subtly and casually, almost incidental or random. My ‘entry-point’ to contemporary translocal Swahili trading connections has been in Zanzibar. On the one hand, in relation to my research focus, this could be justified historically by emphasising the idea that Zanzibar has long been the centre of Swahili trading activities. On the other hand, this choice can be seen (more faithfully) in respect to my personal connections to Zanzibar and the contacts I have been able to establish in Zanzibar during several stays prior to my research. From a rhizomatic perspective, however, neither of these arguments really matters as every point is seen to be possibly connected to all others and, openly with as little preconceptions as possible, it has to be assumed that each ‘point’ in the “translocal Swahili space” has the same relevance and importance to be considered as any other. Having entered the ‘rhizome’, Latour suggests that the researcher has “to be as undecided as the actors we follow” (Latour, 1987: 175-176). First, it is important to take some time in order to develop your own connections and become part of the ‘rhizome’. This relates to the idea that becoming a part of a society will enable you to see the world through a particular lens with particular distinctions and will allow you to get a deeper insight into the perspectives of “the researched”. Therefore, making the field should not be one of the first steps, instead connections should be curiously explored in order to get a sense of what matters to *them*. As stressed, for example, by Rajchman (2000: 7), rhizomatic research is not determined by given outcomes, not based on predictive expertise. On the contrary, its motto is, as Law puts it, “not to predict, but to remain attentive to the unknown knocking at the door” (Law, 1992: 380). In order to examine how people live and make sense of today’s complex networks of social interaction and material exchange, the central aim is to remain an openness and flexibility throughout the research process, which allows the researcher to let himself/herself become guided by the specific context instead of imposing on it a rather schematic research frame which impossibly matches its actual complexity and processuality.

With a thematic field in mind, I therefore first spent a couple of months in a host family in Zanzibar. Already during an intensive two-month language course at the State University of Zanzibar in which I took part a couple of years earlier, I had stayed with this family in their three-bedroom flat in Michenzani, an area of Zanzibar Town which is dominated by long, narrow, five-storey buildings, built by the government (with support of the GDR) as part of the ‘Revolution’s
Socialist Experiment’ in the 1960s and 1970s (cf. Myers, 1994). In the beginning of my research, Latifa and Suleiman, my host parents, only had one child (today they have four), a daughter called Nutaila, who was four years old at that time and had just started to go to the neighbouring Qur’an school. Unless the third bedroom was vacant, I generally shared a room with her and the housemaid, and sometimes also with some other female guests. Usually, Munir, one of Suleiman’s nephews, who worked in his internet-café and served as the male ‘bodyguard’ at home during the times when Suleiman was absent, inhabited the third bedroom. Although, over the years, Munir has turned into a close contact and provided me with valuable insights concerning my research, it was Latifa’s younger brother Mahir who facilitated my formation of the field the most.

Especially in the beginning, he was almost omnipresent, regularly picking me up on a Vespa borrowed from a friend, taking me around and introducing me to friends and relatives. At that time, he was working in Suleiman’s shop in Kiponda, an area in the centre of the old town, so that was where I spent a lot of my afternoons listening to narrations about life in Zanzibar and engaging in conversations with other shopkeepers and customers. Apart from improving my Kiswahili and becoming familiar with different kinds of Kiswahili (formal and more informal expressions known as Kiswahili cha mtaani), I also learned a lot about the meaning of key terms in Kiswahili such as ustaarabu (maybe best translated as fine manners, respectable behaviour), utamaduni (culture, closely linked to urbanity), mila and desturi (denoting customs, habits, conventions) (cf. Bromber, 2006; Kresse, 2007; Middleton, 2004), went to weddings and other religious celebrations, celebrated birthdays and simply spent a lot of time within the family, listening to the latest gossip, what is liked and disliked and observing and participating in everyday practices. Especially Latifa introduced me to the Zanzibari fashion and made sure that I was dressed appropriately and up-to-date when going out. Through visiting people and spending the whole day with them, a common practice called kushinda in Kiswahili that entails to integrate into their day, I got immersed into the everyday rhythms and routines of the family and beyond. Becoming integrated into Suleiman’s family and joining them in their activities, I got to know more and more people, not only in Zanzibar but also in other places. I was for example invited to visit Latifa’s family in Pemba, stayed with Suleiman’s niece in Dar es Salaam, his cousin in Mombasa, and with further relatives in Dubai. These contacts and the impressions gained from them soon started to play a crucial role in the ways and directions into which my field developed during the course of my research.

3.3 Joining in the mobile creation of the field

What struck me most during my early ethnographic experiences was the enormous role of translocal mobility in their everyday life. Coming back to Zanzibar after a period of absence, I sometimes quite disappointedly found out that a lot of people had moved to different places and were no longer where I had left them. Visiting people in London, I was always impressed about the high frequency of
visitors from abroad, packed luggage almost constantly occupying the corridors. Biographies often revealed very short time residencies and showed how mobility influenced their lives. Numerous practices such as regular telephone calls, email exchange and online chats, journeys, visits and the transportation and exchange of goods seemed as strategies to overcome or avoid distance and connect people and places. People seemed to be constantly on the move in order to buy, sell, exchange, pick up or deliver things and almost every visit seemed related to some kind of material exchange. In this regard, while attempting to produce ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz, 1973) of the ways people organise and make sense of translocal trading practices, mobility soon emerged as a dominant aspect, not only as a topic but especially as a practice which interfered with the classical idea of participant observation. How to find out about contemporary trade journeys while waiting for the traders to return from their trip? How to examine the lived experience of travelling to a new place when not being with them? It soon became clear that, if I wanted to understand what it means to live a translocal space, I had to develop ways to become more mobile myself. Researching translocal connections as they are practiced, lived and experienced, joining in this mobility and accompanying the journeys of people, objects and ideas within the translocal Swahili space seemed to me to be the only appropriate way to do so.

The first opportunity to accompany some people I knew on a trade journey arose when Mahir, the younger brother of my host mother Latifa, and his cousin Ibrahim invited me to join them on their trip through the Tanzanian interior, travelling to Sumbawanga, Mpanda and Tabora (Pfaff, 2007). These are towns on the Tanzanian mainland with a considerable Swahili population, in part dating back to the establishment of trade routes into the African interior, in part a result of more recent migrations from the coast into the mainland mainly motivated by the search for a better income. Having relatives in these towns, this route had developed into a beneficent business trip for the young men of the family as their relatives were not only keen to buy goods from the coast but also served as middlemen to find other customers. Eager to get an impression of how such a trip was organised and undertaken, I happily took this opportunity and accompanied them on their journey through the Tanzanian mainland. The next chance to
accompany a trade journey emerged when some people I knew in Zanzibar had booked their flights to Dubai on the same date as me, were staying in the same place, and let me accompany them on their shopping tours through the city.

These examples show clearly how the choice of routes strongly depended on my relations to particular people (who is willing to take me?), their views and opinions about the importance of particular connections, as well as the accessibility of routes and places (which routes are passable during the rainy season?). The emergence of the field clearly depended on the constant negotiations between myself and ‘the researched’. Moreover, these as well as subsequent opportunities to accompany journeys depended on my communication, as I needed to be in touch at the right time to hear about trips and to be available and reachable to be told about them. As Hannerz has pointed out, the necessary choices are often made gradually and cumulatively, as new insights develop, as opportunities come into sight, and to some extent by chance (Hannerz, 2003: 207, see also e.g. van Andel & Bourcier, 2008).

Thus, instead of searching for justifications of the necessary selections, I argue that letting go and accompanying people and goods on their everyday paths in and through places proved extremely valuable in order to gain an understanding of how the complex and heterogeneous translocal connections are organised and experienced and how they affect senses of home and belonging in a translocal space. Furthermore, mobile ethnographies with their focus on ‘the everyday’ open up a way to account for the casual, mundane, sometimes even random and incidental character of translocal trading practices as stressed in the image of the rhizome.

Overall, this example shows how, when following the image of the rhizome, “the field” emerges in the course of an ethnographic “field-driven” empirical research and is constantly changing, never static but always remains in the making. Nevertheless, it also shows how this strictly inductive and open approach is still full of choices made by the researcher for often very pragmatic reasons constantly navigating between the central research interest and logistical, financial as well as personal constraints.

4 Presenting the field – making your rhizome comprehensible

As stated in the beginning, this paper derives from a critique of widely still dominant conceptualisations of the geographical field as a rather static, organisational, and mechanistic framework, which can be researched as a separate entity. In contrast to that, I suggested the metaphor of the rhizome, surely one of its most radical oppositions. But even without supporting and taking up all the implications implied in Deleuze and Guattari’s work, what the image of the rhizome succeeds in emphasising is the relational, processual, heterogeneous character of many of today’s research settings.
Although the limits of the field need to be set in any research – if alone for practical reasons – as the image of the rhizome suggests, this cannot be as clear-cut as many people might wish. The emergence of the field is, above all, characterised by constant negotiations between the researcher and the researched. Perspectives and preferences might change, opinions vary and what has seemed most important when embarking on one’s research trip might turn peripheral. But although many researchers might recall disoriented, uncomfortable and contradictory moments in the research process when decisions previously made did not seem that adequate anymore, in most geographical publications the field is still hardly questioned. As Cook et al. illustrate, although research can be tricky, confusing, messy, and an open-ended process, this is rarely expressed through the ways in which it is written up and presented to the public (Cook et al., 2005). Instead of feeling forced to tell a harmonic and straightforward story of the creation the field, a rhizomatic understanding of the field wants to acknowledge this messiness. It allows for routes to be changed in the course of the research. The lines do not have to be followed until the end, but as long as they seem relevant with regard to the research question, or in other words, until the effects of the network cease (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 100). The boundaries of the research are neither taken for granted nor as inconspicuous anymore.

Moreover, as all connections followed are directly connected to the researcher, it is the researcher who necessarily has to be seen as the centre of the part of the rhizome that develops into ”the field”. So, ‘le terrain, c’est moi?’ Is it “my rhizome” that I research? The more connections I manage to create, the more the rhizome grows. While some connections disrupt, others develop.... As I have shown by reconstructing the process of navigating in(to) a field when trying to understand the lived experience of translocality in the Swahili context, following a rhizomatic idea of the field relates to a strong call for reflexivity (cf. England, 1994; Lussault, 2003; Nagar & Ali, 2003; Rose, 1997; Sultana, 2007), demanding of the researcher to make his or her paths in(to) the field more comprehensible and to highlight the tricky and contradictory bits instead of claiming a harmonious story. As McDowell (1992: 409) has argued, it should be the aim of any researcher “to take account for [his or her] own position, as well as that of [the] research participants, and write this into [the] research practice”. And this should also count for the field.

As ‘the rhizome’ implies, the field always remains cloudy; the connections are not all clearly visible, not always easy to differentiate from each other. Hence, the help of the researcher is needed to make these connections that form the field more comprehensible. In contrast to a more deductive research design, informed by allegedly objective criteria and often opposing a rather static frame upon the research setting, thus, a more inductive and interpretative approach is needed. Only this can allow us to incorporate as much of the complexity of our research settings as possible into the research, and to (self)-critically tackle the questions
of how “the field” can be conceptualised in research on relational spaces and translocal mobility, as well as in geographical research more generally.

Bibliographie


