

PUBLIC ANTHROPOLOGY

Reviews

The Conflicts of Crisis: Critical Reflections on Feminist Ethnography and Anthropological Activism

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Anthropologists who work with marginalized and disenfranchised communities frequently find themselves in the midst of short- and long-term crises. Ongoing poverty and systemic discrimination, abrupt changes in entitlement programs and other policies, natural and human-made disasters, and profit-minded development initiatives can all threaten the lives and livelihoods of those we study. As practitioners of a methodology that emphasizes personal attachment, our first instinct is to leap headlong into crisis.

In recent years, calls for engaged, public, and activist anthropology have ignited the discipline, making such interventions not only accepted but often expected (see Mullings 2013). At the same time, the realities of real-world engagement are messy, and our roles are rarely clear-cut. In this section, we grapple with some of the tough questions and unfinished business that arise in our own work as we navigate the predicaments, uncertainties, and internal crises and juggle our roles as activists, scholars, teachers, and humans.

Frank interrogations of our engagements are essential in a discipline fraught with a legacy of collaborating with empire and colonialism, including Cold War counterinsurgency and the more recent Human Terrain System. For instance, critical scholars such as Kamala Visweswaran have suggested that ethnographers are often uninvited guests or traffickers of “the voiceless” (Visweswaran 1994:69). Others, however, hold that ethnographers have a “responsibility to use counter-story telling as a discursive practice or mobilizing tool” (Harrison 2013:x). In the examples here, we explicitly allied with the social justice struggles of our research participants, and they encouraged us to contribute to their causes as both activists and scholars. But those encouragements came with expectations that were sometimes problematic. Our purpose here is to discuss both the expectations and implications that such scholarship generates.

We began this conversation as participants in an Association for Feminist Anthropology roundtable for the 2012

American Anthropological Association annual meeting in San Francisco, California. The Association for Feminist Anthropology program chairs Jennifer Patino and Susan Harper organized the roundtable to address how feminist modes of inquiry enable anthropologists to cross borders between academia and activism. In this case, *feminist research* was defined as “drawing on methodological strategies that embrace the everyday experiences of people, especially those forced to live on the margins, as epistemologically valid” (Davis 2013:27). Rather than deny or ignore such subjectivities, feminist methods stress equality, intimacy, dialogue, and reciprocity between researchers and participants. Moreover, as Dána-Ain Davis argues elsewhere, “feminist knowledge production, when linked to methodological strategies, should unravel issues of power and include interventions that help move toward social justice” (Davis 2013:27).

And yet, such research produces vulnerabilities, anxieties, and uncertainties that are rarely discussed, even amid a disciplinary embrace of publicly engaged activist anthropology. Accordingly, our purpose here is not to praise our successes but to balance celebratory portrayals of activist anthropology by highlighting the ambiguities and open-ended questions that we have encountered in our own work. Because each case offered a unique set of issues and dilemmas, we cannot pretend that our answers are universally applicable. At the same time, we do hope that our essays offer some guidance for those navigating the fraught terrain of combining scholarship and activism.

For instance, in his essay about activism after the earthquake in Haiti, Mark Schuller considers his role as an advocate for Haitian social movements and internally displaced people, weighing the politics of whether and how he should speak on behalf of others. He shares his efforts at building a constituency within Haiti to whom he is accountable and analyzes the shifting contours of his proximity to power. For instance, he was asked by social movement members to offer quantitative data that they could use in their advocacy; but responding to this desire risked dehumanizing his subjects and, furthermore, lived-experience, qualitative research proved useful in motivating policymakers. Davis documents the struggles of a community already marginalized when draconian “welfare reform” laws eliminated hope for real assistance, including for women victims of intimate partner violence. While implementing a

feminist methodology of eliciting women's oral histories, she also considers the moral implications of using research participants' stories on behalf of individual advocacy efforts when her original intention was to facilitate broad-based social change. Melissa Checker's essay about conducting research on Staten Island after Hurricane Sandy also wrestles with questions of expectation. She asks whether, in compensating for their perceived privilege vis-à-vis research participants and in promoting public anthropology, anthropologists have overestimated and airbrushed the kinds of change they can effect. Drawing parallels between the constraints facing grassroots activists and activist-scholars in this political and economic moment, Checker confronts co-option as an unintended consequence of activist anthropology. As "public service" becomes a ubiquitous part of academic institutions' mission statements, to what extent are our relationships and engagements with local communities being appropriated by universities to serve their entrepreneurial and promotional ends?

All of these pieces expose our vulnerabilities and uncertainties; before we are anthropologists, before we are even activists, we are all human. Sometimes, we do not have the ability to make the change that our participants ask of us, much as we would like to do so. Our activist efforts can and do fail. Still, our intention is not to discourage activist engagement. On the contrary, by raising difficult questions

and offering critical space for reflection, self-critique, ongoing learning, and dialogue, we seek to empower, inspire, and strengthen it. For us, discussing both the limitations and possibilities of activist anthropology is essential to navigating the treacherous terrain of activism in an increasingly unequal world.

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Being an Insider Without: Activist Anthropological Engagement in Haiti after the Earthquake

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I confess to a certain awkwardness and apprehension not just as a man but as a white man, in discussing my experiences as an activist accompanying Haitian women in their struggle for justice. What gives me the right to write this? What gives me the right to claim space on the *Huffington Post*, one of the largest circulation blogs, writing on behalf of Haitian people, including women?

The short answer is: nothing. And that should be unsettling for all of us anthropologists who work alongside of, and behalf of, the "Other."

So why—and how—do I engage in activism nonetheless? I hope my answering this question might be useful to others as well.

On the most general level, this question brings up the distinctions of types of organizing and the role of the activist-organizer. Both resonate with conversations within anthropology. Solidarity activism differs from union organizing or Saul Alinsky-style (1971) efforts—such as the Midwest

Academy (Bobo et al. 2010) and ACORN—in a critical dimension: self-interest. Union and Alinsky currents of organizing hold that people get involved because of self-interest, as it is tied with the collective. Yet, at its core, solidarity activism implies being in solidarity with others. Some conflate solidarity with do-gooderism, what Teju Cole (2012) called the "white savior industrial complex." However, in its ideal form (if not always its practice), solidarity is animated by a belief that, indeed, we're all in this together—that my liberation is tied with that of others. As Dr. Martin Luther King wrote in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." True, this belief shares some affinity with self-interest, but it necessarily requires an anthropological imagination, tracking back and forth between local and global, species and personal lived-experience levels. At its core, solidarity requires belief in our interconnectedness and a shared humanity, despite differences in location and privilege.

There is a debate within organizing regarding the role of the organizer-activist. Union organizing ideology—if not its practice—emphasizes the need for leaders to come from the rank and file. Especially within current neoliberal

globalization, these definitions and identities are hybrid, blurred. Faye Harrison (2008) and others who have brought insights of Black feminism to anthropology, particularly “Outsiders Within” (Collins 1990:32), remind us that perspectives of those most marginalized offer unique and important insights otherwise not possible but also that we are all insiders and outsiders at different times, places, and contexts.

My story is as an outsider to Haiti, one with a considerable amount of privilege but not nearly enough power: at least in the United States, I can be called an “insider without.” As an insider, my U.S. passport grants a certain set of privileges and obligations to work to change the system in the United States. However, I am without power—without the resources to be able to really address the change often demanded of me by people in Haiti. My strategies may not be necessary for anthropologists whose activism is primarily among people with whom they share an identity—although, as my students discovered in the summer of 2011, being of and from Haiti implies a different level of access and privilege than coming from Haiti’s Diaspora (e.g., Bernard 2013). As I have detailed elsewhere (Schuller 2010, 2012), my motivations to work in Haiti sprang out of campus activism and, later, from being laid off as a full-time community organizer. Activist or not, no one initially invited me to come to Haiti; I imposed myself. My first visit in 2001 was on a credit card after my first year of graduate school.

Once there, though, I established lasting personal, professional, and activist relationships. I approached several women’s organizations about my study, and those who were interested in my interrogation for their own reasons accepted my request to pry into their organizational lives for 20 months of intensive (and, in many ways, invasive) participant-observation. As part of my effort to “decolonize” my anthropological presence (Harrison 2010), during my fieldwork I asked what thank you gesture I could offer. One of the women’s NGOs asked me to make a documentary film. They—factory workers—wanted to take their stories directly to consumers of the clothes they sew, particularly in the United States, whose government wields a heavy hand in directing policies toward and even within Haiti. They correctly identified documentary film as a more direct form of advocacy. As one of the most persuasive, spry, and astute women in the resulting film said, “Who’s going to read your book?”

Making *Poto Mitan* (Bergan and Schuller 2009) thrust me into a position of being seen as an “authority” on Haiti; I personally screened the film on over 40 campuses. I try hard to give back: the honoraria from these screenings, and the DVD sales, raised over \$26,000 the first two years after Haiti’s earthquake for the grassroots groups in the film. In addition to this material aid, everywhere we screened the film, the women’s voices, stories, lives, courage, analyses, and their own activism inspired lively discussions about Haiti, global capitalism, neoliberalism, and about what we have in common. After the earthquake, some people used it as a

tool for discussing what U.S. residents could do to help in the wake of the disaster. During screenings at which I was present, while persons asking how to help were often looking for my endorsement of a particular NGO, I tried to steer the conversation toward our role as citizens. My book *Killing with Kindness: Haiti, International Aid and NGOs*—which has attracted some attention, if a small amount—ends with a quote from a colleague of the women in the film: “The best way you can help us in Haiti is to bring back democracy to Washington” (2012:194).

At the screenings, over 1,700 people signed up to receive our newsletter and action alerts. The film ends with a shot of our website, as the film—any film—shouldn’t and can’t be considered the end of the conversation. The website directs people to more information, to our grassroots partners, and to action alerts. During the campaign to cancel Haiti’s debt, over 3,000 people linked to the Jubilee Debt Campaign website after visiting our website. The campaign succeeded in 2009 when the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and Inter-American Development Bank agreed to cancel the debt they claimed from Haiti. I’m told by my Haitian colleagues that the film also triggers a lively debate in Haiti itself; it is being used as a Freirian–feminist consciousness-raising tool in grassroots groups, universities, “popular” neighborhoods, and the internally displaced persons (IDP) camps.

The film also helped raised funds following the earthquake, when it was used to anchor a public event, attract a viewership, and inspire a discussion. Because of this visibility, many viewers asked whether the five women featured in it were alive. In my second trip after the earthquake (the first was as part of a medical mission to the neighborhood where I rent a house), I spent the bulk of my time trying to track them down. I found them, all thankfully alive (although a sixth colleague whose voice appears in the film perished). Three of the five were living in an IDP camp. A few grassroots groups in the film had also begun to organize in the IDP camps, forming the *Fòs Refleksyon ak Aksyon sou Koze Kay an Ayiti* (FRAKKA, the Reflection and Action Force for the Housing Cause in Haiti), a social movement organization. So began my activist work in the camps.

The grassroots women’s group *Komisyon Fanm Viktim pou Viktim* (KOFATIV, the Commission of Women Victims for Victims), in *Poto Mitan*, also followed its members and leaders into the camps, documenting increased cases of gender-based violence and accompanying survivors when they brought those cases to the police and courts. They asked me to use my new platform of the *Huffington Post* blog—for which I am forever grateful to anthropologist Gina Ulyse for facilitating—to share their stories, and I very willingly obliged. These *Huffington Post* articles attracted the attention of the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), who asked me to edit a special issue on Haiti. I interviewed KOFATIV leaders, and one of the *Poto Mitan* leaders, for sidebar stories. We turned this into a book, *Tectonic Shifts* (Schuller and Morales 2012), a volume that

hit the shelves two years after the earthquake, with 46 individual and collective authors, half of whom are from Haiti, including members of KOFVIV.

My activist research in the camps carried me far beyond my ethnographic comfort zone. For one thing, I couldn't be the first contact; as a *blan*—foreigner and white person—people assumed I worked for a big foreign NGO or the UN and was there to give aid. My presence immediately attracted a crowd and changed the conversation. Partly to minimize this, partly to have greater reach, and partly to reinforce the public university's research capacity, I worked with students at the Faculté d'Ethnologie at the State University of Haiti, where I've been affiliated since 2003, to conduct fieldwork. Activists also impressed on me the importance of quantitative data. Telling people how awful and inhumane the IDP camps are only works to a point, especially given the narratives of journalists and disaster tourists engendering a "Haiti fatigue": Just how bad are things? So, I had to quickly catch up to my Haitian colleagues in learning SPSS. The reports that came out—one before and one after the outbreak of cholera—apparently had an impact within various aid agencies where they were relatively widely circulated. On behalf of the Haiti Response Coalition, of which I was an individual member, I was also invited to present these two reports at three Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) staff briefings. Over two dozen such briefings have been held since the earthquake; however, the impact of our collective activism on the ground in Haiti has been minimal.

One approach to dismantling privilege is to share the platform. For instance, I worked very hard with a colleague to bring FRAKKA coordinator Reyneld Sanon with me to Washington. Three universities sent a letter to the U.S. consulate in an effort to grant Sanon his visa, but it was denied. He had to pay another \$160 to try again, with more specific letters from us. Two days before his scheduled visit to my university, he got his visa. Like KOFVIV's Malya Villard and Eramithe Delva, Sanon's first visa was limited to a couple of weeks. His second visit was claimed by the mainstream HAWG (Haiti Advocacy Working Group), and my role in subsequent meetings was as his translator.

The issue of representation is not just a debate within anthropology. As Ulysse (2010) argued, it is all too real: Who gets to speak for places like Haiti and people like its poor majority living in IDP camps? Ideally, people like the women in *Poto Mitan* could travel with me to universities and Congress, share their stories directly, and would be subsequently present to answer people's questions. However, a racist U.S. immigration policy, not to mention funding constraints—such as to apply for visas and to purchase airfares—limits Haiti's representatives to only a handful who all receive foreign NGO support. In turn, this limits the perspective to that of the NGO benefactors who pay for the visits. So the rest of us who speak and write are either Diaspora or *blan*. Like any muscle, this privilege gets stronger through each use. To counteract this growing imbalance, the Lambi Fund of Haiti will be launching a monthly YouTube

video that shows grassroots leaders speaking on their own behalf.

Another concern about self-perpetuation is speaking the "language of power." As noted above, at the request of grassroots groups in Haiti, my own work drifted toward quantitative research methodologies—and I'm left wondering how sustainable, how feminist, this is. This said, during the 2012 Society for Applied Anthropology meetings I took five students from my previous college to the CBC and State Department. They were all Haitian American, and two still had Haitian passports at the time. When they spoke of their daily experiences in the camps and the profound and lasting impact the camps had on their lives, busy Washington staffers put away their Blackberrys.¹ I take heart that students' reflexive anthropology and their sharing experiences of participant-observation can make a powerful impact in policy circles. Their U.S. representative (they all lived in Brooklyn) encouraged the students to create a Facebook group and take their message to constituents. While students created the group to make activist announcements, the constituent discussion fell through because a sister campus refused to offer space. Had I been more influential in my institution or more engaged locally with Brooklyn's Haitian Diaspora community, we might have found a space. So in the end, the momentum to build a citizen-based movement in the United States that could actually mobilize power was lost. Addressing my failure, for my current work with a much-smaller Haitian community in Illinois, I collaborate with Chicago-based organizations, including one with a national reach.

While it might not count as "activism," another attempt to decolonize anthropology and dismantle my privilege is to directly engage and support the local university, the Université d'État d'Haïti (UEH, State University of Haiti), validating and translating the work of colleagues and helping to train and employ students as researchers. In Haiti, as I suspect is true of many places in the global south, there is not a barrier between "pure" and "applied" (or "activist") knowledge within the social sciences. Many of my colleagues at the UEH identify as activists; their boots are on the ground marching with their students. While in the United States long-term neoconservative strategies have undermined academic freedom, the situation in Haiti is far more dire: many colleagues teach ten classes at five universities per semester and grab NGO consulting gigs just to make ends meet. Following Saul at the end of Paule Marshall's (1984) *The Timeless Place, the Chosen People*, I wonder if engaging on the level of the UEH might be more important, and appropriate, for a *blan*, as outsider.

The constraints of U.S. research, however, make this difficult. I fought my former institution to squeeze \$5,000 from an NSF grant to UEH (even after NSF approved the budget), while my home campus took \$20,000 off the top of the grant. I also attempt to disrupt privilege of the digital divide by sharing with Haitian colleagues my access to

studies and analyses about Haiti (and other places). Finally, thanks to a grant from FOKAL, a Haitian foundation, the UEH press, and former colleague Jean François translating, *Tectonic Shifts* is now available in kreyòl, and we are working with community radio and grassroots organizations to promote it alongside a campaign of *sansibilizasyon* (consciousness raising). While writing in kreyòl will never find its place in a journal with a high impact factor, it is absolutely essential that I not only share my analyses with those about whom I write but also that it opens me up to their criticism and empowers my colleagues—both activists and professors—to help shape the activist research agenda in the first place.

So how can I ultimately evaluate the impact of my efforts? If we are to move beyond affirming our activist intentions, we need a sobering look at the results of our activism. To be blunt: we didn't do much. Aside from raising some additional money to U.S.-based NGOs and contractors, the HAWG and Haiti Response Coalition failed to effect any legislation. A central cause is our lack of mobilizing a constituency in addition to claiming the moral high ground. The Haitian Diaspora succeeded in getting the U.S. government to grant temporary protected status and the Haitian government to amend the Haitian constitution to grant dual citizenship. Like an NGO, I can reify outputs as opposed to outcomes, counting the number of articles posted or meetings held in Washington. Insofar that this article details the above, I am becoming more and more like the NGOs that I critique from my "ivory tower." While like Dána-Ain Davis (see this issue) avoiding the trap of becoming either cynical or callous, I must acknowledge that I am the primary beneficiary of my activism: while tens of thousands are still under tents, I was able to buy a house—in part because of my NSF grant, in part because of a new job.

As anthropologists, we should be able to come up with other ways to measure impact. Far from being the "lone anthropologist," I have increasingly come to value the work that we do in building relationships in the field. True, every time I take even 15 minutes of someone's time for an interview or a conversation, there is an expectation that I will be doing something "real" with it, and women living in the camps or shantytowns do have an expectation—or at least hope—that talking with me might make a difference in their lives. I have increasingly cultivated a constituency in Haiti of activist groups and scholars to whom I am accountable. More than my analytic abilities—to say nothing about my (in)ability to actually bring about hoped-for change—this constituency is central to my work not just as an activist but increasingly as a scholar, insofar as these roles are distinct. Having local people to whom I truly feel accountable is the greatest gift—however painful—that has come out of the trauma of the earthquake and my long-term activist engagement. While people may not hold me personally accountable for the lack of progress in Haiti—although some do—I nonetheless do have a responsibility to learn from

our collective mistakes, to understand how the system is maintained and can change, and make the most effective use of the life stories, frustrations, injustices, and analyses that people entrust to those of us who are "insiders without."

NOTE

1. See the June 2013 issue (volume 35, issue 3) of *Practicing Anthropologist* for their reflections.

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What Is a Feminist Activist Ethnographer To Do?

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Over the last two decades, inquiries into the meaning, contexts, and contributions of feminist ethnography have circulated broadly in the social sciences and in anthropology in particular. The feminist ethnographic enterprise has been conditioned by particular political moments in the context of various constellations of power. While the content of feminist ethnography is understood to be both theoretical and methodological, its importance also rests in its role as a paradigm linked to activism. Feminist activist ethnographers often position their work in collaborative dialogue with groups or organizations concerned with a range of issues, especially as they affect marginalization. It is both a politics and a practice—and it includes social commitments. As a feminist activist ethnographer, I am aware that feminist knowledge production should unravel issues of power and include interventions that help move toward social justice. But what do a research relationship and one's social justice commitments look like in a political moment cloaked in neoliberalism? The impact of neoliberalism—that is, the consolidation, restriction, and privatization of provisioning for people requiring public assistance—has raised participants' expectations of researchers. As a feminist activist ethnographer who examines the impact of neoliberalism, specifically welfare reform policy (Davis 2004, 2006), I want to revisit my experience of collecting the narratives of battered women on welfare in a neoliberal context and to explore the relationships developed with women while they lived in and outside of a battered women's shelter. The women specifically narrated how they dealt with changes in welfare policy, and I found that the vulnerabilities that battered women experienced were exacerbated by shifts in the welfare safety net. Consequently they expected I would play a role in mediating their needs. I explore what research participants wanted from me and how those desires were generated at the intersection of feminist activist ethnography's goal of partnering with people and groups to effect broad social change and the neoliberal moment in which that work was conducted.

TERRAINS OF VULNERABILITY: THE INTIMATE DETAILS OF ONE WOMAN

Feminist activist ethnography may disrupt the nodes of neoliberalism because of its potential to illuminate experiences that reflect structural impediments for poor and low-income women, countering neoliberalism's reification of market principles to address social problems (Davis and Craven 2011). This perspective has reconfigured social welfare institutions and relationships of the state to those receiving public assistance. The women in my research lived

in Angel House, a shelter for battered women in upstate New York, and were interviewed just as reforms were being implemented in New York State. Because they received public assistance, the women were highly monitored and had to meet a number of requirements ranging from attending mandatory workshops to completing a requisite number of job interviews (see Davis et al. 2003).

When the welfare social safety net was reformulated as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), many poor and low-income people were susceptible to being cut off from assistance or faced benefit loss or reductions for “noncompliance” with various mandates (Davis et al. 2003). Solange is one woman who shared the intimate details of trying to put her life together after leaving an abusive relationship while living in the web of welfare reform in the city of Laneville.¹ Laneville had experienced economic decline after years of deindustrialization, which led to a bifurcated economy with limited very low-wage jobs and high-wage employment. Simultaneously, there was a decrease in affordable housing stock due to Laneville's economic and real estate development plans directed toward the “creative class.” Women in general, and Solange in particular, were caught in the middle of this maelstrom.

Solange, a 37-year-old black woman, lived at Angel House Shelter. When we met, Solange had completed what she said was her final attempt to leave her husband, who had lined “toothpicks up against the front door to determine if she had left the house when he was not home” (Davis 2006:169). After leaving him and moving to the shelter with her two daughters, we spent a good deal of time together while she searched for an apartment in the city of Laneville. In the nascent stages of welfare reform implementation in 1997, finding a place to live proved difficult in a city that was spatially divided by race and economically injured by deindustrialization. Further, the various tactics deployed to reduce caseloads and decrease federal support for subsidized housing compounded the difficulties. Yet securing an appropriate apartment—one that met both Solange's requirements for what constituted a good place to live and one that would be certified by the Department of Social Services (DSS)—proved difficult. In the absence of support from the housing counsellor at the Department of Social Services (DSS), Solange tapped into two resources to assist in her search for housing: (1) the fact that she was bulimic and (2) her research relationship with me, which she perceived—given the severity of her need and her assumptions about my access to people in high places—as one in which I should advocate or speak on her behalf.

As our relationship deepened, Solange opened up about her horrific experience with bulimia. She not only shared that being bulimic was part of her identity but also demonstrated

exactly what she did. “I don’t stick my finger down my throat, like others,” she told me, “I just cough until my food comes up . . . like this . . . If I am anxious, I can feel it coming on” (Davis 2006:169). I can still hear the sounds of her gagging. When she finally caught her breath, Solange explained how she deployed her bulimia in the presence of people who she thought could help her. This was a strategy that she had perfected as a young girl living in foster care, after her caseworker failed to address reports of sexual assaults. What did catch the caseworker’s attention, however, was Solange’s bulimia, and she was transferred to a safer home. Bulimia became the way Solange was heard; in gagging, her fears found a voice to which people responded. It had worked nearly three decades earlier, and she believed it would do so in the present.

Solange had attempted to secure subsidized housing to no avail. Knowing I was meeting with the director of Section 8 Housing as part of my research, she implored me to speak with the director on her behalf and share the details of her bulimia. There was no request for anonymity—Solange had little interest in “protecting” her identity because anonymous people cannot sign leases. I thought about it and decided I couldn’t think of a reason not to broach the subject with the director.

NARRATIVES OF NEED, ADVOCACY, AND ACTIVISM

The method used for this project, life history, lay in developing deep relationships with women so as to understand the impact of welfare reform on their lives and how they dealt with the perils of neoliberalism. Those who participated in the study knew I was doing research and agreed to tell me their life stories so I could better grasp their situations as they related to benefit reductions, being sanctioned, and attempts to find housing, get an education, secure employment, and meet the mandatory requirements of welfare policy. During the process of sharing the intimacies of their lives, women like Solange gave permission—in fact, they urged me—to retell their experiences and decisions to loosen up the vice of neoliberalism, which negatively affected their access to housing and employment. Their willingness to share these personal details not only helped me understand the dynamics of welfare reform in the context of violence but also from their perspective strategically positioned me to help mitigate their experiences of structural inequality. My access and their desperation merged at the point where they (and I) hoped that maybe people in power would hear women’s pleas differently if it came from a different voice—the voice of a person who did not live in a shelter and who was not battered.

Solange and other women viewed our research relationship differently than I did. Whereas I thought their narratives would be primarily used to reveal the problems of welfare reform and ultimately revisit the policy, women expected that their narratives would be shared to resolve individual needs. They anticipated, for example, that I would re-enact

the mechanics of a woman sticking her finger down her throat and imitate the sound of gagging if it would help motivate a director of Section 8 housing, a landlord, or a realtor to finalize a battered woman’s need for an apartment. Yet, while being a researcher did enable me to meet with the director of Section 8 housing and in fact with other housing officials and related personnel on Solange and some other women’s behalf; I was unable to secure housing for them. Being battered, or being a woman of color, operated against them as the housing application process involved providing both a previous and a current address. When women living at the shelter indicated the shelter’s post-office box as their current address, most landlords and realtors refused to rent to them, fearful that the violence that made them homeless would follow them to their property. In other instances, when we saw “For Rent” signs, women asked that I follow up by phone and determine that an apartment was vacant. However, when the woman went to meet the owner or realtor, more often than not, if she was Black or Latina, she was told the apartment was no longer available. The time between the call and the visit might be less than five hours. Clearly, race obscured whatever social capital I had put to use.

More generally, these issues raise questions about how feminist activist ethnographers juggle individual needs and broader social justice goals. In other words, how do we navigate being an advocate for individuals and groups when conducting research for broader social justice? From a feminist activist perspective, I intentionally collected data to invigorate systemic changes for low-income and poor women needing public assistance. Individual women’s narratives exposed the dire consequences of neoliberal policies that shredded the safety net. I encouraged women to share with me the particulars of their lives, which they did because we were like sister-friends: smoking cigarettes while sitting on park benches, talking about our daughters (and their sons), food shopping, and planning for the future. We developed friendships through snatches of conversation, in the moments spent in their homes, walking home from work or the DSS, and talking on the phone.

Yet, whereas I wanted to fashion their narratives into a strategy for changing policy, the women understandably wanted me to intervene on their individual behalves—to share their stories with landlords and service providers. Desperation often requires reconciliation, and the women believed in the possibilities of what could be achieved if powerful people knew all about them. Somewhere between my feminist activist ethnography, their intimacy, and social justice was ambiguity about what to tell and to whom to tell it (Shryock 2004).

Retelling is a particularly important strategy for feminist activist ethnographers striving to undo the tethers of the state’s power and indifference. Many—albeit not all—feminist activist ethnographers view allying with vulnerable groups and amplifying their voices as inextricably linked to our research and our identity as activist scholars. In light of regressive policies that have restructured the state’s

responsibility, however, feminist activist ethnographers may also be called upon, or feel compelled, to advocate for individuals, an endeavor that can overshadow our goals of activism.

In the end, what are feminist activist ethnographers to do with the intimacies shared by subjects when they want us to use those intimacies not toward broader activist goals but, rather, as part of an individual advocacy strategy to reach out to people in positions of power who have access to significant resources that they, as individuals, require? Research participants' strategies for survival are constituted within and against fields of power that exist both in policy and in the relationships they form with researchers who they see as conduits to certain spheres of power.

CONCLUSION

The intimacies we develop as a part of the feminist activist ethnographic project are embedded within research participants' expectations of us and shaped by particular political moments, which may demand new obligations and new configurations of epistemology. Yet the responsibility of knowing these intimacies and the duty that comes with knowing complicate the goal of feminist activist ethnography, which is often broader in scope than research participants are aware. As a feminist activist researcher, I wanted to share the women's stories I collected, but was I obligated to share them in the manner that they wished—in full detail and with full attribution? On account of sharpened anxieties and the reality of material scarcity, fully publicized desperation was the only bargaining chip the women felt they had. Jennifer Bickham Mendez (2008) reminds us that activist researchers should use our academic privilege, which grants us greater access to public spheres and opens opportunities for the political representation of their work. She cogently points out that preparing research to meet the need of an informational politics puts academics' cultural capital to work as “translators who package oppositional narratives or lived realities so that they resonate with policy makers” (Bickham Mendez 2008: 143–144).

What if our research participants don't want their lived realities “packaged” for accessibility but, rather, “performed,” if you will, to create discomfort for those in power? And if I, as the researcher, choose a different path of representation, as in not “performing” Solange's wretching, then whose knowledge is being produced or reproduced? What is a feminist activist ethnographer to do in these circumstances?

One answer may lie in a politics of radical empathy (Cohen 2012; Landsberg 2009). As uncomfortable as it may be not to sanitize the retelling of people's experiences, a politics of radical empathy depends on discomfort. It depends on forcing people to understand the experiences of someone different from themselves by detailing the horror so vividly that walls of indifference begin to crumble. Committing to a politics of radical empathy means that we can move between explanation and empathy (McLaren 1992).

Attempts to achieve broad social justice then stand alongside advocating for individuals. We can enter research projects with participants fully aware of what we want, what they need, and what they might want us to do. Essential to our role, then, is the facilitation of understanding and empathy by viscerally demonstrating the experiences of participants' existence and by refusing to keep private and erase or sanitize how they, in fact, live their lives.

NOTE

Acknowledgments. This piece is a modified version of the article “Border Crossings: Intimacy and Feminist Activist Ethnography in the Age of Neoliberalism” (Davis 2013).

1. Pseudonyms are used for both the location of this research as well as the research participants.

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Anthropological Superheroes and the Consequences of Activist Ethnography

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On October 29, 2012, Superstorm Sandy ripped through the New York and New Jersey seaboard, hitting the borough of Staten Island especially hard. Up to 14 feet of floodwater went surging across the island's sidewalks and streets, killing 23 people and leaving hundreds of families displaced.

Listening to the news about Sandy from the comfort of my own unscathed neighborhood in Central Harlem, I was frantic. Since 2009, I had worked closely with environmental justice activists on the island's north shore, participating in their struggle as I studied it. This area was home to the borough's highest populations of immigrants, people of color, and low-income communities, and it housed at least 21 sites that were contaminated with toxic chemicals and that sat within 70 feet of residential neighborhoods. Long before Sandy, activists entreated public officials to address the risks they faced from toxic waste sites and local flooding. Over the past few decades, rampant residential and commercial developments had eroded natural wetlands, and an inadequate and outdated sewer and flood protection infrastructure, along with rising sea levels and storm surges, had all worsened flood intensities. For north shore residents, flooding presented a two-fold threat: in addition to endangering their safety and property, floodwater threatened to dislodge, combine, and distribute toxic chemicals.

I e-mailed local activists the day after Sandy to check on their safety, asking, "What can I do? Please let me know!" Within a few hours, I heard back from Beryl, the leader of a local environmental justice organization. Everyone was okay, she told me, but much of the borough was still without power, and a statewide gas shortage was making it nearly impossible to refuel generators and cars. Beryl also explained that she was working with a community organization created after 9/11 to go door-to-door to check on people, disseminate information, and distribute food, blankets, and other necessities. But she was nervous that many households relied on electricity for their heat, and a cold snap was on its way. "What can I do?" I asked again in my response. This time, Beryl answered with a list.

We need access to some kind of warehouse to put the clothing donations — right now they're piling up in a parking lot, but it's supposed to rain in a few days. People need heat more than clothes . . . Can you see if we can get the big generators they were going to use for the marathon? And can you try and find out if what residents are saying they are being told by Con Edison is true—that they won't get their electricity back until next Saturday?"¹ [E-mail with author, October 30, 2012]

These were reasonable requests, of course, but I was helpless to make any of them happen. I did not know anyone affiliated with the marathon any more than I could break through ConEd's bureaucracy. What kind of networks did she think I had? In my zeal to marshal my professional resources on behalf of community struggles, had I represented myself as some kind of academic superhero, able to scale vast configurations of power with a single e-mail? Had my efforts to acknowledge my privilege as a white, middle-class academic exaggerated the difference between my social position and that of the people I researched?

More generally, as anthropologists celebrate and promote a disciplinary shift toward public and engaged scholarship, are we glossing over our own limitations and overestimating or overstating the kinds of change we can effect, especially at this political-economic moment?² Have we somehow failed to position ourselves as . . . well, ourselves? What are the unforeseen implications of airbrushing our activist efforts—for our research participants, our students, and ourselves?

I argue that by sidelining the uncertainties, limitations, and anxieties that often accompany activist scholarship, we not only establish sometimes unfeasible expectations but also miss important opportunities for solidarity with grassroots activists. In particular, as engaged or public scholarship is popularized and institutionalized as a mode of practice, it joins with other desultory trends in the academy that constrain our ability to help to make social change. Academics certainly enjoy many privileges compared to those with whom we often align ourselves; but we also operate within—and are subject to—the same political and economic trends and demands that increasingly circumscribe activists' efforts. To be clear, I am not advocating for a retreat from public-engaged-activist-protest anthropology.³ On the contrary, I argue that the endeavor will be better served if we acknowledge the contexts in which we operate, along with our own powerlessness and vulnerability.

SEEKING RECIPROCITY—AND OPRAH

"What can I do?" Like most anthropologists, I have asked this question of my research participants thousands of times, with genuine and heartfelt intention. In my own case, the question is also a methodological one, as an emphasis on reciprocity shapes the way I conduct research. Specifically, I try to contribute to activists' organizing efforts in whatever ways they ask, partly to return the time, energy, knowledge, and information that they supply to my research and partly as a way to gain access to the kinds of information I seek.

This approach has served me well. For instance, in my research on environmental justice organizing in the U.S. South, I became an unpaid staff member of a community-based organization in Augusta, Georgia. Residents there had recently discovered that their neighborhood was contaminated with high levels of toxic chemicals, and they were struggling to be relocated. Neighborhood leaders asked me to contribute to their cause in a range of ways including the following: establishing an after-school tutoring program; creating and distributing flyers; filing; designing and managing a website; and writing funding reports and grant proposals (see Checker 2005).

While activists did appreciate my efforts, and I helped them inch toward some of their environmental justice goals, the benefits of this “reciprocal” approach tilted significantly in my favor. Methodologically, it put me in an advantageous position to develop a deep understanding of my topic of study (Hale 2008:20). Thus, I was able to advance my career while fulfilling my personal activist commitments. Yet my participation really did little to advance residents’ ultimate goal of moving out of their impoverished and contaminated neighborhood. Years after leaving the field, I continued to try to right this imbalance: I donated book royalties (and my own funds) to the community organization, maintained the website, wrote some more grant proposals, and organized workshops. At one point, activists and I decided that the only way to win relocation was for them to appear on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*. I spent about a year tapping my personal and professional networks, somehow thinking that my own social capital might lead me to the show.⁴

PLAYING WHACK-A-MOLE

On Staten Island’s north shore, I took a different approach to reciprocity. In this case, I was conducting fieldwork while working as a full-time faculty member. Trying to maximize my considerably more limited time, I focused on the specific skill sets I could bring to environmental justice groups. For instance, drawing on a journalism background, I was able to publish a number of newspaper articles that called attention to some of the environmental justice issues activists were facing.⁵ I also wrote comments and testimonies about the environmental justice consequences of new development projects, and as a class project, students and I compiled an environmental justice profile of the north shore. Once again, these efforts helped me gain important access to environmental justice groups.

Part of that access included following environmental justice activists as they rushed around, answering endless calls to participate in public hearings and community meetings, visioning sessions, steering committees, and government and academic panels. Making this pace all the more frantic, activists often had to unexpectedly respond to some new development proposal that threatened to degrade their environmental conditions even further, disregarding neighborhood concerns. This “game of whack-a-mole,” as one woman called it, left little time for advancing organizations’

long-term goals, including fundraising (Checker 2011, in press).

Spending an inordinate amount of time on participatory opportunities reflects contemporary trends in governance that emphasize inclusion and transparency and that promise empowerment through civic participation. However, many scholars demonstrate that public participation tends to have little impact on planning decisions; rather, it serves to mask the degree to which contemporary policies and practices privilege financial interests while defunding or outsourcing traditionally public services to private companies and non-profit organizations (Brash 2011; Clarke 2005; Hyatt 2012; Maskovsky 2006; Ottinger 2012). As one Staten Island activist said of the participatory opportunities to which she was constantly invited, “There is plenty of work to be done . . . without being given busy work to do in order to make the government look like it’s doing its job” (e-mail correspondence with author, September 13, 2013). Indeed, civic participation began to feel conspiratorial, designed to drain people’s time, energy, and optimism, and even to disable grassroots activism.

The funding scene for grassroots groups is similarly shaped by contemporary political and economic trends. With ever-shrinking financial resources, both public and private funders are more likely to offer project-based, rather than operating, grants, which must produce quantifiable outcomes and deliverables (Del Moral 2005; Schuller 2012). Applying for such grants requires time, technology, and expertise—resources often in short supply for grassroots groups. Yet these groups can no more turn their backs on funding opportunities than they can decline to participate in local governance.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, as I watched environmental justice activists on Staten Island become even more pressed for time and struggle even harder to keep their organizations afloat, I decided to step up my participation, offering to take over the writing of some grant proposals to private foundations and state agencies. While activists were grateful for my help (and we did win some funding), from an institutional perspective, my efforts did not “count,” as the grants did not include monies for myself (or the university). Thus, I also wrote some more traditional research proposals, doing my best to include funds to pay grassroots groups as project “consultants.”

My publications ran into a similar problem—mainstream journalism did not satisfy institutional expectations for scholarly publication, but academic articles did not reach the wide audiences sought by activists. Writing two sets of grants and two sets of articles while struggling to balance activism with my commitments as a scholar, educator, and faculty member certainly deepened my empathy for the exhaustion and depletion of those I researched.

THE BEST INTENTIONS FOR TOWN AND GOWN

Surely, both anthropologists and activists have always juggled multiple responsibilities. Yet the number of balls we must

keep in the air has increased. Indeed, the same trends that circumscribe the time and agendas of grassroots organizers now delineate the terms of academic practice and threaten to co-opt engaged scholarship.

During the late 20th century, anthropologists began to confront the discipline's historic complicity in promoting various forms of racism, colonialism, and imperialism (Low and Merry 2010; Mullings 2013). These critiques entreated ethnographers to both recognize their subjectivities and apply them toward analyzing power and privilege (see Marcus and Fisher 1986; Hale 2006). Feminist anthropologists pushed this idea even further by seeking to explicitly transform patriarchal and unequal systems through their work (Clarke 2010; Craven and Davis 2013). As calls for a more political and engaged anthropology grew louder in the early 21st century, public scholarship became an almost pervasive theme of conferences and publications. In 2010, *American Anthropologist* editor-in-chief Tom Boellstorff created a "Public Anthropology" section of the journal and named Barbara Rose Johnston, a longtime advocate and activist, as section editor. Alaka Wali, David Vine, and I began editing the "Public Anthropology Reviews" subsection, which reviewed scholarly projects directed to publics outside the academy (see Checker et al. 2010).

These endeavors aligned with similar movements across academic disciplines that sought to tear down ivory towers and build bridges between "town and gown." For the communities that surrounded and interacted with academic institutions, and which had long criticized the academy's hierarchical and privileged stance, such efforts were a long time coming (Krause et al. 2008).

However, while the mission statements of academic institutions increasingly stressed service, public scholarship, and engagement (echoing discourses associated with participatory governance), economic downturns and conservative attacks on higher education forced these institutions to take on increasingly entrepreneurial roles and to restructure around market-based priorities (Krause et al. 2008; Maskovsky 2012). Privatization and an ever-more-polarized (and exploitative) academic labor market took hold, as did larger class sizes, stricter tenure requirements, increased pressure to procure grants, and corporatized modes of academic governance. In addition, the replacement of tenure-track lines with contingent faculty has significantly expanded the service responsibilities of full-time faculty members (Schrecker 2008).

Today, entrepreneurial academic institutions are eager to fulfill their public service missions in part by inviting community leaders to sit on panels, guest teach, lead students on neighborhood tours, collaborate on grants, and to speak at conferences and seminars. Yet, in many cases, community members' time and travel are not reimbursed.⁶ Moreover, such activities take time and resources away from activists' more immediate goals, and they often seem to do more to endorse universities than they do to advance social change (see Cooke and Kothari 2001). Meanwhile, engaged scholars are frequently pressured to lend credibility to these institution-

building activities by drawing on their community-based relationships. Once again, such time-consuming efforts are of little value when it comes time for promotion and tenure.⁷ All of these trends converge: just as superficial forms of civic participation work to disable social movements by distracting activists from their goals, the institutionalization and appropriation of engaged scholarship threatens to divert us from building a truly transformative anthropology.

CONCLUSION: LEANING IN TO THE MYTH OF SUPER-ANTHRO

In recent years, feminists have looked up from decades of struggle against patriarchal systems only to find that, for middle- and upper-middle-class women, gains in the labor market have outpaced the evolution of ideologies and expectations about their roles in child rearing and domesticity. (Hochschild 1989). Motherhood myths are particularly enduring, although they appear in various forms, including the super, soccer, hockey, waitress, tiger, or helicopter mom (see Schulte 2014; West 2002). However idealized, numerous studies show that women's lives have only gotten busier, despite advances in gender equality (see Gupta et al. 2010; Jacobs and Gerson 2004; Schulte 2014). Similarly, anthropologists may have debunked the myth of the swashbuckling anthropologist who objectively studied native lives and ignored the political-economic contexts in which he worked. But we may have replaced this ideal with a new myth—that of the publicly engaged scholar who, in addition to teaching, administrating, and providing service, also identifies, analyzes, and resolves social problems. In reality, of course, our powers are limited, and they certainly do not extend to the ability to change the terms of grassroots struggles or to intervene in the political-economic forces that are arrayed against them.

Importantly, I am not suggesting that we abandon activist scholarship. Rather, I am suggesting that we rethink one of the key assumptions underlying it—that we have access to the kind of resources that will transform our informants' lives. We need to be frank about the realities of contemporary academic life—to our informants as well as our students—without giving the impression that we are so preoccupied by our own suffering that we are indifferent to that of others. Revealing up front that the academy is a complex, ambivalent, vulnerable, and politically compromised institutional space from which to participate in grassroots campaigns is a good place to start. It should be an essential part of the story that we tell about ourselves. And if we tell it right, we can enliven and fortify our relationships with our informants and create more realistic expectations for our research participants, for ourselves, and for new generations of anthropologists.

NOTES

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1. Amid great controversy, Mayor Michael Bloomberg had just announced the cancellation of the New York City marathon, scheduled for less than a week after the storm.
2. For critiques of overly celebratory accounts of activist anthropology, see, for instance, Hale 2008.
3. I use these terms to describe anthropological efforts directed to publics both within and outside the academy. For more detailed definitions and typologies, see Low and Merry 2010 and Maskovsky 2013.
4. These efforts were unsuccessful, but in 2013, the neighborhood actually began undergoing a city-sponsored relocation, a surprising and welcome development for which I take zero credit.
5. For some examples, see Checker 2009, 2010, 2012, and 2014b.
6. Importantly, this attitude prevails even among leftist scholars, who have balked when activists (or I, on their behalf) have asked for compensation—sometimes just in the form of a donation—in return for appearing on a panel or lecturing to students. It is as if such scholars believe activists' request somehow cheapens their dedication to “the struggle.”
7. See Hale 2008 and Low and Merry 2010.

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