

FROM ACTIVIST TO APPLIED ANTHROPOLOGIST TO ANTHROPOLOGIST? ON THE POLITICS OF COLLABORATION

By *Mark Schuller*

This article discusses my experiences moving from a full-time organizer to anthropologist. While conducting dissertation fieldwork in Haiti, I participated in a campaign to cancel Haiti's debt and organized an observer mission to Haiti's Free Trade Zone. During my fieldwork period, Haiti underwent an intense political-economic crisis, demanding extra vigilance and caution, transforming my role from direct involvement to an academic observer. Paradoxically, this role might be more appropriate for transnational solidarity. During Haiti's food crisis and 2008 hurricane season activists relied more extensively on my scholarly role than activist role. This article distills lessons from this collaboration for other activist-anthropologists.

Introduction

It's a matter of pride that anthropologists use our professional skills in the service of a here-and-now issue, group, movement, or to solve a particular social problem. I am certainly proud of our heritage of engagement in real world issues. From Boas and Mead there is an unbroken legacy of social change agents throughout anthropology. I stand humbly on the shoulders of giants like Paul Farmer, Barbara Rose Johnston, Helen Safa, Eric Wolf and Sol Tax continuing an activist anthropology grounded in social justice and focused on how inequalities are begun and maintained through institutional means, in my case international development agencies.

Despite their great contributions, and a renewed interest in "public anthropology" and engagement, the conversation about the political and ethical lessons learned from activist engagement lag

behind. We rightfully celebrate and build upon the successes of our activist anthropological ancestors, but we less often take the time to reflect. Tracy Kidder, writing about Farmer, and students of Sol Tax are notable exceptions.

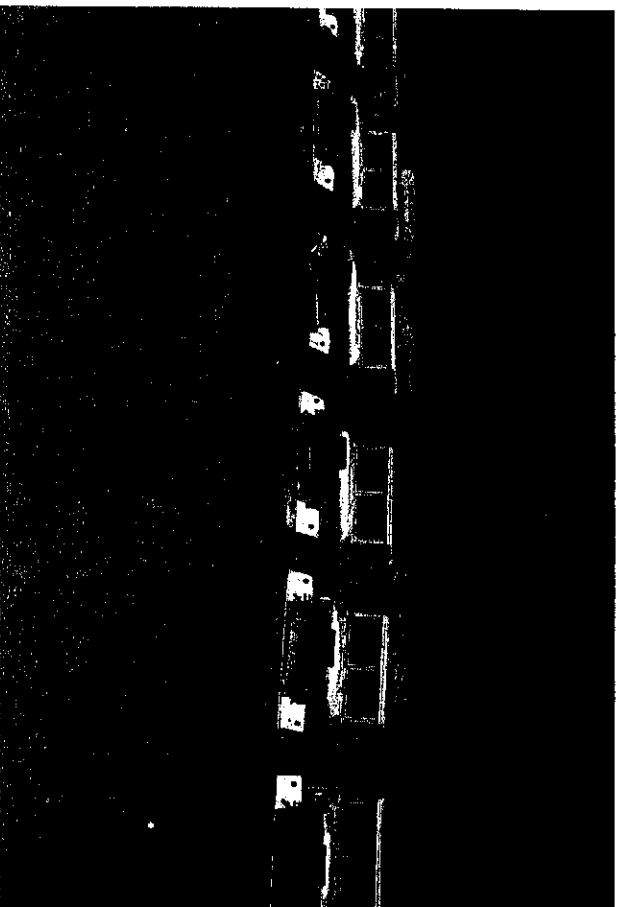
This article is a cautionary tale for other anthropologists who need to do something real with our "toolkit" outside the ivory tower, lessons I learned from my involvement with a range of nonprofit/nongovernmental groups in the US and in Haiti where I did my dissertation fieldwork and where I continue my professional activism.

I became an anthropologist because of my experience as a grassroots organizer. Anthropology seemed to me then as it does now the academic discipline most capable of supporting long-lasting, grassroots social change. We talk with and listen to the world's most marginalized people, people whom other disciplines tend to ignore, to silence, or to translate into statistics. We have a global reach, enabling us to explore how phenomena like the contemporary global economic crisis are impacting people everywhere, how it is understood, how it intersects with local realities, and how humanity is confronting it. Our core methodologies most resemble that of grassroots activism: participation, holistic listening, and a humanistic approach to caring, understanding, and working with real people. As an activist I had learned that organizing inspires critical transformations in people, and that marginalized, formally uneducated people often have sharper analyses than us professionals. These insights helped develop my empathy and deepened my commitment. I learned communication skills but unfortunately also needed to develop a thick skin and a strong stomach. All of these proved essential for my work as an anthropologist.

I did my dissertation research in Pòtoprens,¹ Haiti, with two women's NGOs. I wanted to study a question that proved central to my previous work as an organizer at the St. Paul Tenants Union: the impact of funding on NGOs. Everyone at the Tenants Union was laid off in part because we were too dependent on the city and a for-profit corporation for funding a direct service, the hotline. This is why I decided to go to graduate school in the first place. My later research in Haiti was, as much as possible, a participatory action project looking at how donors influence NGOs' and how donor funds impact NGOs' autonomy and participation in local communities. In addition to this agenda-setting, staff at the two NGOs participated in developing methodology and data analysis. I presented preliminary findings before I left and wrote up a Kreyòl summary to facilitate conversations about findings and conclusions.

Working in a Contested Terrain: Haiti's 2003-5 Political Crisis

There was one slight glitch in my research plans. Haiti's eight million people, 80 percent of whom are classified as "poor" by international standards (\$2 per day), who had the highest seroprevalence for HIV (6%) at the time, the highest unemployment (70%), and the highest illiteracy (50%) in the region, were held hostage by a protracted political and economic crisis when I was there. As Farmer has noted, it and other outbursts are expected results from "structural violence," long-term processes of exclusion and exploitation. Haiti's "unthinkable" (Trouillot 1995) act of defiance against the slave system, its independence in 1804 resulting from a slave revolt, began its punishment by the world system. In 1825 France



Vehicles Outside an NGO's Office, Highlighting the Ambiguity of the U.N. Mission as Humanitarian or an Occupation

demanded ransom, 150 million francs to compensate slave owners for their losses, beginning one of the longest periods of debt service, a century and a half before the World Bank and IMF. Promising change and an end to the complete exclusion of Haiti's poor majority, Haiti's first democratically elected president, former liberation theology priest Jean-Bertrand Aristide was ousted in a coup backed by local and foreign elites eight months into his first presidency in 1991. In order to return in 1994, Aristide had to promise the international community a complete reversal of his social justice platform in the Governor's Island Accord and the Paris Club. Six years later when his time came up for re-election in 2000, the opposition boycotted. They seized upon concerns of the vote counting methods in that spring's senate elections to bring the international community to the negotiating table. Half a billion dollars of international aid to Haiti ground to a halt pending resolution of this crisis, squeezing Haiti's poor majority out of public services like clean water and health care. Supporters of Aristide increasingly turned to violent means to

force the bourgeois-led opposition to respect their right to have a say in the country's future.

From Activist to Anthropologist

I arrived in Haiti for my 20-month dissertation research in October, 2003, just three weeks after the murder of "Cubain" Metayer, a leader of a violent group that had publicly switched alliances, notably joining the opposition against Aristide. Journalists began counting the dead in daily clashes between pro- and anti-Aristide groups. The political crisis had begun in earnest. Since 2000, after boycotting elections and with unwavering foreign tactical and financial support, the opposition gained momentum. My little notes home quickly became virtually the only reporting of the unfolding crisis that some consider "resolved" on February 29, 2004 when Aristide was forced out; however, my advisors begged me to "stay under the radar." The Haiti specialist on my committee, herself a founder of an NGO, was particularly adamant. "Your role in Haiti now is to simply observe and document. The time will come for your activism."

But I simply couldn't resist. My little notes were read on community radio. I was part of a collective we called "Voices for Global Justice." I imposed one condition: anonymity. The director of the radio station of course honored this request.

I saw several people become instant stars of the blogosphere, individuals whose analyses from afar were reproducing a toxic polarity that hid the quiet truth. For most people in Haiti, certainly Haiti's poor majority, the "crisis" didn't end with Aristide being forced out.

Most Haitian people were concerned about other pressing concerns such as the rise in prices for staple goods and a wave of violence and kidnapping that claimed as many as 8,000 lives. Still—and especially—my committee advised me to be silent. "What good is all your activist research going to do anyone if you're kidnapped or dead?" With great pains, I watched in relative silence, noting that people in the US continued to be the political stage, and to this day the discourses talk past one another. As of my last count, eight English-language books have been written about Aristide's ouster. To people with the time and patience to read them all, they are talking about at least two different sets of actors and actions: a state-versus-society narrative and a world-system-versus-Haiti narrative. Both discourses are essentialist, and both hide an important actor in the crisis. The first hides the role of the US and other foreign powers, and the second erases all differences in Haiti and Aristide's own actions.

Honoring a Request and Giving Back: Making a Documentary

As it turned out, keeping a low profile was even better advice than I had expected. In a gesture of giving back, of thanking one of the groups for their time and their wisdom, and in an effort to raise Haiti's profile, to raise standards for how Haiti is being portrayed, to raise awareness and funds, and to raise people's voices in demanding change, I co-produced/co-directed a documentary about Haiti, *Poto Mitan*.² *Haitian Women, Pillars of the Global*

Economy (<http://www.potomitan.net>). Told through the compelling lives of five courageous Haitian women workers, *Poto Mitan* gives the global economy a human face. Each woman's personal story explains neoliberal globalization, how it is gendered, and how it impacts Haiti through inhumane working and living conditions, violence, poverty, lack of education, and poor health care.

All were factory workers; however, most had been fired or laid off and all have migrated to the city in search of a better life after Haiti's peasant economy was destroyed. All but one, who came before the massive migration in the 1980s triggered by the destruction of Haiti's pig population, live in very crowded shantytowns that lack basic services like water, sewage, and electricity. While *Poto Mitan* offers an in-depth understanding of Haiti, its focus on women's subjugation, worker exploitation, poverty, and resistance demonstrate these are global struggles. Finally, through their collective activism, these women demonstrate that despite monumental obstacles in a poor country like Haiti, collective action makes change possible.

We had two primary audiences in mind in making *Poto Mitan*, students and activists. Aimed at community organizations, we hoped it would be a tool of change for civil rights, labor, women, global justice, faith and Haitian solidarity groups. We also wanted it to be an educational resource for anthropology, sociology, black studies, film studies, global studies, and women's studies departments.

Whether in a classroom, at an academic conference, or for a community organization, the film is already inspiring critical discussion. Once people see *Poto Mitan* many people ask questions about the US role—particularly consumers—in the problem. Invariably, several people ask what they can do to help. This inspiring action is not surprising because the film was made at the behest of the women who implored me to share their stories with people in the US who have the power to make change. As the Haitian proverb



A Protest, Being Pushed Far Off the National Plaza with the National Palace by U.S. Marines

they used in their request reminds us, *tande ak wè se de* (hearing and seeing are different things). The gripping images of working and living conditions that Haitian women have to endure are moving, and some even a little shocking. Eighteen groups addressing justice for workers, women, and Haiti have endorsed *Poto Mitan* and are committed to use it in their activism. Partners of the film, including Haiti Reborn, Dwa Fann, and the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti, plan to use the film to draw new people into organizing for causes such as structural reform of international development, and a sizeable increase in Haiti's minimum wage. Over 1500 people have signed up for our action alert network, and over 2000 people have gone from our website to the action alert about cancelling Haiti's debt.

All this said, the filming was done after the worst of the violence, but it was still dicey. I visited a woman's house to set up a shoot and because of my presence, neighborhood thugs roughed her up. We've been in touch many times since, and she's okay, but I learned that

the higher my profile, the more my presence is a risk to others, particularly the people who are participating in my research and activism.

Membership Has Its Privileges

In the mean time, I was becoming an anthropologist. As it turned out, it was more useful than being an organizer or activist to some NGOs and particular causes. My role as a scholar was the reason two particular NGOs³ asked me to get involved. I offered legitimacy that an "activist" would not have. And in the end, my role as a scholar may allow me greater freedom to collaborate with people across this bitter sectarian divide.

The first campaign I was asked to join made perfect use of anthropological skills of observation, in-depth interviews, and focus-group interviews. A conflict erupted between Dominican owners and Haitian workers of a factory producing Hanes shirts and Levi's jeans. The owners prevented workers from organizing, locking them out, firing them, sending in the Dominican

army to beat people up, allegedly injecting people with Depo-Provera without their knowledge or consent, and terminating as many as four pregnancies. Regrettably for the solidarity effort, the union was an outspoken critic of Aristide's. As a result the solidarity community in the US boycotted the effort, and no on-the-ground observer missions were sent. What little information the anti-Aristide union sent to their European solidarity partners was dismissed and actively challenged.

As a graduate student I organized a team of foreigners for an observer mission. We published a factual account of the events, detailing allegations, including an in-depth interview with one of the workers who miscarried at eight months. In part because of advice to 'keep a low profile' and in part because we only got one side of the story despite our attempt to contact the owners, we left our names off the report, the only English-language one of its kind. Not by any means am I taking credit for the workers' eventual victory, but I learned an important lesson. Because of the scholarly tone and its independence from activist groups, it was used by a wider audience than this union's European solidarity partner. It found its way into some union protests in San Francisco and news articles, for example. Had it been authored by the union, or the same group that publicized their efforts, or had it been written more like the activist action alerts that I cut my teeth on, it would have been easier to discredit, to marginalize, or to ignore.

A month later I was asked to write a report about Haiti's debt, as a scholar rather than an activist, and as an anthropologist as opposed to an economist. I happily obliged. In the end, I did not add a more in-depth analysis of the nuances of debt service, arrears, or the conditions the World Bank and IDB imposed on individual loans, etc., but I did dutifully reconstruct the numbers without flourish or rhetorical flair. *As an anthropologist*, however, I focused on the human aspect of this debt—the way it choked very needed social services,

and its impact on real people. One of the lessons I continually learn in Haiti is that people die needlessly from illnesses we've eradicated generations ago, people whose lack of access to clean water or the most basic preventive care cause them to fall ill. The lack of access to a doctor—because they have no money—causes people like my friend Ronald, who used to shine my shoes, to die. He fell ill because of stomach flu and died two weeks later. Had he had access to either clean drinking water or health care he most likely would have lived. He was 28 when he died. I think that my anthropological imagination was critical to this effort. No need to use adjectives like murderous or even the technical term "odious" to refer to the debt. Simply citing Paul Farmer's structural violence was enough. The report was ten pages, single spaced, which included a carefully constructed table, long enough to feel weighty but short enough to be read. Sadly, one of the reasons I think I was asked to do this—like the observer mission—was my status as a US citizen and my native fluency in English. But there it is: I got progressively involved in the Jubilee campaign (debt cancellation), and was invited to speak at their annual grassroots conference, again not as an activist, but as a scholar, as an "expert."

As I have hinted at, another benefit of being an independent scholar was that I could collaborate with people across this very bitter divide. Both sides of the Aristide divide and their blan⁴ on both sides of the Atlantic were pulling for debt cancellation, albeit separately. Due to the advocacy of hundreds of people, the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank and the International Monetary Fund cancelled 1.2 of Haiti's 1.9 billion dollar debt on June 30, 2009. But being an individual scholar, not embumbered by bad blood and a personal history, I could tell one person that I was working with someone that she or he reviled, and they respected that. As an individual scholar I have the freedom to collaborate with whomever I choose, even people on opposing sides of a particular political struggle.

Now that I'm beginning my next research project I am being pulled into the center of an internal conflict—just come to light in February—of a grassroots movement organization on its way to becoming an NGO. Not surprisingly, this conflict centers around funding and a division between foreign donors (albeit individual, not institutional) and members of the grassroots. Initially hoping this research might point to some solutions, I am finding that my organizing and research experience is being called upon to resolve a conflict. Both sides—whom I would consider friends, and some of whom I have collaborated with for three years—are asking me to take their side and offer some judgment. While it may strain my relationship—the very relationships that long-term participant observation both needs and sustains—I have told both sides that I can't get involved. Drawing on my trajectory from activist to activist-anthropologist to anthropologist, I am even considering doing less "participation" and more "observation." There are obviously limitations when I have to translate people's real experiences into "testable hypotheses" for IRB applications. And these experiences for Haiti's poor majority, particularly those who have had to confront violence, could make IRBs shudder and maybe shut down the formal "research." Having to explain anthropological methods to a psychologist is difficult enough... folding activists into the research makes this task Sisyphean.

Something Gained, Something Lost

Finally, while I believe I have gained much as a result of my professional identity, becoming a Ph.D scholar can also represent a loss of a pre-professional *habitus*, to use Bourdieu's famous term. If we scholars aren't careful, a certain vitality, and ability to work collaboratively with different social movement actors, can be lost. Lessons I learned from NGOs—including and especially the Tenants Union—were about how to engage the public and how to write. In all of these cases I did

not have the luxury of time, space, or anthropological jargon. When I was asked to research and write a paper about Haiti's food crisis that finally got world attention in April, 2008 because of riots, I had 36 hours to write a publishable account from scratch.

This piece and others like it are more significant public anthropology than articles that I have spent literally years writing, editing, submitting, re-editing and re-submitting, that "count" towards my tenure case. I learned this lesson before being a graduate student by writing press releases that had to go out in a manner of hours, protesting an eviction, announcing a rally, etc.

In addition to the quick turnaround time, these pieces were all short and to the point. Unlike my dissertation, or even peer-reviewed articles that feel painfully short at 8,000 words, these were all under 3,000 words, able to fit comfortably on a single webpage. Again, this is similar to writing for NGOs or nonprofits. And it goes without saying that writing for the public should be free of jargon. While not compromising sound scholarship which was the very reason I have at least marginal utility for social movements, campaigns, or NGOs, these writings had to be free of the clutter, citing the most important scholar in the field, showing that I'm aware of theoretical trends, and citing people who may be my reviewers lest I get trashed in the process.

It has been suggested that we re-kinde Turner's notion of "liminality" to talk about the spaces we activist-anthropologists occupy in the movements that we support. To call myself, a full-time professor making more than a hundred times Haiti's minimum wage, "liminal" is missing a very important piece of the context, imperialism. Gayatri Spivak's "strategic essentialism" comes closer to the mark here. When necessary I can put on my "scholar" identity. But as Spivak's feminist critics have noted, to assert a fixed identity, one that is useful precisely because of the power it connotes, is always perilous. As is the case with all other forms of privilege, it is like a muscle that grows stronger with each use. There is a danger in muscling

out the very people alongside whom I am working for justice, the very people whose lead I am attempting to follow.

Some Lessons Learned

I hope that my experiences and lessons learned may be useful to other activist /anthropologists. I humbly offer mine as only one possible experience in the hope that it might engender a useful conversation. Some general lessons are:

- Everything is based on relationships and negotiations. Sometimes we have to put our own politics or analysis aside to be able to work in collaboration, to empower others.
- We need to be comfortable taking the back seat to activist groups. We need to ask, how we can be helpful and not assume what role is appropriate.
- Sometimes our most relevant work is anonymous, as translators of other people's analysis or worldview.
- We need to limit the jargon and get to the point: the *New York Times* gives 250 words, or if we're very lucky, 500.
- We need to be ready to get it out quickly, and be ready for the critiques based on our imperfections.

Notes

¹I use the Kreyòl spelling, because despite the fact that it is the country's first spoken language, and the only language of Haiti's poor majority, and despite the fact that since 1987 it is an official language, it is nonetheless marginalized.

²Potomitan means literally "center post," referring to women's central roles in family, community, and society.

³They would both bristle at the title of NGOs—in Haiti there is a critical populist discourse and suspicion—one is a union and the other a progressive think tank.

⁴"Foreigner," in this case foreign solidarity partner.

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