

*Reviews and Reflections*

## Learning from Activist Anthropologists' Praxis

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Fourteen years ago, I organized a seminar at UC Santa Cruz called Engaged Anthropology, and out of that came a session at the Society for Applied Anthropology meetings that year called Politically Engaged Anthropology: Projects Under Construction. Anna L. Anderson-Lazo, the editor of this issue, was one of the presenters. It is an inspiring experience to be part of this continuing conversation, and to hear how these scholars—many of whom I have known during their graduate and even undergraduate student days—continue to live their praxis. In that 1995 seminar, we began with one of the dictionary definitions of engaged, which is “to be mired in muck.” As many of the authors have said here, resonating with a larger conversation, this work is not easy, not comfortable, and it is never finished. It can be joyful, maddening, heartbreaking, and the *only* way we feel we can live our lives—finding ways to collectively refuse neoliberal capitalist structuring of our communities, livelihoods, thoughts and relationships. That refusal is a full-time job, it seems, as we see the very forums we use to talk back to white supremacy, to heteronormativity, to neurotypicality and other normativities, and the interests of neoliberal capital, inhabited by those same dominant discourses. Collectivities have been both well-problematized and encouraged by the authors here, and I will comment on what I have learned from these and other ongoing activist/teacher/collaborators.

Lena Sawyer writes about finding role models who live the critique and stand up to power relations in the university as well as talking about power

in classrooms. She mentions St. Clair Drake, Zora Neale Hurston, and W.E.B. DuBois. As a role model for all who aspire to live our praxis, DuBois (1940) in particular, documented the very moment of his turn from seeing his role as scholar to seeing his vital role as a politically engaged scholar. He linked his politicization to the carnivalesque lynching of Sam Hose, near Atlanta where Professor DuBois was teaching. As many readers know, he decided at that moment that he could not just *teach* sociology: he had to *use* sociology classrooms to teach about the urgent need to transform power relations in the U.S. He did indeed live and advocate practicing what we teach, so I am glad Lena Sawyer invoked him in this issue. Lena Sawyer is herself a role model in her critique of the use of anthropology and social work instructors to teach “cultural competency”—which may be the only intervention we sometimes have in, for example, the training of health practitioners, and her point that culture can be used as a way to *not* talk about racialized, classed, and gendered power relations is very important. She poses a challenging choice for us: to maintain or to transform power relations with work we do every day, in or out of classrooms.

Scott Morgensen gives us an excellent reminder to *listen* to the salient terms and priorities in circulation in the transnational contexts in which we live and work our praxis, as he discusses Two Spirit identity as a salient position for critically and politically analyzing pandemics. Too often, activist scholars have imposed categories of identity and organizing priorities on the communities we engage, rather than

asking and listening to what is salient, or speaking *from* diverse positions within activist projects. Kristen Hudgins notes that projected assumptions can include the assumption of *community* itself.

Kathy Riley also problematizes, with those she cites, the uses by activist anthropologists of the terms community, partnership, and participation as sometimes facilitating processes of oppression and silencing, with or without the awareness of the anthropologist/collaborator. I have seen several oral history projects with participatory documentary aims railroaded by powerful factions, confirming the politicization of knowledge production in any form—the claim to equitable participation being often just as illusory as the claim Afsaneh Kalantary discusses of academic knowledge being apolitical. That claim, as she shows, has been used to powerful ends, and Kathy Riley also demonstrates the problematic outcomes of presumptive participation.

The authors writing for this journal issue critique reading bodies for identities, proximity for community, and collaboration for agreement. Similar challenges have been pointed out in debates about multiculturalism—not the fact of it, but states' legislative responses, fixing identities with ascribed political positions. As Wendy Brown (2006) has noted, use of the word tolerance in neoliberal state contexts can be powerfully silencing, with assumptions about naturalized subjects tolerating naturalized "others." After 9/11 a Native American woman was run over and killed by men who somehow read her body as Muslim, problematically conflating racialization, religious and political identification. During an anti-immigrant campaign in 1994 in California that targeted and racialized selectively some undocumented immigrant groups and not others, the attackers of two Latina women said that they thought they were "illegals;" their citizenship could not be read bodily, but their attackers' hatred focused on their own formula for inclusion and exclusion. How do activist anthropologists participate in the construction and deconstruction of problematic notions of community, including reading bodies? The decolonizing of knowledge Scott Morgensen says indigenous activists are calling for includes questioning so many categories of identity, community, and experience relied on in

activist anthropological practice. Returning to critiques of multicultural policies of representation as "having it covered," I once heard a student tell her class that such assumptions prevented acknowledgement of everyday racism. She said she was tired of other students asking her for her opinion as an African American (reading her body for her political position) and never as a person experiencing life with one blind and one seeing eye, which was not as apparent to her classmates. Kathy Riley encourages readers to attend to the "importance of historical and contextual daily experiences of political structures" rather than becoming comfortable with categorizations of identity, including citizenship.

Social movements, like notions of community, are increasingly using strategic points of convergent interests across many articulated differences. Adriana Garriga López discusses, for example, the "effectiveness of different activist strategies developed and adopted by various activist groupings." This perspective contests the essentializing of communities that many authors in this issue critique. Recognizing diversity within and across "communities," including anthropological ones, Scott Morgensen and Adriana Garriga López show how one way to stand up to the ongoing structural violence of colonial governmentalities is the cross-talk *between* transnational activist communities, very publicly engaging oppressive silences and fears. Asserting transnational status between Native American nations or Puerto Rico and the colonizing governmentality of the U.S. state is itself strategic in the work of activists Morgensen and Garriga López write with and about. Lena Sawyer writes, also, about transnationalism within a nation-state as part of the work of anthropology as all the authors reject, with most other anthropologists, the conflation of nation and culture.

Afsaneh Kalantary writes about the political and politicized space of universities, pointing out that the same forms of silencing and disenfranchisement from resources that happen in the larger neoliberal capitalist state context occur in the university. This has long been acknowledged in universities all over the world, but a dominant discourse for U.S. academics has shown resistance to acknowledging either the epistemological point that knowledge production,

distribution, and consumption is always politicized or the fact that academic processes like tenure and program and curriculum development are political, too. Afsaneh Kalantary discusses the surveillance and disciplining of Middle Eastern Studies after 9/11, and at this moment of economic crisis there are examples across the U.S. of budget cuts serving as a cloak of expedience for ideological decision-making (like the elimination of interdisciplinary programs focusing on critical praxis). She also points to the political challenges of curricular structures, for example, the assumption of sameness implied by the rubric Middle Eastern Studies applied to a huge and diverse region, as can also be said of all of the “peoples of...” and “... cultures” courses in anthropology departments.

Anna L. Anderson-Lazo challenges readers to see ourselves in relationship *first*, and long-term, and *then* to think about the academic framing of projects, rather than having the relationships entailed to, and necessitated by, academic projects. As a professional community organizer, she has exemplified this kind of choice by sustaining the long-term conversation among her activist anthropologist colleagues as reflected in the act of editing this issue, not because she needs the publication for tenure in an academic setting but because she is committed to continuing the conversation about what anthropological praxis means in diverse everyday work contexts. In the PICO organizing model Anna L. Anderson-Lazo discussed, I was fascinated by the first step she described in that process: a *listening campaign*. I believe, as Ulrika Dahl expressed in the session that led to this issue, that we work as colleagues with others in activism, and we each bring skills to those collective—even momentarily allied—projects. With cultural anthropological training, we bring ethnographic listening skills. But what we have often been trained to be, even as activists, is individual brokers—like Kristen Hudgins described—between stakeholders in communities. Anna L. Anderson-Lazo brings from community organizing to engaged anthropological practice, in concert with other activist scholars over time, a rejection of the modernist and then neoliberal imperative that anthropological practice be a solitary act of intellectual commodification. She describes whole congregations—in the

faith-based NGO context—engaged in “a listening campaign.” What if anthropologists *really* did this? At anthropological conferences, what if everyone talked with each other on elevators, talked with the workers making the beds and moving the tables and chairs around, and connected the conversations happening in different meeting rooms? As Sandy Smith-Nonini (2007) has pointed out in her analysis of the anthropologists’ responses to the UNITE/HERE lockout at the San Francisco Hilton, the “employees only” doors in hotels swing both ways, and it is important for anthropologists to engage the workers who facilitate those very privileged conference spaces. Our work needs to include the ways we are implicated in the social context we may be critiquing, as in ignoring a homeless person on the way to give a paper about homelessness—the kind of irony Brackette Williams (1995) has discussed so well. As Scott Morgensen points out, the anthropologist does not *control* the conversation he or she may be a part of, and this needs to be acknowledged in activist anthropology methodologies. One method I have tried (Kingsolver 2001) is to organize collaborative interviewing in which each participant—from different nations, disciplines, and institutional contexts—can use the transcript for her/his own writing and publication purposes, including the individuals interviewed. With activist documentation and less class-based control of recording equipment, there are increasing possibilities for multiple uses of what used to be very hierarchical recording events, and Scott Morgensen and others here have discussed this.

*Decolonizing Anthropology: Moving Further Toward an Anthropology for Liberation* (Harrison 1991) is in danger of going out of print again, at a time when it is as relevant, or more so, than ever—as demonstrated by the references to decolonizing anthropology throughout this issue. It is vital that we read the work of activist anthropologists from earlier moments, and as many have pointed out, that is the work that is most readily marginalized from the anthropological canon. Zora Neale Hurston and Ruth Benedict, who could possibly have been in the seminar that activist social scientists W.E.B. DuBois and Franz Boas team-taught at Columbia University, each had their most activist work subsequently writ-

ten off by most anthropologists. Zora Neale Hurston's novels exemplify a form of activist anthropological documentation that anticipated the politically reflexive storytelling turn in the discipline many decades later. And when Proposition 209, the "California Civil Rights Initiative" aimed at undoing affirmative action policies and drawing on scientific racism to undergird its arguments, was proposed in California, I thought of Ruth Benedict's book, *Race: Science and Politics*, in which she said, "The slogan of 'science' will sell most things today, and it sells persecution as easily as it sells rouge" (Benedict 1945: 232). Decolonizing anthropology is a long-term, global, everyday project, and the authors collected here—some working in contexts marked as anthropological spaces, and some not—have strong mentors in activist anthropologists like Faye Harrison, who not only lays out a very clear plan for engaged praxis (Harrison 2008) but has demonstrated it in her transnational collaborative work against oppression and her extensive work to decolonize classrooms and anthropology meetings. With time, I realize that that is what my dissertation advisor Sylvia Helen Forman was doing—she was not only teaching activist, political, and anti-racist anthropology in classrooms, but she was committing most of her time to her institutional transformation work. She worked in very practical ways, serving as program chair in anthropological associations, and as department chair overseeing faculty and graduate student recruitment practices, for example, to connect U.S. anthropology, so isolated, to international conversations, and to address structural classism, racism, and sexism in the university context (see Shenk 1995).

In my classroom praxis, I continue to learn from my mentors and students. As I get older, mostly the

lesson I find I need to learn is getting out of the way and *not* telling a student s/he *cannot* do something. After a class project in a course I teach called Globalization and Cultural Questions, for example, Mica Jenkins went on and decided to get our university's president and student body to sign off on policies making the USC a sweatshop-free campus when it comes to any product sold with the university label, and she did it. In the current economic crisis, since food insecurity is 14.7% and rising here in South Carolina (according to feedingamerica.org), our anthropology department has paired with the local food bank for several projects. Some students are using their social science training to assist the food bank in administering a statewide survey to improve food distribution services. A number of our students need those services themselves. Last week, the students in the globalization class were discussing the case of a couple around their age who had just been arrested in this state because one of their children starved to death; the students questioned the structural violence that doubly penalized this family, and they pooled their available knowledge and found that it would not be easy to find and utilize the services available to prevent hunger in a household, even with the access to information they have as university students. Those volunteering in soup kitchens and homeless shelters talked about the lines of people who had to be turned away each day, and those who are food service workers talked about the food they were supposed to throw away at the end of the day but gave away instead. I agree with Afsaneh Kalantary that there is no classroom wall dividing the political from the apolitical, and with all the authors in this issue that wherever we are is where we act, as activist anthropologists.

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