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Review /Reseña

Victoria Sanford and Asale Angel-Ajani, editors, *Engaged Observer: Anthropology, Advocacy, and Activism*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006.

Anthropology and the Engaged Observer

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Engaged Observer focuses on the discipline of anthropology, and I am not an anthropologist. Yet the book spoke to me in many ways, and I learned greatly from reading it. As in many edited volumes, the book's strengths lie in the diversity of its contributions. Most are thoughtful, thought-provoking pieces of scholarship that directly explore questions raised in the foreword and introduction: What is the role of advocacy in research? To whom do the anthropologist's primary commitments lie? What is the role of truth, and justice, and power, in scholarly work? Drawing on research conducted around the globe among settings where human rights are endemically violated, the contributions to this volume are

powerful examples of compassionate scholarship by leading anthropologists.

Yet what makes them “engaged”? I found myself reflecting on this question as I thumbed through the book’s pages. Here, some interesting and contradictory answers emerge from the contributors themselves. For some, the engagement would appear to lie in the nature of the relationship between researcher and subject. For example, in Aldo Civico’s reflection on conversations with a Colombian paramilitary, engagement emerges through compassion with the research subject; Civico asks whether research relationships of true reciprocity and caring—even with subjects who may have committed atrocities—can offer a “truce” from a world drenched in suffering. Michael Bosia, writing about the importance of understanding corporal experiences in research among HIV positive men, emphasizes a similar need for “an empathetic turn in research, giving priority to the lived experiences of our research subjects as witnesses.” And though she offers no commentary on the concept of engagement per se, Irina Carlota Silber appears to do just that in her sensitive ethnography of poor women in postwar El Salvador. Monique Skidmore argues eloquently, defending her decisions to do ethnographic work in Burma, “To gather data from the most disadvantaged sectors of Burmese society is, for me, an opportunity to give a voice to largely powerless people who have no recourse to justice... But [it is also an opportunity to] document the potential forms of political agency that exist in the various subjectivities that are created under authoritarianism. In this sense, being an engaged anthropologist is to advocate for the histories of terror and misery to be retained in the contemporary world.”

And yet a second set of contributors seems to suggest that engagement must go beyond sensitive listening and faithful documentation. Indeed, Asale Angel-Ajani, in a thought-provoking critique of the notion of witnessing, problematizes the very notion of the anthropologist as witness, asking what roles anthropologists play in documenting “cases” or communities for outsiders. Others suggest that the engagement lies in transformative action. Dana-Ain Davis writes, “Turning up the volume of under-represented voices is not enough. ...We must link

research practices to critical inquiry and ultimately to action that will dislodge power.” Some scholars, including Aída Hernández, call for the application of anthropological insights in “political and economic frameworks at the national and global levels” in an effort to stop the violence against indigenous peoples. Philippe Bourgois’ foreword and Victoria Sanford’s introduction are unambiguous calls to action along these lines.

Of course, these are not either/or choices: ideally, as several contributors here reflect, engagement with the communities we work among should be shaped and strengthened by our engagement with broader advocacy efforts. In her excellent chapter on gendered resistance in Chiapas, for example, Shannon Speed explores the way her engagement as an activist feminist, and her experience as a mother, enhanced her understanding of reactions to the massacre at Acteal. As Dana-Ain Davis illustrates, the adoption of a participatory research design in her work among battered black women not only deepens the engagement between “researcher” and “subject” but also enables a more nuanced analysis which in turn proves useful for shaping policy.

I find the tensions between these choices fascinating, and would have liked more explicit attention to this in the volume; many of the contributors clearly have great expertise in this area, and I would have liked to hear more. Restricting our contributions to academic debates rather than real-world discussions is seductive because it allows us to (largely) control the terms of debate and (largely) limit its consequences. In academic writing we can engage the insights of postmodernism, relativizing truths, without directly impugning the credibility of key witnesses in ongoing trial proceedings or other subjects whose claims to truth are the basis on which real-life benefits including material reparations, access to aid, protection, and symbolic justice are obtained. (Although, it is worth remembering that we kid ourselves if we claim that our research might never impact such determinations, as the fallout from David Stoll’s book on Rigoberta Menchú makes clear.)

Nonetheless, if we deliberately venture outside the comforting echo chamber of academic work, as many contributors to this book suggest we

must (and I agree) insert our voices into debates which we control even less. While writing this review I am also trying to sum up my research findings on CAFTA's impact on access to medicines in an op-ed piece of 650 words or less which I hope might inform public debate during the upcoming referendum in Costa Rica; and I wonder, what are the ethical implications of reducing multiple partial truths to a single sound bite? And/or, what are the ethical implications of choosing not to do so? In a refreshingly honest meditation on some of these dilemmas, Monique Skidmore criticizes Burma scholars who engage with the US policy corps rather than the Burmese people. Her critique is enormously persuasive. But any time one engages circles of state power, there is the potential that one's work be co-opted, that one's relationships with victims of state policy be challenged; under what circumstances (if any) are such risks worth taking?

Overall, the book raises a series of fascinating questions, and different authors offer compelling, often contrasting glimmers at what might begin to be answers. Ultimately, the volume does not attempt to provide a single, pat solution to such a complex set of dilemmas and challenges, nor should it. While a final commentary knitting together the insights embedded within so many gripping chapters would have helped lend coherence to the volume, even in its absence the book is rich with food for thought, and many of its contributions make excellent stand-alone articles for scholars interested in anthropological ethics, conflict ethnographies, activism, or thoughtful analyses of power and its effects in a range of research sites around the globe.