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Edited by Sam Beck and Carl A. Maida

## Public Anthropology in a Borderless World

Edited by

**Sam Beck and Carl A. Maida**



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To the legacy of Eric R. Wolf

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**ANTHROPOLOGY FOR WHOM?**  
Challenges and Prospects of Activist Scholarship



*Angela Stuesse*

When I stumbled upon anthropology in college, I was drawn in because I found that it troubled my conceptions about the world and my place in it. My first anthropology course, taken when I was an exchange student at the *Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán* in Mérida, México, focused on the legacies of a colonialist and racist “science” that sought to justify European and North American global dominance by categorizing “the other.” It challenged me to think about others in new ways, but more importantly, it pushed me to understand myself—and my privilege as a white, middle-class, U.S.-born college student—in a new light. This critical self-reflection laid the foundation for my continued study of the discipline.

As a graduate student at the University of Texas in the late twentieth century, I found sustenance in a new brand of anthropology that my mentors dubbed “activist.” A small cohort of faculty there had begun training students, recruiting faculty, and carving out institutional space for an anthropology that drew on the field’s critical history and moved it in new directions. Driven by a politics of liberation, the “Austin School” espoused a deep ethical commitment to decolonization of both the discipline and the world more broadly. It did so by asking, “Anthropology for whom?” and answering in explicit political alignment with “people organizing to change the conditions of their lives” (Gordon and Hale 1997).

The Austin School teaches that activist research “begins with an act of political identification and dialogue with collective subjects in struggle for

relief from oppression, for equality and betterment" (Gordon 2007: 95–96). I was drawn to its radical reconception of anthropological research as a tool that marginalized peoples could wield to effect social transformation toward greater equality and justice. In the years that followed, I designed and carried out a research project that sought to put these ideas into practice. Conducted over six years in rural Mississippi's chicken processing towns and factories, the research aimed to understand how the recent influx of Latin American immigrant labor was transforming communities and influencing workers' ability to organize in one of the most dangerous, dehumanizing industries in the country. It was carried out in collaboration with a fledgling workers' center dedicated to advancing workers' political mobilization through education, organizing, access to services, and legal advocacy.

The experience gave me much food for thought about the promises and pitfalls of activist research. Perhaps most transformational was the realization that my research complicated one of the fundamental principles of activist anthropology as taught by the Austin School—that of sustained collaboration with an organized collective. Somewhat problematically, I found, it presupposes a concrete, bounded, organized group of individuals or organizations with whom one works throughout the various stages of research, when in fact, the "communities in struggle" with whom we align ourselves are often amorphous and transitional, at times even metaphorical or imagined.

In this chapter I reflect on my research collaboration in Mississippi to illuminate this complication of the Austin School's proposition of activist research. This case, in dialogue with other research experiences that also challenge the notion of research in collaboration with an "organized collective," allows consideration of potential alternative conceptions of politically engaged research that can produce more varied configurations of ethically grounded, mutually fruitful collaboration. It also abundantly exemplifies how anthropologists are "put to use" by our partners and can contribute to their goals in different phases of the research process. Ultimately, it illustrates that the Austin School's core notions of "communities in struggle" or an "organized collective" can elide the complexity of relationships and allegiances that activist research must negotiate. I argue for reconceptualizing these terms with a more nuanced understanding of their intersecting parts—the individual people, the institutions, and a set of (mutually shared?) political ideals.

Before elaborating on the Mississippi experiment, however, I will consider some of activist anthropology's historical genealogies and the contemporary contours of its relationship to the idea of public anthropology in a borderless world.

## Activist Anthropology

Activist anthropology has a multi-stranded genealogy. This section aims to first delineate some of its roots and, later, more fully operationalize the teachings of the Austin School. One vital predecessor of today's activist anthropology can be located in efforts to create an "action anthropology" in the 1950s. This work grew out of Sol Tax's research and teaching with the Fox (Mesquaki) Indians, sought to create an anthropology that was more dialogic and practical approach than its predecessors (Tax 1952). Tax and his many students strove to involve community members in identifying problems that social science research might solve, conducting studies, and generating more useful community-centered research products. Critics disagree about the extent to which Tax achieved these ideals, but they concur that his ideas were groundbreaking for their time (Blanchard 1979; Foley 1995; 1999). They influenced a subsection of American anthropologists and marked the early formalization of the U.S. field of applied anthropology in the United States (Bastide 1973; Rylko-Bauer et al. 2006).

In the wake of independence movements around the globe in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a critical mass of anthropologists and those affected by their work caught the discipline's attention. With biting critiques of anthropology's role in bolstering colonialism and furthering the empires of the United States and its European Allies, these voices set the stage for anthropology's "critical turn" (Asad 1973; Deloria Jr. 1969; Hymes 1972; Lewis 1973; Nader 1972; Symposium on Inter-Ethnic Conflict in South America 1973 [1971]; Willis 1972). Around the same time, in South America Paulo Freire's critical teachings on popular education as a tool of resistance inspired social scientists to conceive new collaborative research methodologies as pedagogical tools for social transformation, giving rise to Participatory Action Research (Fals Borda 1979; Freire 1970; 1982 [1972]; Kassam and Mustafa 1982).<sup>1</sup> By the end of the 1970s, these entwined efforts, in tandem with other crucial global and domestic events of political significance (movements for civil rights, racial justice, and gender equality; politics of war and peace; U.S. foreign policy, etc.), had politicized a growing number of U.S. anthropology departments. Among students and newly-minted faculty, the concept of "radical anthropology," a critical theory-based Marxist approach seeking to align its aims with those of the "oppressed," began to emerge (Polgar 1979).

In the 1980s, these critiques prompted anthropology to turn its gaze upon itself and begin to grapple with questions of ethnographic authority and the politics of representation (Clifford 1988; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Rosaldo 1989). Feminist scholars' scathing critiques of long-held ideas about objectivity and positivism in science had far-reaching impacts on

the field (Haraway 1988; Harding 1987; 1993). Around this time, increasing numbers of women, people of color, queer writer-theorists, and other scholar-activists on or outside the margins of the discipline deepened the “critical turn,” engendering intense discussions over anthropology’s (and the academy’s) role and relevance in society and its complicity in sustaining unequal relations of power in the world.<sup>2</sup>

As works in this vein have multiplied in recent decades, the discipline has witnessed an increased interest in an “engaged” anthropology that “gives back” to the communities where we work and seeks relevance with broader publics. Several edited volumes and articles on the topic have emerged in recent years, the present volume being a fine example of this trend.<sup>3</sup> In 2010, *American Anthropologist*, the discipline’s leading U.S. periodical, dedicated a new section to anthropologists’ public engagement (Checker et al. 2010). The term “engagement,” however, has as many meanings as it does users. Some focus on putting anthropology “to use,” reclaiming the moniker “applied” in its broadest sense (Rylko-Bauer et al. 2006). Others seek to alter understandings of important social issues via their scholarly critiques (which some dub “cultural critique”) (Hale 2006). Still others strive for a broader impact on social change by writing for a more general audience, sometimes using new means of communication (Borofsky 2010; Lende 2013; Scheper-Hughes 2009).

The Austin School’s approach to “activist anthropology” grows out of this diverse scholarly and political lineage and intersects variously with these contemporary inclinations, yet it proposes something qualitatively distinct. Its defining feature is its emphasis on long-term collaboration with “communities in struggle” in each phase of the research process. “To be an anthropology which no longer serves the interests of the oppressors it must be one which actively serves those of the oppressed,” wrote Edmund T. Gordon, one of the founders of the Austin School (Gordon 1991: 153). Certainly, an important foundation of activist research is its explicit political positioning, though some might argue that the move toward a values-driven anthropology embodied in the Austin School is but a logical conclusion reached by taking seriously the thoroughgoing critiques of some of anthropology’s earlier forms of engagement in the world. Overt political alignment enables us and our interlocutors to more directly consider how our positioning is always situated and how this shapes our research and results. Failure to do so is itself a political act that may well be read as complicity with the status quo.

Activist anthropology attempts to address longstanding power inequities in the relationship between anthropologists and their research “subjects”—in essence, democratizing our practice—while simultaneously putting anthropology to use in ways that advance struggles for justice

more broadly. However, calls for a more “militant” anthropology (Scheper-Hughes 1995) that enables some of us to be anthropologists while staying true to our deepest beliefs about the world and our role in it only partially address the advantages proffered by activist research.

Charles R. Hale asserts that activist anthropology offers the potential for at least two (other) significant scholarly contributions to our discipline, those of enhanced methodological rigor and theoretical innovation (2008). In terms of methodology, because activist research demands a more horizontal, collaborative relationship between the anthropologist and her interlocutors from the conception of the research questions to the dissemination of its final products, it offers fertile ground for improving rigor. Moreover, because our collaborators often have use for positivist, objectivist findings to inform their struggles, these needs require sound, defensible methodologies. By exploring new or creative ways to internally validate our data, and by positioning ourselves in the most transparent ways possible, Hale argues, activist researchers can enhance the precision and accuracy of our claims, reclaiming notions of strong objectivity in the process.

He also suggests that activist anthropology is positioned to enrich our discipline by offering new analytical insights into social processes and relations. The argument here is quite simply that deeply engaged and collaborative research provides the researcher with a *different* partial perspective from which to examine the problems under study. This alternative vantage point can provide novel understandings to help us complicate and advance theories of power, inequality, and social change. Shannon Speed makes a similar claim, and her work on how discourses of human rights have been wielded in the Zapatista struggle for indigenous rights in Chiapas offers a prime example of how activist research positioning can enrich anthropological theory (2008). In sum, activist research produces qualitatively different findings.

The activist research process begins with collaborative design of the research project. As Gupta and Ferguson pointed out, “The political task is not to ‘share’ knowledge with those who lack it, but to forge links between different knowledges that are possible from different locations, and to trace lines of possible alliance and shared purpose between them” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 48). The exchange of ideas among differently positioned social actors, including the researcher, becomes a fieldwork process in which methodologies, data, and analyses remain in constant dialogue with one another. Their simultaneity makes it possible—and essential—to continually reappraise and revise project questions, methods, and theoretical assertions throughout the research.

Depending on the work context, the processes of fieldwork and data collection may be directly relevant to our collaborators, particularly when

they entail building networks or training local partners in research methods. More often, however, activist researchers combine data collection with fulfillment of other roles—fundraiser, organizer, educator, director, interpreter, cartographer, logistical coordinator, phone answerer, coffee maker—deemed more immediately relevant by the organizations or movements we work with. I will elaborate on these roles and the attendant political commitments below, but they merit note here because they are key to the activist researcher's privileged perspective and insight into the social processes under study. Through precisely this positioning, politically engaged research offers the promise of deeper, more nuanced—"better"—analyses and results (Hale 2001; Holland et al. 2010; Speed 2006). In active partnership with the people central to the analysis, one learns not only more but differently, having gained access to distinctive and collaborative theoretical insights.

Activist research also takes particular approaches to the process of writing and dissemination of knowledge. How does one write against inequality? What are the political stakes of publicly sharing our analyses? How do we balance accountability to our political commitments and collaborators with self-reflexivity, honesty, and critical attunement to our topics of study? Who "owns" the knowledge produced by collaborative, politically engaged projects, and who should control and benefit from its dissemination? To start, activist research requires us to dialogue with our collaborators throughout analysis, writing, and dissemination, and work out ways to incorporate their critiques and concerns into the research products. This increases the research's accountability, accuracy, and usefulness to our closest collaborators (Bernard 2002; Foley 1990; Hale 2001; Schepher-Hughes 1995; Sudbury 1998). Meanwhile, validation, popular consumption, and critique of our (often shared, collective) analyses force us to seriously consider who will benefit from the knowledge we produce and its utility in the struggle on the ground.

Having described the Austin School's forerunners, its positioning within a larger movement toward engaged and public anthropologies, and the ways in which a commitment to activist scholarship challenges and transforms the research process, I will now show how my first experiment in activist research complicates the teachings of the Austin School.

### **Collaborative Beginnings: Founding the Poultry Worker Justice Research Project**

I spent more than six years, from 2001 to 2008, experimenting with the Austin School's model of activist research. As indicated earlier, my ethno-

graphic inquiry took place in rural Mississippi's chicken processing plants and communities. Since the mid-1990s, hundreds of Latin American migrants from across the continent had moved to the area in response to chicken plants' recruitment of foreign-born laborers. As a result, during that decade poultry communities' "Hispanic" population grew by more than 1,000 percent, dramatically altering neighborhoods' and workplaces' dynamics and demographics. My research was fundamentally interested in how these changes were impacting poultry processing workers' ability to organize for higher wages, improved working conditions, and basic human dignity.

To comprehend how recent and ongoing transformations might impact workers' strategies of political mobilization, however, I needed to grasp how old and new Mississippians of different backgrounds—white and Black as well as "Hispanic," representing a diversity of cultures and nationalities—understood and experienced the ongoing changes in their communities and workplaces. The research revealed that interpretations of the escalating globalization of rural Mississippi are conditioned by people's positioning vis-à-vis whiteness and Blackness, as well as by their relationship to the poultry industry. Moreover, it showed that the industry adeptly wields these diverse relationships to race and labor (along with other forms of difference) to keep workers from recognizing potential mutual self-interest. These findings led me to conclude that the region's complicated historical and contemporary political economies of race seriously impede poultry workers' organization across difference in the newly transnational U.S. South. Having elaborated elsewhere on these results, here I mention them as background to contextualize the subsequent methodological discussion of activist research (Stuesse 2003; 2009; 2010; forthcoming; Stuesse and Helton 2013).

The project began in 2001 as a dialogue with the Equal Justice Center (EJC), a newly formed nonprofit legal advocacy organization in Austin, Texas, which advocated for worker justice in the poultry industry.<sup>4</sup> Decades of representing migrant farm workers in employment law cases in Texas had piqued EJC Director Bill Beardall's interest in the growing immigrant communities in other parts of the U.S. South, particularly their participation in emerging forms of industrial agriculture like poultry processing. My academic advisor introduced me to Beardall and encouraged us to discuss potential activist research collaboration. After a series of conversations on the goals of politically engaged scholarship and its potential contributions to social justice movements generally and recent inflections of the poultry justice movement particularly, Beardall invited me to participate in a National Poultry Justice Alliance convening in Washington, DC, in early 2002. The alliance brought together individuals and organizations



interested in poultry justice from a diversity of perspectives, including workers' rights, growers' (farmers') interests, the environment, and public health. As I began to learn about the issues and actors, I asked myself and potential collaborators how politically engaged ethnographic research could contribute to their work and enhance ongoing struggles for poultry justice. The initial meeting suggested potential for partnership between an activist anthropologist and poultry justice stakeholders, but particulars remained vague. Where and with what organization(s) or collective(s) might I collaborate? Around what research question(s)?

In the following months, dialogue continued with the EJC and others I had met at the national convening. Beardall's connection to a Southern labor organizer led to a conversation with a local union representative and former poultry worker in Mississippi. He had witnessed the operators of the production lines change from predominantly African American workers to, increasingly, Latin American immigrants. "I need someone who can help me speak Mexican!" he implored. He had fought the changes at first, even calling federal immigration agents to demand deportation of "illegal" workers, but by early 2002 he was working to incorporate them into the union's membership. Further discussions with poultry worker organizers and advocates in Mississippi revealed that a small, diverse, multiracial group of people were grappling with the recent phenomenon of Latin American migration into the area's poultry processing plants and communities. Along with fellow graduate student Anita Grabowski, I agreed to spend the summer of 2002 in Mississippi meeting the actors, learning about the issues, and further exploring possibilities for activist research in alignment with poultry justice efforts there.

Besides identifying key problems faced by poultry workers and their advocates, this preliminary research established relationships with religious leaders, union organizers, immigrant and civil rights advocates, and poultry workers of diverse backgrounds. It revealed their commitment and perseverance, as well as a staggering lack of resources and information with which to improve conditions in chicken plants and communities. To address this limitation, Grabowski and I, working with the EJC and our new Mississippi-based collaborators, began offering "know your rights" workshops for poultry workers and advocates in the area. These efforts built rapport and seeded key research relationships between me, Grabowski, and our Mississippi partners, and also helped solidify the nascent ties between each of these actors and the EJC, whose legal expertise in workers' rights and employment justice filled a significant void in local capacity. As our collaboration developed, advocates expressed interest in opening a workers' center to help them address continuing obstacles to poultry worker justice, and worker participants in the workshops sup-

ported this idea. This early coalition between local actors, the Equal Justice Center, and University of Texas-based activist researchers was soon dubbed the Poultry Worker Justice Research Project.

In fall of 2002 and throughout 2003, I traveled frequently to Mississippi, where Beardall, Grabowski, and I, along with colleagues from Southern Migrant Legal Services and other legal advocacy organizations, continued supporting local activists and the poultry workers they represented. We expanded and refined the popular education workshops and participated in formulating preliminary plans for a workers' center. At the time I was also focused on meeting key requirements of my doctoral program: studying for and passing qualifying exams, writing and defending a dissertation research prospectus, applying for research funding. The political process moved forward despite periods of my own diminished engagement compelled by my program of study.

### **Establishing Ownership: Becoming a Project of the Equal Justice Center**

By January 2004, when I arrived in Mississippi with my U-Haul and moved into my rented home, Grabowski had finished her MA program and Beardall had hired her to work with him in Austin coordinating the EJC's collaboration in founding a workers' center in Mississippi. To oversee and guide its creation, a diverse group of our closest collaborators since 2002 formed a Mississippi-based advisory committee. I struggled to determine what, precisely, my role should be within this structure. I was neither EJC staff nor a member of the advisory committee, and formal affiliation with the workers' center was not possible at this preliminary stage of its existence. Still, my participation was vital to the project. My presence "on the ground" in Mississippi lent credibility to the Texas-based EJC, and my daily engagement with poultry workers and their allies made me a crucial gatekeeper of "local" knowledge that fueled the EJC's continued involvement. Likewise, my collaboration with the EJC helped me build relationships with workers, union representatives, and other allies; facilitated my repeated entry into several chicken plants as a union interpreter; and boosted my credibility with allies such as the Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance in ways I couldn't have achieved as an independent researcher or graduate student. Moreover, interaction with Beardall provided me with ongoing education in employment law, and his mentorship greatly improved my ability to help Mississippi-based activists and workers troubleshoot issues as they arose. Thus, in mutually constitutive fashion, my relationship with the EJC provided me with vital

tools and research access while also enabling the organization to deepen its relationships and engagement in Mississippi.

I communicated with Grabowski almost daily and joined in weekly conference calls with her and Beardall. Drawing on what I was learning from our collaboration with local actors, my participation was integral in laying the groundwork for the workers' center. I devoted much of my time to planning and conducting activities and campaigns in Mississippi in collaboration with the EJC and local advocates, and also participated in monthly advisory committee meetings. However, I was not invited to the EJC staff meetings in Austin or made privy to many other key organizational conversations, which limited my power to influence EJC's strategic planning. After more than two years of collaboration, I found I was both an insider and an outsider in the processes I was studying. Moreover, our mutual consideration of the potentialities of activist research often felt reduced to the (considerable) value of intelligent, eager, exploitable free labor.

As the spring of 2004 advanced, I realized that what had begun as a collaborative project between Mississippi-based advocates, university-based researchers, and the Texas-based Equal Justice Center to facilitate the creation of a locally owned and run workers' center was now becoming a "project" of the EJC. Despite the loose alliance supporting the work, decisions came largely from Beardall and Grabowski in Austin. Their nominal creation of a regional Poultry Worker Justice Project housed the Mississippi initiative and helped to justify non-local control over its development.

Local people were certainly integral to and supportive of the work, but their sense of ownership over the center's creation was minimal. The advisory committee members willingly offered guidance to the project, but their more-than-full time commitments to their own work, often involving intensive advocacy or service provision, left them unable to take on the burden of running a workers' center. Their comments in meetings suggested that they saw the EJC's expertise, resources, and dedication as vital to the center's development, and they generally supported its position of ownership over the initiative. Poultry worker organizing—one of the center's key objectives—was barely nascent, so those whom the proposed work most directly affected were poorly positioned to opine.

I wrestled with the complexities of political alignment in this context. I was conducting research in collaboration with loosely affiliated actors with overlapping political commitments and social justice goals, including most obviously the EJC, but I (idealistically) envisioned being a partner in a locally sustainable project led by Mississippi advocates, community members, and especially poultry workers. Where did I stand as an activist researcher, seeing this political commitment and vision jeopardized by the

very organization I was most closely affiliated with? And what could I do about it? My field notes from this time reflect the unease I felt. I repeatedly raised my concerns with Beardall and Grabowski, but my insistence did not have the desired effect. I began to suspect that instead of stimulating greater impulse to contribute strategically to a locally owned and driven program, my outspokenness was resulting in my exclusion from key planning and relationship-building meetings. Ownership of the project had passed tacitly to the EJC, which dedicated considerable resources to fundraising and making the workers' center a reality.

We continued to work toward building the center without resolving this point of contention. My relationship with the EJC was at times strained, but reflection on these early months of effort reveals that the collaboration was mutually beneficial—in fact, quite necessary—for all involved. Moreover, despite the tensions, all parties shared a deep political commitment to achieving greater justice in the poultry industry, and this ideological glue held us together in difficult times. My formal relationship to the project as both activist researcher and volunteer remained nebulous throughout 2004, and ambiguities about my positioning and political alignment persisted but also changed as the year wore on.

### **A Conflicted Labor Movement: Conducting Activist Research with Unions**

Throughout my time in Mississippi, we worked to gain the confidence of the various unions representing poultry workers there. Since the project's outset, the union local representatives on the advisory committee had expressed varying degrees of skepticism about the concept and role of the projected workers' center. Aware of concerns raised by the growing national workers' center movement, unions justifiably wanted to know how the workers' center would support their efforts to organize workers without compromising their work or competing with them (Fine 2006; Fink 2003). We therefore trod softly while trying to establish trusting relationships with union representatives and convince them that by working together, we could do more to help poultry workers.

Distressingly, the longer we worked with the unions and with poultry workers of diverse backgrounds, the more we questioned the unions' (general) business-model approach to organizing and representing workers. This approach consists of short bursts of intensive effort by local, regional, and international staff to mobilize workers during National Labor Relations Board elections and union contract negotiations, followed by long periods in which local representatives struggle to keep up with "ser-

ving” their contract. Local representatives’ time is often split between several plants, towns, and even states, and their limited capital is spent mediating between workers and plant management and representing workers with grievances. Mississippi’s status as a Right to Work<sup>5</sup> state—coupled with other state-level anti-labor policies, its intense rurality, the historic presence of a disempowered, low-wage workforce with few options, and an increasingly undocumented pool of immigrant workers—means union locals must struggle to maintain the resources they need to pay salaries and stay in business. This greatly limits their ability, and sometimes willingness, to adequately represent their members, let alone focus on workers’ political education, organizing, and empowerment.

While I fully recognized the structural conditions that severely circumscribe unions’ potential to grow a movement in a place like Mississippi, in 2004 I began to question the EJC’s decision to stand with the unions despite what at times appeared to be union locals’ negligence or lack of good-faith effort in representing their members. I agreed with the EJC’s argument that a troubled labor movement is better than none at all, but I often ruminated over questions of worker (dis)empowerment and worried that the project was sacrificing standing with workers in order to build the trust of the unions. These concerns—part of a larger set of ethical questions about the project’s approach—again raised doubts about my relationships and allegiances as an activist researcher. I saw the EJC as the closest thing to an organized collective with which I could continue formal collaboration on this work. Yet I acutely felt the tensions between my methodological and political alignment with an organization whose interests did not always align with those of the people it sought to empower, and the poultry workers with whom I was gradually building political and personal alliances over time.

### **Becoming Staff: The Founding of the Mississippi Poultry Workers’ Center**

By the end of 2004, the workers’ center we had worked to build could claim initial success. It now had a name—the Mississippi Poultry Workers’ Center—and a small office in a central poultry town. More importantly, Grabowski’s fundraising efforts had borne fruit, enabling the workers’ center (via the EJC) to hire its first full-time Mississippi-based community organizer, an African American woman from the nearby state capital of Jackson who boasted deep roots as an advocate for social justice in the state. I benefited too from the newly acquired funding when the EJC hired me as part-time staff with the title Community Outreach and Education

Associate. I had sought this formal role for several reasons. First, lacking external funding to support my research, since arriving in Mississippi I had taken on two part-time jobs—one as a teacher of English as a Second Language to recent immigrants and the other as a contract researcher for a Jackson-based nonprofit agency—and compensation from the EJC would let me focus more exclusively on issues central to the research. Second, I expected a title and clear affiliation with the EJC to bolster my credibility with local Mississippi advocates—particularly certain unions that I saw as vital to my research and to the worker justice movement. Finally, I hoped that a “staff” role on the project would strengthen my ability to guide the development of the workers’ center in directions I deemed promising. Emerging implications of the research pointed to leadership development, political education, and relationship-building efforts with African American and Latin American poultry workers as key components of this vision.

Throughout 2005 we continued to respond to worker justice crises as they arose and cultivate relationships with unions, while also endeavoring to consolidate a mission, vision, and clearly defined areas of work for the workers’ center. Meantime, several of the EJC’s other projects grew rapidly and Beardall focused most of his energies on the issues before him in Texas. His diminished engagement in the Mississippi work opened space for Grabowski and the Mississippi-based staff, guided by the advisory committee, to craft the center’s foci according to our vision. We downgraded the role legal advocacy and technical expertise would play in the organization and privileged community organizing and popular education work. This shift in focus reflected our areas of interest and training (none of us had legal education beyond what we had learned from Beardall), but more importantly it suggested an alternative theory of social change, one that centrally involves the people most affected in advocating their own interests. During this time the advisory committee dissolved to make way for a leadership council, at least half of whose members would be poultry workers. This focus on making the work more locally run and accountable felt promising, even though the project remained under the auspices of the EJC.

In collaboration with a Peruvian educator and former poultry worker, I developed a pilot curriculum to bring Latino and Black worker leaders together to build a critical analysis of the political, social, and economic conditions that affect their lives and keep them divided. *Solidarity/Solidaridad: Building Cross-Cultural Understanding for Poultry Worker Justice*, inspired by the pedagogies of popular education, encouraged participants to draw on their life experiences as both learners and teachers in a nonhierarchical setting. The classes offered tools for practicing basic communication in

English and Spanish, upholding workers' rights, and understanding the realities of immigration and the struggle for civil and immigrant rights in the United States. By learning about each other's histories and cultures and identifying how their experiences as raced, gendered, classed beings keeps them from recognizing common problems and seeking collective solutions, participants began to recognize their mutual self-interest in building strategic alliances for social change. The urgent need for this popular education course emerged from the principal findings of the collaborative research—that people's life experiences as raced, gendered, and classed beings, and their positioning vis-à-vis whiteness and Blackness, inhibits the formation of a collective vision whereby people of different backgrounds can build strategic alliances for social change.

The curriculum offered a modest glimpse of the prospects for politically engaged research as well as one strategy that might begin to contest the racialized and other identity-based divisions that uphold industry power and white supremacy in the newly transnational South. It emerged from the conviction that whereas common oppression as workers does not naturally unite diverse groups of individuals, "coalitions within and across identity categories can be built by open and honest discussion of the ways in which all of us have been differently racialized, gendered, and infused with complex and composite identities and interests" (Lipsitz 1998: 232). The curriculum acknowledged the structural and institutional nature of power and oppression exercised via neoliberal globalization and confronted it head-on, seeking to build solidarity not by silencing difference, but by embracing diversity as both a lived social "problem" and a resource to be leveraged in building a more just world. It taught that any sustainable worker movement must be rooted in experiences of culture, history, and identity, and that this approach is vital to the "emancipation of the whole" (Kelley 1997: 110). To this end, it began building a common language and points of connection through which poultry workers might begin to forge coalitions with co-workers and community members who are different from them, a notion Black feminist Barbara Smith deemed "truly radical" (Smith 2000: 232).

In my formalized role, I sensed throughout 2005 that collaborators, including those at the EJC, began to see me less as "teacher," "researcher," or "volunteer" and more as an integral part of the organization. I, too, felt more a part of the team building the workers' center. As I became further integrated, some of my earlier concerns about the center's leadership diminished. In hindsight, I have often pondered the extent to which assuming a position of greater leadership moderated my critical lens. At other times I've wondered if the EJC had the foresight to recognize that my new role might help to quell my critiques. In any case, my reflections on this

period of collaboration are also somewhat sunnier because this was when our shared dreams about the potential of activist research began to bear fruit.

As the research suggested potential paths toward worker education and organizing and the workers' center eagerly sought to incorporate these lessons in its work, I felt renewed hope for the constructive possibilities of activist research. Not only was the collaborative relationship mutually beneficial from a methodological and utilitarian perspective (or as one of my graduate students recently put it, "mutually exploitative"), but my positionality was now simultaneously giving me a privileged perspective on the issues I was studying *and* letting me apply that insight in ways that developed the workers' center and strengthened poultry workers' political consciousness. The popular education initiative discussed above is but one of the key examples of the contours of our activist research efforts during the worker center's heyday.

## Leaving the Field: The Creation and Decline of MPOWER

As I prepared to leave Mississippi in early 2006, my formal relationship to the EJC changed again when I became an "independent contractor." I continued to work with the workers' center while in Mississippi and after I left on a project basis. I trained new instructors to continue the political education and language courses we had developed, and I coordinated this and another workers' center program as I focused on writing my dissertation back in Austin (and later, Santa Fe). Shortly before I left, we hired a Salvadoran woman who had previously worked in the chicken plants to be the center's second full-time community organizer. Grabowski continued to direct the workers' center as an EJC project, traveling regularly between Texas and Mississippi.

As the year progressed, tensions escalated within the EJC over the organization's decision-making processes, the activities staff should spend their time on, and the most effective ways to bring about social change. The disputes involved a cross-section of the EJC staff and were not unique to the workers' center project, but they both fed off and deepened earlier divisions surrounding the mission and work of the workers' center. These fissures grew increasingly urgent, as did tensions concerning perceived gender, age, and race inequalities within the EJC. Grabowski involved the leadership council, the Mississippi staff, and me in conversation as she weighed the potential paths forward in light of these developments. After months of painful discussion, the council authorized Grabowski to negotiate the center's separation from the EJC. By the end of 2006 the workers'

center had formally spun off with high hopes of becoming its own community-based nonprofit organization.

Under this new structure, the leadership council was poised to become the governing board of directors and the workers' center changed its name to MPOWER (Mississippi Poultry Workers for Equality and Respect). The activist research relationship that began as a collaboration with local advocates and the EJC and grew over time into a close, if complicated, partnership with EJC, now shifted into a third phase in which I was most closely affiliated with a new organization, MPOWER. Throughout 2007, while focused on completing my dissertation, I continued to support MPOWER from afar. Spatial distance and my divided attention made it increasingly harder to engage with the changes the organization was undergoing. Meanwhile, turnover within MPOWER's leadership council and staff presented the activist research relationship (and, much more acutely, the organization itself) with additional challenges.

The shift to local ownership compromised Grabowski's ability to lead the organization, both logistically and ideologically. She agreed to remain for a one-year transitional period devoted mainly to board training, organizational development, and the hiring of MPOWER's first executive director. This turned out to be a very tall order. The commitment to growing a board of directors composed mostly of poultry workers required equipping the leadership council with the tools it needed to successfully govern a nonprofit organization. However, many of its members were unfamiliar with nonprofit management, and irregular meeting attendance (poultry plants often operate six days a week) and the need to conduct gatherings in English and Spanish at once also proved problematic. That summer, Grabowski, the leadership council, MPOWER's staff, and I interviewed three candidates for the directorship and offered the job to the most promising individual. Despite his enthusiasm, a family crisis delayed his decision and ultimately prevented him from starting work. By late 2007 the board faced the prospect of another director search. With Grabowski's departure looming, they appointed the board chair, who had been involved in the organization for approximately the past year, interim director.

Under her direction, MPOWER's staff increasingly approached their work through a lens of service and Latino immigrant rights, all but abandoning the organization's mission of building worker power through cross-racial organizing and education. As before, I faced an internal conflict between accountability to an organization and commitment to an increasingly divergent set of political goals. On a practical level, I was immersed in writing across the country, and because my work had principally involved coordinating and supporting a pool of independent contractors (*Solidarity/Solidaridad* instructors and Workplace Injury Project

interpreters), I had not worked closely with MPOWER's interim director and barely knew many of the newer board members. Confusion about my role repeatedly surfaced, and my shifting and under-defined relationship to the organization generated more questions than answers.

I invited MPOWER staff, board, and collaborators to read and critique drafts of my dissertation, and some took up the challenge. Grabowski commented on multiple drafts of the complete manuscript; others reviewed, critiqued, and clarified sections in which they figured prominently; and impressively, a few for whom English was a new, third language gave me painstakingly detailed feedback. The EJC's Beardall, with whom relations had been strained since MPOWER's spin-off, never responded to my invitations. Others at MPOWER, puzzled, asked what they could possibly contribute to an academic paper. Many of the individuals with whom I had for years discussed furthering the goals of poultry worker justice through activist research had moved on, and I found myself at the end of a six-year road starting new conversations about the politics, methods, and goals of politically engaged research. However, our geographic distance, the newcomers' unfamiliarity with MPOWER's history and my role within it, and a healthy skepticism of outsider academics made these conversations difficult and, at times, impossible.

As I put the finishing touches on the dissertation in early 2008, MPOWER was in decline. Grabowski's overly ambitious plan to transform the workers' center from a professional legal advocacy organization's project into an independent, community-led nonprofit organization in the span of one year encountered more challenges than successes. The time allotted proved insufficient to build the capacities and cultivate the local ownership needed to sustain the organization. By summer MPOWER was broke and insolvent, and the interim director had vanished. Amid rumors of her financial impropriety, the frustrated, defeated leadership council ceased to meet. All programming ended, and MPOWER never received formal nonprofit recognition from the state. Ironically, as I successfully defended the dissertation and my academic career began to bloom, the organization at the heart of my ethnographic narrative—and which the activist research relationship had helped to grow—was withering.

Since then, a small group of Latin American women poultry workers has continued to meet irregularly, utilizing MPOWER's popular education and workers' rights materials. Organized by the last MPOWER staff person standing at the time of its collapse, these women gather to support one another and confront issues of sexual harassment, discrimination, workplace injuries, and domestic violence while learning to defend their rights at work and at home. They benefited briefly from affiliating with STITCH, a transnational organization that supports leadership develop-

ment among women workers in Latin America and the United States, but by the time of this writing, STITCH, too, had gone under.

## Reflections

Throughout my research and writing, I was repeatedly troubled by dissonance between my relationship to a shifting group of individuals and organizations, and the ethics, methods, and theory taught by the Austin School. As the project moved from the hands of a loose local coalition to the EJC to the Mississippi Poultry Workers' Center and later to MPOWER, I struggled with questions of responsibility and allegiance in the activist research context. What were my ongoing responsibilities to individuals no longer involved in the workers' center, such as my initial collaborator and mentor, Beardall? What responsibilities did I have to organizational newcomers, and how could I make activist research "real" for them after my involvement in day-to-day activities had waned? Were my primary alliances with individuals or the organization? Moreover, how could I reconcile my forging of an activist research relationship with institutions (mainly the EJC but also the unions) that at times seemed at odds with the very politics I thought myself aligned with? As a new initiative founded by a coalition of people who themselves were not poultry workers, the Mississippi Poultry Workers' Center/MPOWER had experienced its share of growing pains, which made my relationships and potential contributions as an activist researcher more fluid and more complex.

In the dissertation I speculated that activist research with a more established organization—one with a clear constituency, vision, and strategic plan—would likely entail a different type of negotiation between researcher and organization, resulting in a more defined relationship, specific responsibilities and/or deliverables, and clear lines of accountability. I did not write about one lingering question: Had I fundamentally failed to operationalize the Austin School's approach to activist research by not allying myself from the start with a bounded group of individuals organizing to change the conditions of their own lives? Did I misstep by unwittingly selecting a project that early on vested power in individuals who were not poultry workers? Then again, MPOWER's later leadership reminded me that worker control did not necessarily translate into commitment to a progressive political vision. Would there have been fruitful ground for collaboration if my initial contact had been with a largely service-oriented (albeit worker-led) organization? Revealed over time, the project's many complexities muddied the notion of activist research with which I identified.

Regarding the lessons my fieldwork experience in Mississippi holds for the practice of activist research, I have devoted much thought to what I might do differently in crafting future collaborative projects. Should I be more intentional about identifying potential organizational collaborators that not only share my political vision but also meet a particular threshold of institutional stability and democratic organizational culture? It is very difficult to assess an organization's internal politics from the outside looking in, and gathering this information before beginning a dialogue about the potentialities of activist research would be impractical and perhaps unethical. More importantly, subsequent experience in activist research endeavors has taught me that all organizations are fraught with contradictions, like any product of human relationships. The idea that careful selection of an organization could elide all the conflicts and contradictions that might arise is naive and unrealistic.

I have also considered and experimented with ways of more explicitly delineating the contours of the activist research relationship early on, though this has proven difficult in practice. Specifying precisely how the activist research relationship will benefit collaborators through particular outcomes jeopardizes our ability to respond to needs and opportunities as they arise. And by focusing too much on research products, we risk overlooking the immediate benefit (and accompanying research opportunities) that our labor—used as our collaborators see fit—often provides. Corroborating this cautionary note are the experiences of several engaged researchers whose collaborators "put them to use" in tasks as mundane as making coffee and copies and as high-stakes as representing the organization in meetings with prospective international funders or helping it build strong legal arguments (Checker 2005; Duneier 1999; Hemment 2007; Johnston and Barker 2008; Speed 2008; Vargas 2006; Vine 2009). Flexibility and willingness to be "put to use" are often key components of the activist research relationship.

Yet I have begun to question what I have long accepted as a cornerstone of the Austin School. Is alignment with an organized collective imperative? Should activist research not partake in building something new, helping to forge political consciousness and organize a loosely defined group with potentially overlapping interests, even if it has not yet been constituted as such? Feminist anthropologist Julie Hemment did precisely this by joining a budding organization of politicized women in post-Soviet Russia (Hement 2007). Her self-reflexive ethnography frankly considers the benefits and challenges this collaboration brought to her as a researcher and to the group. The organization was fragile (as is, Hemment concluded, the sustainability of the "third sector" in contemporary Russia), and as with the workers' center in Mississippi, the focus of its work and particular

individuals' active participation within it changed over time. By the time her book came out, the organization was no longer active, but she maintained relationships with its former members, who continued to work for women's empowerment (Hemment 2007: 149–151). Indeed, she and the organization's founder continue to collaborate on engaged research projects of mutual interest. In Hemment's case, the organization she collaborated with dissolved over time, but its people continued the work in other forms, guided by the same political principles they had held when she met them. Her text gives no intimation that her collaborators' politics ever shifted in ways that required her to choose between the organization and its people.

Anthropologist and engaged scholar of the African diaspora Jemima Pierre offers another case that complicates the Austin School's insistence on partnership with an organized collective. Her chapter in Charles R. Hale's edited volume *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics and Methods of Activist Scholarship* attempts to carve out space for academics engaged with a progressive politics located in spaces *other than* an organized collective (Pierre 2008). Despite her predisposition to engaged research, when studying racialization in postcolonial Ghana Pierre found no organized group struggles around matters of racial disparity in which to participate. Reflecting on how her positionality as a Black woman studying Blackness in Africa opened transformative spaces for Africans to rethink their relationships to global political economies of race, the essay advocates a reconception of the relationship between activism and research. Ultimately, Pierre argues, it is her commitment to the ideals of "global Black emancipation" in all areas of life, including the relationships she forges with research participants in Ghana and the spaces she occupies within the academy, that makes her scholarship fundamentally activist (Pierre 2008:127). The myriad ways she lives her politics, she insists, make her academic encounters transformative.

Hemment's and Pierre's discussions help me think about how my experience in Mississippi might encourage us to broaden our notion of activist research. Like Pierre, I based my relationships with collaborators in Mississippi on a particular vision—a more just life for Mississippi's immigrant and U.S.-born poultry workers, but more broadly, a world where power is more equally distributed in ways that move us closer to the goals of social, racial, and economic justice. Like Hemment, I had and retain concrete accountability to a collaborating organization and to particular individuals.<sup>6</sup> Thus, enmeshed in the idea of activist research collaboration with an organized collective are at least three identifiable overlapping commitments: (1) to individuals, (2) to an institution (formal or informal), and (3) to a politics of liberation. In the Austin School's ideal type, the individuals, the

group, and the politics exist in harmony within "communities in struggle," but in light of this chapter they might be better understood as three strands that at times become tightly interwoven but can also loosen and fray. To further the analogy, the longer a fabric is worn, the more likely it is to unravel.

Activist research calls for long-term commitment to all three strands. Given the privileged perspective the collaborative relationship typically enables, the passage of (more) time associated with activist research likely allows us to witness fabric unraveling (through personality conflicts, ideological disagreements, organizational collapse, etc.) more often than do ethnographers of other inclinations. Most often, however, we forbear to write about it, concerned with protecting our research participants, our future research access, or the social movements we support. In reflecting on my own experiments in activist research, I have taken pains not to harm any of the above. I have used deliberate language, exercised caution with revelations, and narrated the story with my purpose in mind.

My aim is to refine the teachings of the Austin School and illustrate the importance of its framework for an anthropology in collaboration with broader publics. Crucially, sustained engagement with the question "Anthropology for whom?" ensures that we consider the impacts, contributions, and relevance of our work. Meanwhile, although the notion of research aligned with "communities in struggle" works as a theoretical tool to guide our research methodologies, it implies an overly idealistic conflation of "communities" and "struggle," eliding the complexities involved in simultaneous commitments to people, institutions, and a shared politics. When these diverge, the relative weight given to each often depends on situational particularities and the stakes involved in the decision. This chapter has shown how I struggled to come to this realization, privileging political/ethical commitments and, to a lesser extent, the personal relationships these politics helped forge, over obligation to any one organization or group. My deliberations also demonstrate some of the many possible inflections of activist research and their potential contributions to publics beyond the academy. The realities of carrying out politically engaged research are always more complicated in practice than in theory, and considering the challenges that emerge from on-the-ground scholarship aligned with political struggle enables us to further refine the analytical frames through which we conceive our work. One of my mentors, Charlie Hale, has suggested that engagement with the contradictions of engaged research can cultivate new ground for debate, broaden the community of scholars conducting relevant work, and further map out the field of activist anthropology (Hale 2008: 26). In this spirit, and with these goals, I offer my reflections for consideration.

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## Notes

1. For discussion of the development of participatory action research and its contemporary uses, see, for example, Hemment 2007; Nabudere 2008.
2. See, for example, Anzaldúa 1999; Behar and Gordon 1995; Crenshaw 1991; Enslin 1994; Fox 1991; Harrison 1991; Lorde 1983 [1980]; McIntosh 1997 [1986]; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; Narayan 1993; Sandoval 2000; Scheper-Hughes 1995; Smith 1983; Trouillot 1995; Visweswaran 1994.
3. See, for example, Beck and Maida 2013; Benmayor 1991; Craven and Davis 2013; Field and Fox 2007; Hale 2008; Holland et al. 2010; Hyatt and Lyon-Callo 2003; Juris and Khasnabish 2013; Low and Merry 2010; Sanford and Angel-Ajani 2006.
4. For more on the Equal Justice Center's current work, see <http://equaljusticecenter.org>.
5. The federal Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 empowered states to determine whether employees at unionized workplaces would be required to join the union. Under "Right to Work" legislation, currently enacted in twenty-three states located mostly in the South and West, individual workers choose whether or not to pay union dues and become a member. In such "open shops," the collective bargaining agreement protects all workers, whom unions are required to represent equally, but often only a fraction of these workers are dues-paying members. As a result, unions in Right to Work states typically lack resources, crippling their ability to sustainably organize and represent workers.
6. Despite the passage of time, I invited both Beardall and Grabowski to comment on the present piece.

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