

Feminist Anthropology Anew: Motherhood and HIV/AIDS as Sites of Action

Pamela J. Downe

ABSTRACT: Ongoing discussions about feminist anthropology as an active and relevant sub-discipline largely rely on historical comparisons that pit the political fervour of the past against what is deemed to be the less defined and increasingly disengaged feminist anthropology of today. In this paper, I argue that the prevailing tone of pessimism surrounding feminist anthropology should be met with a critical response that: (1) situates the current characterization of the sub-discipline within broader debates between second- and third-wave feminism; and (2) considers the ways in which the supposed incongruity between theories of deconstruction and political engagement undermines the sub-discipline's strengths. Throughout this discussion, I consider what an ethnographic study of motherhood in the context of HIV/AIDS can offer as we take stock of feminist anthropology's current potential and future possibility.

KEYWORDS: engagement, feminist anthropology, HIV/AIDS, motherhood

Introduction: A Time to Take Stock

In the introduction to their recent volume on feminist anthropology, Miranda Stockett and Pamela Geller (2006) persuasively argue that it is time to take stock of the sub-discipline's past in order to plan for its future. Stocktaking can be a tremendously fruitful exercise because it often sets the tone for future work by characterizing the problems and prospects of the field in the past as well as today. My intent here is to contribute to this stocktaking task by outlining how we might read and respond to the arguments that gender-based action research in anthropology has been abandoned in favour of theoretical approaches that render sub-disciplinary coherence untenable and advocacy impossible. As I consider feminist anthropology's future as a site for engagement and activism, I draw on a community-based study with women who are negotiating ma-

ternal health and motherhood in the context of HIV/AIDS.

I am committed to feminist anthropology in large part because, as a graduate student in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I benefited from the swelling waves of this vibrant sub-discipline and my scholarship was sharpened by the debates that shaped the gendered categories of reproduction, status, conflict and care, among others. The usefulness of feminist anthropological texts has not been lost; in fact, in a globalized world of unprecedented conflicts, connections, trade and travel, the analytical categories of gendered experience are drawn on more frequently than in feminism's supposed 'heyday' thirty years ago. Sarah Hautzinger's (2007) fascinating ethnography of all-female police units designed to respond to domestic violence in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil, is but one of the many recent works that serves as an example of how principles of

feminism and categories of feminist anthropological analysis are relevant to the mitigation of power inequities. Yet, despite such innovative work, a decidedly pessimistic tone has seeped into the characterization of today's feminist anthropology, at least as it is being documented and discussed by leading American and British scholars.

Certainly, pessimism based in feminism's 'failure' to address HIV/AIDS in the early years of the North American epidemic plagues efforts to engage with the topic today. In 2008, I began a study of HIV/AIDS and motherhood, exploring what it means to be a mother in the context of the epidemic and partnering with an HIV/AIDS organization that offers services to central and northern Saskatchewan, a Canadian prairie province of a million people with a recent and alarming increase in HIV. The study is ethnographic, involving open-ended narrative interviews with twenty-four women (as of January 2010), participant observation in the organization's drop-in centre, and a mapping of the institutional landscape (from social services to primary care clinics) that the participants negotiate. Although there is increasing attention to the very important topic of mother-to-child HIV transmission in Canada and elsewhere (particularly sub-Saharan Africa), there has been virtually no attention to how being a mother affects health-related behaviours in the context of HIV. This project attempts to redress this significant gap by working with a community-based agency in a participatory way to engage the women who struggle to nurture and raise their children amidst the epidemic. It became clear early in the study that a central focus of the research must include the maternal activism in which the women engage. As they respond to child apprehension, ongoing surveillance by social services, public stigma and the daily challenges of child care, the women participating in the study adopt an activist and feminist stance. Yet, this type of grassroots feminism draws little attention from those who decry

the demise of feminist anthropology, and this is truly unfortunate because – as I will discuss – the research participants' engagement with feminism holds great potential for feminist anthropology.

Feminist Anthropology? 'No, But ...'

Recently, former *Ethnos* editor Don Kulick published the transcript of a roundtable-type conversation with foundational scholars of feminist anthropology: Rayna Rapp, Louise Lamphere and Gayle Rubin (Kulick 2007). The conversation was held to mark the thirty-year publication anniversary of two landmark texts, *Woman, Culture and Society* (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974) and *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (Rapp [Reiter] 1975). The record of this conversation is an interesting one – part nostalgia, part institutional critique, part disciplinary reflection and part prolegomenon for the future of feminist anthropology. What emerges clearly, particularly on this last point, is the simple fact that in order to imagine what kind of future feminist anthropology might have, we must address how the field is currently characterized in substance and tone.

We can begin by considering Don Kulick's two questions that in many ways framed the roundtable discussion – 'What about the field today? Is there a field that we can call feminist anthropology?' – and Rayna Rapp's response: 'I would say "No", or "Yes, but" or "No, but"' (Kulick 2007: 423). The qualifying 'but' here includes testimony to the successes of feminism, acknowledgment of the move to a more intersectional analysis of gendered experience and recognition of the need for a nuanced consideration of diversity (a need that, despite later claims to the contrary, was identified in the foundational feminist texts being discussed). But, still, despite this qualified testament to the field's success and relevance, Rapp equivocates on whether a distinguishable field of feminist anthropology currently exists when, in her

view, categories of identity are deconstructed and rendered ambiguous rather than embraced for political engagement. This equivocation is illustrative of a presiding tone of pessimism and it warrants further attention.

Mary Weismantel (2002: 37) echoes Rapp's sentiments when she draws a contrast between the excitement of feminist archaeology, with its methodologically innovative attention to the material record of gender inequity, and cultural anthropology's supposedly waning enthusiasm and tepid response to a post-Judith Butler feminism. Acknowledging that most ethnographies address specific forms of inequality – racism, poverty or hetero-normativity – Weismantel still argues that the dynamics of inequality are not explored as fully as they could or should be. Researchers, she believes, shy away even from the word 'inequality' itself, 'finding it, like patriarchy or misogyny, a bit too crude in its politics'. The far-reaching and unifying theory required to explain and to challenge dynamics of inequality is the kind that Weismantel believes has been ousted by the supposedly 'trendy' theoretical engagements with ambiguity, fluidity and diversity. For emphasis, Weismantel draws a historical contrast as well, setting the oft-cited lassitude of feminist anthropology today against the fervour of the field thirty years ago:

It was different in the heady days of the 1970s, when fiercely radical scholars embraced a specific goal: not only to study inequality but to eradicate it. That sense of purpose is now blunted and diffused – and not only because the political climate has changed. Research seems fragmented and rudderless, the distances between the subdisciplines unbridgeable, and cultural theory becalmed in the post-post doldrums, passively awaiting the next big thing. (Weismantel 2002: 37)

Henrietta Moore (2006: 23) adds her perspective when she considers, quite seriously, whether the concept of gender itself has a future within anthropology or if it is now reaching 'the end of a brilliant career'. Moore's

concern is with the 'disavowal of social categories' (2006: 42) and a preference instead for approaches favouring individualization that, Moore believes, undermine political activism and collective advocacy. Importantly, like Rapp and Weismantel, Moore tempers her concerns for the current and future state of feminist anthropology with an acknowledgment that 'feminist, black, and gay scholarship are based on [understandings] of agency [that are] linked to emancipatory politics, the desire to be free of larger, determining structures, discourses, and ideologies' (2006: 41). The quest for individual freedom is, after all, central to the cultural processes and anthropological studies that Moore otherwise finds problematic for their individualization. Again, though, despite this tempering, Moore – like Rapp, Weismantel, and others – posits that the engaged projects of feminist anthropology have been all but abandoned.

Taken together, then, these foundational feminist anthropologists project an undeniably pessimistic view of a once vibrant field. They collectively argue that there is now a disengagement from those exciting days of yesteryear when, as Gayle Rubin nostalgically puts it, 'Feminism was in the air' (Kulick 2007: 414). According to Paula Treichler and Catherine Warren (1998), feminism was most certainly *not* in the air – or anywhere else, it seems – during the early years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Just as feminist anthropologists contend with disciplinary chronicles of abandonment, feminist scholars working in the area of HIV are called on to repent for a history of silence and detachment.

In North America, cases of HIV/AIDS in women were reported as early as 1982, and yet the infection and its concomitant set of diseases were cast as a disease of men, and gay men in particular, a configuration that combined homophobia and androcentrism. Important critiques of homophobia, racism and xenophobia emerged to lay bare the discriminatory 'othering' to which HIV-positive individuals were subjected (Shilts 1987). But in these criti-

cal early years, when framing narratives and counter-narratives were emerging in public cultures across the continent, feminist voices were surprisingly silent. Treichler and Warren (1998: 87) explain that:

While gay men fought against the disease, joined in their efforts by a core of health care professionals, community service providers, and a handful of activist lesbians and organized sex workers, most members of the mainstream feminist movement watched from the sidelines – or did not watch at all. Feminism did not take up the cause of AIDS even after heterosexual transmission became the fastest growing source of HIV infection in women.

Treichler (1999) goes on to call the feminist silence a ‘failure’, noting that it was not a lack of information about HIV and women that precluded commentary. So what was the source of this silence and apparent disinterest? Perhaps, as several leading scholars suggest, the original ‘4-H’ categories of HIV risk (heroin users, Haitians, haemophiliacs and homosexuals) that dominated in the United States and Canada were of little interest to North American feminist activists who, throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, continued to set their sights on employment benefits and equity, abortion rights and anti-violence legislation. It has also been suggested that the feminist silences around HIV/AIDS and women – which, with very few exceptions, included feminist anthropologists as well – reflect the tenacity of the ‘good girl’/‘bad girl’ and virgin/whore dichotomies that pit women (and feminists) against each other. While sex workers and their advocates throughout the Americas, Europe and sub-Saharan Africa were attempting to seize the day to repudiate the damning depiction of prostitutes as dangerous vectors of the virus (Miller 1986; Pisani 2008), feminists stayed silent, letting the gay and bisexual men be cast as the whores this time: ‘Breathing deep sighs of relief, perhaps, [feminists] accepted for women the much more sympathetic virgin roles: helpmate, caretaker, mother’ (Treichler and Warren 1998: 115).

As persuasive as these explanations are, I am not convinced that they go far enough. The fact that feminist scholars and activists did not advocate more emphatically with and for all those affected by and infected with HIV/AIDS – including the mothers and sex workers who figured so prominently in the early documentation of the infection throughout North America – deserves further consideration. Even if sex workers had their own advocacy successfully in hand (and I argue elsewhere that, because of structural constraints, they did not; see Downe 1998, 2003), what about the supposedly more sympathetic players: the mothers? After all, as early as 1983, the fear that the virus could be spread through ‘routine household contact’ was mollified by findings that the infections in infants and young children were most likely due to vertical transmission from mother to baby (Fauci 1983; Guinan and Hardy 1987). In Canada in the early 1990s, the Public Health Agency conducted a study to determine the provincial patterning of unacknowledged and potential infections and, based on over 20,000 blood samples, used pregnant women as the gauge (PHAC 2006). Mothers, therefore, made a dramatic entry into the HIV/AIDS drama and not entirely as ‘innocently’ as Treichler and Warren (1998) suggest; as many critics would go on to point out accusatorily, these women were infecting their children (Lemonick and Park 1999). But the drama of the mothers’ entry quickly faded; references to ‘affected families’ and ‘infected infants’ subsumed women, and while this may have shielded them from opprobrium, it left their own needs, experiences and challenges largely unaddressed.

There are, of course, many ways of writing about, reading and responding to both the prevailing characterization of feminist anthropology as well as feminism’s initial ‘failure’ to respond to the impact of HIV/AIDS, particularly on women. In this article, I consider two of them. First, I argue that we must appreciate how the intergenerational debates among feminists frame, and occasionally detract from

issues of engagement. Second, I suggest that we should relate our work to the ongoing challenge of bringing together, on one hand, the theoretical concerns for difference and the methodologies of deconstruction with, on the other hand, a commitment to collective action that is often organized around a categorical basis for identity and social change.

From Feminist 'Failure' to Maternal Ferment: Second- and Third-wave Feminism

The intergenerational dialogue and debates between second- and third-wave feminisms have garnered considerable attention (Gillis and Mumford 2004; Snyder 2008) and have led to several decades of controversy that very few of us can avoid. Third-wave feminism is often characterized in similar ways as today's feminist anthropology, and the connection is anything but spurious. Germaine Greer, one of the best-known spokespersons for second-wave feminism, has referred repeatedly to the feminist apathy among young women, dismissing their political action as the 'dull reinvention of the wheel' (1999: 312) by dispassionate 'kinderwhores' (1999: 3). Intergenerational tensions are played out publicly, with younger scholars and activists countering the charge of apathy with one of their own: scholars like Greer, they argue, are blind to their own privilege and oppressively exert 'the power to dictate feminist membership [and] the control over deciphering "good" from "bad" feminism' (Steenbergen 2005: 58). Concerns and forecasts for feminist anthropology, then, are connected to – and perhaps even based on – broader debates about feminism itself.

Although it has not been central to the intergenerational feminist debates, the topic of motherhood has definitely figured in them. In her bestselling book, *Maternal Desire*, Daphne deMarneffe explores the interplay between feminism and motherhood, concluding that

feminism offers little to an understanding of motherhood and maternal emotions. She describes the 'many times I have encountered a feminist book filled with innovative ideas for changed gender relations, the acceptance of whose argument requires just one small price: that I relinquish my attachment to spending time caring for my children' (2004: 25). Of course, there *are* some well-known and publicly cited feminist works that confront motherhood and maternity as weapons of patriarchy. As Janice Nathanson points out, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* is often characterized as an attack on both motherhood and domesticity; Shulamith Firestone considered reproduction a 'bitter trap for women', and in *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir 'attacked marriage and motherhood as the barrier to freedom and transcendence' (Nathanson 2008: 244). Held in particular contempt is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's now 100-year old comparison between mothers and domestic servants. What is missed here (though, in fairness to deMarneffe, not entirely) is the fact that Gilman's early twentieth-century work invoked motherhood and maternalism as an important source of power for middle-class women and, in turn, one of the very reasons for women's suffrage. 'The ballot', wrote Gilman (1903: 301) 'was an improver of motherhood', and motherhood was – after all – central and fundamental in women's lives. Moreover, the general first-wave feminist concern to provide 'a language of morality and compassion that emphasises the importance of maternal well-being for the health and safety of children' (Tucker 2008: 209) was shared by many and, in various permutations, extended to certain streams of second-wave feminism (Rich 1976) and even into the third-wave. Many feminists today who emphasize individual and collective agency as well as (and *not* instead of) structural constraint and liberation, depict motherhood and maternalism as sites for individual and collective activism, not condemnation (e.g. Hewett 2006). For women who care for their children

under duress – including addiction, poverty, HIV/AIDS, and contested or lost custody – this holds particularly true. In these often dire circumstances, motherhood (as an institutionalized category) serves as the primary site of political action.

In my ongoing study of motherhood and HIV/AIDS, I am struck by the frequency with which references to feminism inform the participants' narratives of maternal care and activism. 'I'm not the quiet type', said Lisa, a 26-year-old Aboriginal woman whose two children were removed from her care the week of the interview. 'I know I'm using [drugs] and that's no good, but when it comes to being a mom, when it comes to my kids, I gotta' fight hard and be real loud so that I don't get forgot or my kids don't get missing. I gotta' fight so they'll always know I'm one of their moms, and I love them'. To what extent does 'feminism' serve as a resource in Lisa's fight and that of others?

Very significantly, all of the participants in the present study made reference to women's rights and women's struggles when describing their attempts to fight public stigma and to access health and legal resources. Andrea, a 34-year-old Euro-Canadian mother who voluntarily sought a foster-care placement for her 12-year-old daughter in order to access an addiction treatment programme, acknowledged feminism as a strong influence:

I hate the way the social workers treat me like shit even though I did the right thing by my daughter, but I know I got my rights. Feminists fought like hell to get people to do something about violence against women, and that taught me about my rights, you know? And now I know that I can fight like hell for my rights in this situation, too. Whether I got HIV or whether I'm on heroin, I got my rights as a mother, and I got hope.

Although Andrea could not identify any specific anti-violence struggles or name particular feminist leaders in her community, feminism was her reference point for articulating agency

and the optimism she had that 'somehow, even with HIV, I just know things will work out for my daughter and her mom, me'. In this case, feminism is named as the strategy through which Andrea claims both her identity and her rights as a mother despite her addiction and sero-status.

Lisa's references to feminism are more specific in that she draws directly on the activities of the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) and the Aboriginal feminist struggle against race- and culturally based discrimination. In the late 1800s, the Government of Canada passed the first *Indian Act* in an attempt to define who was an Indian and to control the mobility, economy and culture of Canada's diverse Aboriginal peoples. The impact of this legislation cannot be overstated; this *Act*, together with additional policies that emanated from it, had long-term deleterious effects that are still apparent today. For Aboriginal women, the *Act* was problematic in that, among other things, it denied them political voice in their band elections; it defined the conditions under which they could lose Indian status, and it legitimated the apprehension and removal of thousands of children from Aboriginal homes and communities (Fournier and Crey 1997). In 1985, with the passing of Bill C-31, Aboriginal women who had been stripped of their Indian status after marriage to a non-Aboriginal man won an important victory; their status was reinstated and they could reclaim rights as a citizen of their Indigenous nation. Lisa referred to this struggle several times throughout her interview and gave credit specifically to the feminist activities – the 'feminist fights', as she put it – of the NWAC: 'The poster on the wall [in the drop-in centre] taught me a lot about NWAC and what it can do for me as a woman and an Indian'. She went on to repeat the point she made earlier, 'I gotta' fight for my kids so that they don't get lost or go missing the way so many of us Indian women do. And lately we go missing because of AIDS. AIDS is killing us'.

The phrasing of Lisa's response is significant. She clearly embeds her connection to feminism within broader cultural struggles of Aboriginal peoples and then, without a pause, extends that to her role as a mother facing HIV/AIDS. As their protector, Lisa wants to guard her children against losing a sense of Aboriginality, but the use and placement of the word 'missing' here (and in the previous interview excerpt) implies much more. In a country where NWAC estimates that some 500 Aboriginal women have disappeared in the past 20 years (Amnesty International 2004: 4) and where lists of missing women circulate frequently, Lisa is speaking of a vulnerability to violence that is well recognized and frequently discussed by the women accessing the AIDS organization where this study is conducted. In her telling of it, the vulnerability to violence and the threat of 'going missing' are now connected to the HIV/AIDS epidemic that in Western Canada is increasingly indigenized, feminized and stigmatized (Silversides 2006). It is through a feminist-infused maternal subjectivity that Lisa sees a way 'to fight' for herself, her children and her community. In claiming her mother status through a discussion of feminism, Lisa demands access to her children, to health resources, and to legal representation. These are demands that she feels empowered and entitled to make both in the context of our interview and, as she repeatedly assured me, in her negotiations with the child welfare agencies and health-care centres as well. She makes these demands for the sake of her children as one of their mothers, claiming that she would otherwise be 'too shy, or too out-of-it' to assert herself in this way.

The principles of feminist engagement are being well nurtured by Lisa, Andrea and the twenty-two other women participating in this study who take a stand as mothers against oppressive forces. In fact, as mentioned earlier, all of the participants mentioned the struggle for women's rights and the benefits of feminism at some point during our interview to describe

the fuel that propels them to fight against the oppression and opprobrium they regularly face as HIV-affected mothers. More precisely, like Lisa, eighteen of the women spoke passionately about feeling, and acting on a connection to at least one activist group that is distinctly feminist in its orientation. In the larger body of work on women in Canada, however, references to this kind of feminist-identified stance is rarely mentioned, and we must return to the question of why. Certainly one answer may be found in Kamala Visweswaran's (1997: 616) overview of feminist ethnography where she drew on Mary John's work to argue that the divide between feminist anthropologists and the 'other women' who they typically study might be overcome (at least partially) if we focus more attention on what it means to be a feminist in other places. The women participating in this research live in the 'otherness' of HIV infection, risk and stigma, and they do so as mothers who consistently struggle to maintain a place in their children's lives despite the surveillance of social services, the realization or threat of child apprehension, the challenges of ill-health and addiction, and intense public scrutiny. By invoking feminism as they do, they are, in fact, feminists in other places, generating critique, finding inspiration from activist groups, and challenging oppression from the margins of academic and mainstream political feminism. It may therefore be that feminism has not failed the women living with HIV/AIDS, but that the expected feminist critique emanated (and continues to emanate) not from academic halls or political rallies but from the women and particularly the mothers themselves. The trouble with this kind of 'other'-placed feminism is that, although formative to the women's daily lives, it may not give rise either to the kind of much-needed political investment in gender-specific HIV/AIDS programming or to the cessation of gender-based discrimination that fuels the epidemic. But, still, feminism *is* clearly at play and the opportunities for feminist anthropo-

logical engagement abound, particularly in the opportunities to work alongside women like Andrea and Lisa who are exposing and challenging the institutional structures and public discourses that relegate such women as ‘others’ in the first place.

Contending with the Quagmire of Deconstruction

Charlotte Faircloth (2009: 15) has recently argued that ‘To a greater degree than ever before women are encouraged to self-identify through mothering and to see mothering as the primary frame by which women communicate and sustain their identity’. Certainly, the women participating in this study express and understand their concerns about, and experiences with HIV/AIDS through a feminist-informed articulation of motherhood. This not only allows the women to give voice to the daily challenges of HIV/AIDS and to relate those challenges to broader structural constraints and historical contexts, but to recast motherhood itself. The participants are engaged in a daily deconstruction of the imposing and idealized standards of maternal care that place unrealistic expectations on the women who live in poverty and face addictions, HIV and other stigmatized challenges. The research participants outwardly reject both these standards of motherhood – well illustrated by Andrea’s forthright claim that ‘the perfect mommy that the social workers are looking for is a bullshit lie’ – and the perceived consequences of them, including ongoing and invasive assessments of parental fitness, child apprehensions, inadequate legal representation, inadequate drug treatment and harm reduction programmes, and forced visits to social workers and public-health nurses. The women argue persuasively for other standards of motherhood and maternal rights.

In the excerpt from Lisa’s interview cited earlier, she refers to herself as ‘one of [her chil-

dren’s] moms’. Key here is the reference to ‘one of their moms’. Having negotiated relationships with two foster mothers, and her aunt (who temporarily assumed guardianship of her children while Lisa was incarcerated), she sees herself as one of several who care for and love her children. She shares the mother-stage with at least three other women and she does so willingly, reflecting a maternal subjectivity woefully underrepresented in popular discourse but potentially important to a fuller understanding of how women negotiate maternal care in the context of HIV/AIDS. She explains:

I grew up on a Reserve where all us kids had more than one kokum (grandmother) and okawiyimaw (mother). We knew who born us, but four, five, even six women loved us like their own kids. Up there, we *were* their kids. The ‘one mother does it all’ kind of thing that the nurses and social workers here keep talking to me about just feels wrong. I want my kids to have more than me. They need more love, and they need more eyes watching over them so they don’t get missing, so they don’t get AIDS. They need more moms. And I tell the social workers, nurses, doctors, AIDS workers, researchers, and teachers this. I tell everyone, not because I like to talk ... I tell all these people this because it is my way of saying what I need and what my kids need. Being a mom lets me do this, and being a mom with AIDS means I gotta’ do it *now*. And I think I’m getting things done. I get to see my kids this weekend, and that’s a real win for me.

With her critique, Lisa pushes the boundary of the one-mother model of maternal care and, in so doing, echoes those feminist anthropologists – such as Ellen Lewin (2006) and Marilyn Strathern (2005) – who challenge the biological reductionism inherent in the prevailing models of kinship and intergenerational connection. Like Monica Russell y Rodriguez (2008), who interrogates the Mexican ‘mother-wife’ iconography that valorises a one-mother model of child care even when in reality there are feminist-informed and intergenerational networks for collective caregiving, Lisa concludes that

it is the dominant model of motherhood – and not the mothers themselves – that is insufficient for the adequate protection of children. This deconstructionist approach achieves a powerful end; it separates the idealized notions of motherhood from the mothers, and allows them to call for more sustained child-care and health-related resources.

In this context, deconstruction and political engagement are complementary and mutually defining activities. This is significant because much of the prevailing pessimism about feminist anthropology is, it seems, grounded in the twenty-year debate over the supposed incompatibility between cultural critique and activist engagement. Harkening back to Peter Dews' (1987) much cited claim that a logic of disintegration cannot affirm any political stance and to James Clifford's (1988) well-known surrender of the morally evaluative and politically committed perspectives taken by structural anthropologists in the pre-post era, the application of anthropological work is pitted against poststructuralist projects of deconstruction (Bennet 1996). The resulting incommensurability between the deconstruction of analytical categories and the kind of political activism that rests on those very categories has, over time, created a quagmire into which feminist anthropology has apparently been sinking (Mascia-Lees, Sharpe and Cohen 1989).

Remembering that not all feminist anthropologists align themselves with post-structural theory, it is important to recognize that the many who do are taking up the same challenge as Charles Hale (2006): to bridge this theoretical gap by reconciling the kind of cultural critique called for by Dews and Clifford with anthropological engagement and action. There has been some success in this task; even Clifford (2000) has tempered his approach, arguing that a scholarship of cultural integrity and social action can and should be distinct from theoretically naïve invocations of culturally authentic categories of identity. But the real success, I believe, comes from the kind of

powerful and grounded approach to deconstruction that the research participants adopt in order to engage in a self-advocacy as mothers living with HIV and its risks. Just as the women in Begona Aretxaga's (1997) study in Northern Ireland drew moral force from their status as mothers when they felt compelled to 'do something' about the political changes in their lives, the research participants in this study draw moral force to deconstruct dominant ideals of one-mother 'perfection' and assert their own maternal rights.

Final Thoughts

Feminism has not 'failed' women infected and affected by HIV/AIDS, but it has emerged in different ways, in other places, and with a more encompassing reach than Treichler, Warren and others may have expected. Feminist engagement with HIV/AIDS has taken place, at least in part, when women fight against public stigma and the state-enforced estrangement from their children. As a feminist anthropologist, I am engaged with the women to chronicle their struggles, to work with service providers and policy makers to ensure (as much as possible) that the women's struggles are not in vain, to support the women's self-advocacy, and to challenge the idealized caricatures of motherhood that constrain the maternal experiences of marginalized women. My engagement in this multi-faceted task is not born of an abandoned field, nor is it hindered by feminist failures. Engagement in this case, and more broadly of this kind, defies the prevailing pessimism and strongly suggests that feminist anthropology is being reclaimed, remade and renewed.

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Pamela Downe is an Associate Professor in the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Saskatchewan, Canada. As a medical anthropologist, the majority of her research focuses on issues of gender and health, infectious disease, syndemic theory, and motherhood. Email: pamela.downe@usask.ca

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