

Introduction: Feminist Anthropology Confronts Disengagement

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Feminist ethnography was a hot topic at anthropology conferences in the 1980s and 1990s. As students, we remember meeting rooms so packed that people crowded in the doorways, straining to hear energetic debates over the negotiation of power, the embodiment of systemic and structural violence, the possibilities for combining scholarship and political activism, and issues of identity and difference – not least the dangers of imposing an ethnocentric feminist agenda on ‘other’ women. By early in the new millennium, that passion had waned; feminist sessions at major conferences were fewer in number, audiences smaller. At the same time, even thinkers foundational to the field began to decry the lost promise of feminist anthropology, arguing that the Y2K version was less political and less effective (e.g., Alonso 2000; Moore 2006). For many feminist anthropologists who remain actively committed to engagement and advocacy, this is a troubling and puzzling trend. It is not as if the problems are all resolved or the injustices all redressed.

This special issue seeks to comment on feminist anthropological engagement during a period of supposed disengagement. The papers represent a selection of the kind of work being done by feminist anthropologists to confront intersecting inequities and to negotiate the persistent ‘awkwardness’ between feminism and anthropology diagnosed by Marilyn Strathern (1987) more than twenty years ago. Drawing on research that spans six countries and diverse topics, these articles embed the

concept of engagement within the history and current practices of feminist anthropology to reveal that the field continues to be a site of passion, promise and political activism.

Pamela Downe’s article on motherhood in the context of HIV/AIDS ‘talks back’ to the pessimistic chronicling of feminist anthropology by arguing that claims of feminist failure and abandonment are mired – at least in part – in feminism’s intergenerational debates and in ongoing tensions within anthropology and academic feminism over the prospects for reconciling political engagement with theories of deconstruction. As a result, important feminist practices, including those undertaken by the women with whom anthropologists partner in their work, are relegated as secondary to the institutional and disciplinary practices of academic researchers. The potential for feminist anthropological engagement abounds in Downe’s project with HIV-infected and -affected women who, against formidable odds and public marginalization, claim maternal rights as mothers of their children whilst simultaneously challenging ethnocentric and class-bound models of ‘good motherhood’.

Julia Murphy’s article offers a similar analysis of the ways in which women’s claims and reactions to feminism do not figure as fully as they could or should in the anthropology of development. Despite the arguments of those cited by Downe, Murphy’s work with the Calakmul Model Forest in southeastern Campeche, Mexico, demonstrates that feminist engagement within the anthropology of development

entails a more (not less) radical approach to both the categories of development and feminism. The questions raised throughout her article frame the tensions between analytical deconstruction and political engagement taken up in various ways in all the articles, including Jean Mitchell's study of *kastom* (custom) in Vanuatu. Through the work of her colleagues Jenny and Monique, Mitchell introduces us to the potential of the 'modest witness' to analyse and gender both the universalizing perspectives in which human rights discourses are embedded and the cultural relativism with which *kastom* and other such 'local' practices are often approached. Drawn from Haraway's (1997) work, the modest witness seeks to 'make a difference in the world of differences' and in so doing incidentally – or, perhaps not so incidentally – eases the awkward tensions between analysis and politics.

Strain between 'global' approaches and the specificities of the often conflicted situations in which they are being put to work is also addressed by Glynis George in her article on models of equality and gender mainstreaming. As with Mitchell, George confronts the tensions between politics and analysis – in this case, the analyses of grassroots activists and bureaucrats as well as the feminist ethnographer who must account for how such interpretive frameworks work in particular political economic contexts. George adeptly argues that, within the purview of gender mainstreaming, models of gender analysis are too reliant upon predetermined templates of equality. As a result, they reproduce the wider power relations that they otherwise seek to resist. As neoliberal practices of governing intensify, a shift in feminist practice to gender mainstreaming can be particularly risky, given the opening it offers government to restructure the terms of engagement with women's organizations. Going beyond the application of models to policies, gender mainstreaming may remake the ground of feminist practice in ways that narrow the prospects for critical analysis and

action. The reflexivity demanded by feminist practices of dis-identification, George suggests, provides one way to ensure that nuance, flexibility and ambiguity are accommodated in the categorical approaches to gender policy in Newfoundland.

Appeals for dis-identification might seem at odds with the idea of friendship. Yet, Robin Whitaker argues, feminist ethnographers are better served by a political model of friendship that acknowledges not only the differences between friends but the different and sometimes contending dimensions of their relationship. Her analysis of friendship and feminist politics in Northern Ireland pulls together many of the themes in the articles that precede it, particularly the tensions between approaches that take categories of identity as transparent and approaches that deconstruct those categories, regarding with suspicion any claim that they constitute natural constituencies. In her critique, Whitaker illustrates that troubling the categories of analysis is not antithetical to engaging with those categories for political ends. Far from undermining the prospects for politics or critique, a political and categorical deconstructionist stance can give rise to clear and defined moments of activist engagement and critical insight.

In a recent essay on the conceptual status of gender, Henrietta Moore (2006: 28) reflects on 'the complex recursive relationship between social science theorizing and the world it analyses.' Hence the persisting question: 'what is the basis for feminist politics if women are no longer a group?' Feminists have given many answers, she continues, but the force of the problem remains. On the one hand, as feminists working in universities, we have encountered frustration from community-based activists, who question the relevance of academia to needs on the ground. On the other, some feminist scholars worry about the danger of tying intellectual work too tightly to political priorities and thereby undermining critical thought (e.g., Brown 2001, 2005; Mahmood

2005). Charles Hale (2006: 105) gets to the crux of the issue with his observation that activist research is always being judged according to two distinct standards. In academic terms, it is only 'justified by the claim that it yields privileged scholarly understanding. It must generate new knowledge and theoretical innovation'. But outside the academy it 'will be judged in starkly different terms: what is its potential contribution to the struggle underway?'

The work represented in this volume is not all as systematically activist as in Hale's model, where every aspect of the research methodology is shaped by explicit political alignment with a specific group. It is, however, partisan in its commitment to 'being for some worlds and not others', as Mitchell (following Haraway 1997: 37) puts it. The multiple loyalties – intellectual, political and more conventionally personal – that underpin it are not ultimately resolved. The refusal to collapse these registers into one another or choose between them means that engaged research is neither comfortable nor uncompromised. But as these articles show, the tension created can be productive.

References

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