

Activist Research v. Cultural Critique: Indigenous Land Rights and the Contradictions of Politically Engaged Anthropology

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We are seated in the courtroom of the Inter-American Human Rights Court in San José, Costa Rica, in mid-November 2000. On the right are Edmundo Castillo and Rosinaldo Castro, pugnacious lawyers for the Nicaraguan government, who are visibly irritated by the preposterous idea that the “Illustrious Nicaraguan State” would be brought to Court by Awás Tingni, a small indigenous community.¹ On the left are three lawyers from the Organization of American States, who are to present the case formally, and James Anaya, an indigenous law expert and special counsel for the community. The courtroom is packed with observers, including about 20 community members, and tensions run high. Regardless of their ultimate outcome, these proceedings are unprecedented in Central America: Government representatives are forced to sit and listen, hour after hour, to allegations made against them by an indigenous community, in accordance with rules of legal discourse set by a third party. After six years of arduous legal maneuver and untold years of struggle, Awás Tingni leaders have the chance to speak truth to power.²

Broad questions of indigenous land rights lie at the heart of the trial. Since the early 1990s, Awás Tingni community members had experienced increasing incursions into areas they consider to be theirs, most dramatically in the form of a government concession of logging rights to a multinational company. They pursued remedies inside Nicaragua to no avail and eventually turned to the OAS Human Rights Commission. After two years of unsuccessful efforts at mediation, the commission filed a petition on behalf of Awás Tingni against the Nicaraguan government in the Inter-American Human Rights Court. The petition cites violations of three articles of the Inter-American Human Rights Convention, the most important of which is Article 21: “Rights to Private Property.” Here, for the first

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time in the convention's 30-year history, Article 21 is being applied to property held collectively and validated by traditional occupancy rather than legal title.

Preparing for my own testimony, I feel more nervous than I had expected. The stakes seem especially high because a legal victory could help to legitimate similar claims by other indigenous and Afro-Latin peoples across Latin America. The Awás Tingni legal strategy, I know, is strong but not invulnerable. Cloistered in a side room waiting for my turn and intent on developing the proper voice of social scientific authority, I rehearse my statements and answers to possible cross-examination questions. Preceding me is the eminent Mexican anthropologist Rodolfo Stavenhagen, who everyone later agrees, gives a "brilliant" testimony; he even manages to tame the irascible government lawyer who prefaces his cross-examination, "Please allow me to draw on your scientific authority, Doctor, with the following two questions" [Quisiera aprovechar su ciencia, Doctor, para hacerle dos preguntas puntuales] (Corte Interamericano de Derechos Humanos 2000:75). By contrast, the lawyer refers to me disdainfully with the lesser title Señor. I am followed by the Colombian legal scholar Roque Roldán, a leading expert on indigenous law, who also clearly impresses the court. Together, Stavenhagen and Roldán give crucial support to the claims of the community, wrapping those claims in a mantle of scholarly authority. Drawing on considerably less cultural capital, I make every effort to do the same.

Some months later, an anthropological colleague patiently tolerated this description of the trial and responded with a wry quip: "Sounds like James Clifford on the Mashpee, redux."³ I rejected her suggestion with an adamant "oh no it is not." In part, my reaction was literal: I really had approached the trial in hopes of contributing useful and persuasive expert testimony; the idea of carrying out a critique of the problematic notion of culture underlying the community's claim could not have been further from my mind. But the challenge runs deeper. After all, the trial transcript is a 240-page, single-spaced treasure trove of claims and counterclaims that calls out for precisely this kind of scrutiny. In the face of that allure—to which I partly succumb—this article attempts to rationalize my adamant refusal of cultural critique as a resting place for anthropological research and writing.

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The Awás Tingni trial and my ongoing research on black and indigenous land rights, which had led me to serve as an expert witness, provides an opportunity to follow two lines of inquiry.⁴ First, I explore the great potential—but also the dilemmas and challenges—of what I call activist research. By *activist research*, I mean a method through which we affirm a political alignment with an organized group of people in struggle and allow dialogue with them to shape each phase of the process, from conception of the research topic to data collection to verification and dissemination of the results. Second, I reflect on the contradictory character of the land rights movements with which I have become aligned. However, I suspect that

these contradictions apply, with varying particulars, to social movements across the board. These movements are both inspiring and compromised; movement activists are courageous advocates of local and global justice yet partly implicated in the very systems of oppression they set out to oppose. My argument takes shape by viewing these two lines of inquiry through a single lens. To align oneself with a political struggle while carrying out research on issues related to that struggle is to occupy a space of profoundly generative scholarly understanding. Yet when we position ourselves in such spaces, we are also inevitably drawn into the compromised conditions of the political process. The resulting contradictions make the research more difficult to carry out, but they also generate insight that otherwise would be impossible to achieve. This insight, in turn, provides an often unacknowledged basis for analytical understanding and theoretical innovation.

I develop this argument by first setting up a sharp counterpoint between cultural critique and activist research and then conclude with a call for dialogue and mutual recognition between the two. What I mean by *cultural critique*, in this context, is an approach to research and writing in which political alignment is manifested through the content of the knowledge produced, not through the relationship established with an organized group of people in struggle. Cultural critique embodies familiar progressive desires to champion subaltern peoples and to deconstruct the powerful; yet it neither proposes nor requires substantive transformation in conventional research methods to achieve these goals. Paradoxically, cultural critique has helped create the supporting rationale for activist research while also constituting a barrier, making it harder for activist research, as a distinctive methodological approach, to grow and prosper. Especially in the face of alarming rightward trends in university and world politics, proponents of activist research and cultural critique need each other as allies. Reciprocal intellectual challenge should be mutually beneficial, and the boundaries between them should be porous and easily crossed. But this can only happen, I contend, if we first differentiate the two sets of research practices, specify the advantages and limitations of each, and clearly acknowledge the sources of tension between them. In the argument below, I substantiate these points by tacking between discussions in anthropology and my own experiences with activist research on black and indigenous land rights struggles in Central America.

Politics of Anthropology: From Revolutionary Fervor to Neoliberal Perplexity

Movements of radical social change that begin in the *montaña*, mobilize impoverished rural dwellers, and make their way gradually to the cities have been the stuff of utopian political imaginaries in Latin America for a long while. Especially in Central America, where tiny economies were confined to agro-export production, to work for agrarian transformation was, inevitably, to contest state power and to strike at the heart of the oligarchic capitalist system. By the late

1970s, leftist movements, feeding on these agrarian utopias, had set the region ablaze with revolution. Those days are over, never to return. Demographically, Central American societies are increasingly (disastrously) urban; they have undergone what economists call a “structural break,” whereby traditional agricultural export products have lost their central place in the national economies.⁵ With El Salvador leading the way, the new primary sources of economic dynamism (if they can be considered as such) are financial services, commerce, *maquila* production, tourism, and remittances from cross-border migrants. Struggles for land still occur, often with great intensity and urgency, but in a different idiom. Whereas struggles over rights to land once meant a confrontation between the oligarchic state and a “national–popular” revolutionary alternative, they are epitomized today by indigenous mobilizations around a range of demands seeking cultural autonomy and expressed in the language of cultural difference.

At the same time, anthropology has changed dramatically as well. The same forces that produced revolutionary politics in Central America in the 1970s put the discipline of anthropology on notice. In an early and portentous formulation of this challenge, 11 anthropologists, mostly Latin American, met in 1971 to assess the relationship between anthropology and indigenous peoples. They found it woefully lacking and issued a wake-up call known as the Declaration of Barbados (1971). In the rousing rhetoric of that era, the declaration denounces state policies and religious projects that do not “seek a radical break with the existing social situation; namely, the termination of colonial relationships . . . [and the] breaking down of the class system of human exploitation and ethnic domination.” They note that “anthropology . . . has often rationalized and justified in scientific language the domination of some people by others.” They conclude:

The anthropology now required in Latin America is not that which relates to Indians as objects of study, but rather that which perceives the colonial situation and commits itself to the struggle for liberation. In this context we see anthropology providing the colonized people with the data and interpretations both about themselves and their colonizers useful for their own fight for freedom. [Dostal 1972:380]

The group met twice in subsequent years, once in 1977 and again in 1993, but it never quite managed to recapture the moment.⁶ The 1993 declaration went virtually unnoticed. In part, the young firebrand anthropologists of the 1970s had mellowed; but in larger part, few took notice in 1993 because the declaration that emerged from that meeting expressed a consensus that was by that time widely held. Most cultural anthropologists who now work in indigenous Latin America are intensely aware of the criticisms raised by the 1971 Declaration of Barbados. They are generally aligned with the peoples they study and intend for their research to contribute to the “freedom” and empowerment of their research communities. The same is true, I suspect, for most cultural anthropologists who study subaltern peoples in other parts of the world.

Theoretical developments in anthropology and in the social sciences more generally have reinforced this shift. Over the past two or three decades, we have seen a strong trend in the sociology of knowledge, in the philosophy of science, in critical scrutiny of social science epistemologies, as well as in culture theory, toward the acknowledgement that all forms of data collection, and the knowledge claims that derive from them, are “situated.”⁷ Once we bracket objectivity and affirm the intersubjective character of social science research, one might expect the floodgates to open to a growing interest in activist research methodologies and their endorsement as legitimate scholarly activity within the discipline. For those who affirm the idea that knowledge is produced through a dialogue among politically situated actors, it would seem a relatively easy and logical step to incorporate this process more integrally into one’s research method—especially when one shares a political alignment with the subjects of study.

Yet as anthropology has consummated this shift to explicit alignment with marginalized peoples, we also have developed a newfound appreciation of the complexities of subaltern politics. Land rights struggles in Central America, again, offer a case in point. In a very real sense, the principal adversaries of black and indigenous land claims are the proponents of a neoliberal economic model that has impoverished major sectors of these societies, blocked the development of locally based production, and promoted capitalist expansion in ways that threaten directly the resource base and lifeways of these communities.⁸ At the same time, key transnational institutions within this neoliberal establishment—most notably the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank—have been instrumental in opening up the political space and providing funds in support of land claims by indigenous communities. To understand land rights struggles in Central America today, we must come to terms with the contradictory policies and practices of these institutions and, more broadly, with the menacing allure of neoliberal multiculturalism.⁹

In the face of these complexities, anthropology’s response has been slow and ambivalent. There are important exceptions of course, and these include individuals and organized initiatives to whom I have turned for guidance and inspiration.¹⁰ Generally speaking, however, instead of embracing the mandate for activist research enunciated in Barbados and applying it to the new challenges of the neoliberal era, the strong tendency has been to respond with theoretically important but methodologically limited projects of cultural critique. Activist research and cultural critique can be distinguished principally on methodological grounds. Scholars who practice activist research have dual loyalties—to academia and to a political struggle that often encompasses, but always reaches beyond, the university setting; proponents of cultural critique, by contrast, collapse these dual loyalties into one. Cultural critique strives for intellectual production uncompromised by the inevitable negotiations and contradictions that these broader political struggles entail. Activist research is compromised—but also enriched—by opting to position itself squarely amid the tension between utopian ideals and practical politics.

Proponents of cultural critique, driven by the search for ever-greater analytical complexity and sophistication, object to the politically induced analytical closure that activist research often requires. The criticism that follows from this position of cultural critique is not that activist research lacks objectivity or that it has become politicized but that it is simplistic, unproblematized, and undertheorized. Both these differences—how political commitments transform research methods and at times prioritize analytical closure over further complexity—make activist research difficult to defend in an academic setting, especially when the arbiters of academic value tend to be proponents of cultural critique themselves. Consequently, since the 1980s, we have seen anthropological writing incorporate a hyperawareness of its own power-laden constraints, whereas anthropological field research methods have remained relatively unchallenged and unchanged over the same period.¹¹

Probing the Dichotomy

I associate the inception of cultural critique in anthropology with the year 1982. Having just spent a year working in Nicaragua under intense and fulfilling circumstances, I faced the prospect of entering graduate school at Stanford University with deep ambivalence. The argument of my Nicaraguan workmates eventually convinced me: “Get trained,” they insisted, “and come back to put social science to the service of the revolution.” But course offerings that first semester left me perplexed. They showed incipient signs of a deep intellectual rift that pitted “anthropological science” against “cultural anthropology” and would later split the department into two. My political sensibilities lay mainly with the latter, but it was not immediately clear to me what courses with titles such as “Stories and Culture” had to do with putting social science to the service of the revolution.¹² I developed a program of study that fashioned an awkward bridge between these two tendencies and returned to Nicaragua as quickly as I could. In retrospect, the dichotomy highlights a paradox that underlies this article: For all its epistemological radicalism, cultural critique introduces very little change in the material relations of anthropological knowledge production. Once such change has occurred, both anthropological science and cultural critique could have crucial roles to play.

The theoretical genealogy of cultural critique, including its direct challenge to the authority of anthropological writing and representation, help explain its allure for those who want their work to be politically engaged. The most familiar landmarks in this genealogy include *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986), *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Marcus and Fischer 1986), and *The Predicament of Culture* (Clifford 1988). Trinh Minh-ha’s *Woman, Native, Other* (1989) exemplifies a parallel challenge from outside the discipline, with a race and gender inflection.¹³ Although I recognize that a great diversity of work belongs under this rubric, cultural critique shares certain key elements in common, whatever the theoretical and empirical proclivities of individual texts. These include a well-elaborated awareness of the power inequalities built into the research process; a

critical scrutiny of how anthropological writing has obscured those inequalities and bolstered the analyst's authority; an explicit alignment with subordinated peoples who have been anthropology's traditional subjects; and the energetic deconstruction of powerful ideas, institutions, and practices that these peoples confront. By the time I started teaching in the early 1990s, cultural critique had become mainstream among the best graduate programs in cultural anthropology, even to the extent of becoming commonsensical intellectual fare.

Anthropology is still struggling with the fallout, especially in relation to ethnography, the central methodological practice of our discipline. In a recent collection of essays, for example, George Marcus (1998) devotes great intellectual energy to helping ethnography recover from the collective anxiety and loss of purpose that—as he repeatedly reminds the reader—he played a central role in provoking. Marcus writes, “There can be little doubt that cultural anthropology in this country has been in a state of transition of major proportions” (1998:231). “We are now in the midst of a rethinking of the ideology of [cultural anthropology's] distinctive method of fieldwork” (Marcus 1998:127). Although agreeing with Marcus that the anxiety is generally healthy and necessary, I take issue with the resolution he proposes for this dilemma of what ethnography should be.

Marcus's proposal for a “multi-sited ethnography” has struck a cord among anthropologists and for good reason.¹⁴ It does away with the much criticized study of a bounded locality; it allows one to follow webs of power that connect, for example, an isolated indigenous community and transnational actors such as the World Bank; and just as importantly, it deflects a critique in which ethnography is accused of objectifying the marginal and powerless. At the same time, it continues to encourage deconstructive scrutiny of all knowledge categories, which has been the signature of cultural critique since its inception. Although Marcus deploys this scrutiny across the board, including the full range of subject sites, he reserves special enthusiasm for deconstruction of the powerful to find “the fissures” in dominant categories of knowledge production, using cultural critique to hold a mirror to the purveyors of this knowledge and getting them to confront “the concepts, methods, ideas, practices and life experiences . . . about which there is self-doubt and uncertainty” (Marcus 1998:208). As long as the heavy weapons of deconstruction are aimed at the powerful, the proposal remains on high ground. But what about the other “sites” of a multisited ethnography? How do we responsibly address situations in which the relatively powerless are using these same vexed categories to advance their struggles?

To explore this problem further, we might turn Marcus's method back on his own project to find the fissures, the areas of “self-doubt and uncertainty,” in multisited research itself. Interestingly enough, one such fissure is signaled by the term *activist*. The uninitiated reader of this “how-to-salvage-ethnography” genre would be surprised by how frequently this term is used. Anthropologists who follow this renewed path of ethnographic inquiry become, Marcus writes, “activists in spite of themselves” (1998:243). Marcus explains, “the anthropologist, by virtue

of these changing circumstances of research, is always on the verge of activism, of negotiating some kind of involvement beyond the distanced role of ethnographer” (1998:122). Yet although Marcus repeatedly announces the arrival of activism to anthropology, asking, “To what extent and on what terms can such activism be indulged within the activity of ethnography?” (1998:122), he never really answers his own question.

An adequate answer, in my view, would require us to distinguish between two discrete but overlapping meanings of activist intellectual engagement. Marcus emphasizes the inherently political thrust of cultural critique as ethnographic writing and theory building: it clears conceptual ground, denaturalizes powerful ideas and institutions, and helps the reader think through the political possibilities and strategies for subordinate actors. Most ambitiously, this form of activism is about (in my words not his) producing emancipatory knowledge. Such engagements build on critiques of the power-laden character of anthropological research, and they are more or less explicitly situated in a “progressive” institutional space. It is inconceivable that one could carry out the ethnographic and theoretical project of cultural critique that Marcus advocates without sharing his left-liberal political sensibilities, without being attuned to the multiple axes of dominance that afflict our societies, and without being aligned with various political-intellectual currents (around race, gender, and sexuality, among others) that run through that space.¹⁵ Throughout his discussion, however, Marcus stops abruptly with this first facet of activist intellectual engagement and leaves the second—alignment with an organized group in struggle—unaddressed. Multisited research changes the spatial distribution of research time and effort, but it does not challenge, or seek to change, the everyday material relations of the research process. To focus on this second meaning of activism is to reveal the fissure in Marcus’s argument: it shows how cultural critique and the academic authority-granting system can feed on one another, yielding intellectual production generally aligned with struggles against inequality and oppression, but with no proposal at all for remaking anthropological methods in ways that such an alignment would require.

Anna Tsing, whose work I associate with the best of cultural critique, moves further than Marcus in exploring this second facet of activist engagement (and, thus, unsettling the dichotomy on which my argument rests), but ultimately she steps back from the challenge as well. Tsing’s recently published book *Friction* (2005) is sure to receive critical acclaim as a beautifully written and sophisticated analysis of social movement activism in the contemporary world.¹⁶ She traces the political-economic underpinnings of global inequalities and shows how social movements draw on unlikely alliances and “packages” of discourses, with a wide array of consequences, intended and otherwise. In Tsing’s rendering, these social movements—for social rights and community development and against corporate and state-led destruction of forests—are deeply contradictory forces that nevertheless are crucial sources of analytical insight and political hope. She juxtaposes her own ethnographic appreciation of these political struggles—gained in large part by

participant observation with activists—with relevant currents of theoretical production, and she finds the theory sorely lacking. Divorced from locally generated meanings and oblivious to the need for analysis that informs “good enough” political interventions, efforts at theory building, Tsing argues, have degenerated into unmoored conversations among smart, critical, disaffected, and largely ineffectual intellectuals. Tsing concludes this discussion with a haunting question—“How has it happened that in order to stay true to hopes for a more livable earth, one must turn away from scholarly theory?”—and a succinct admonition—“We can do better” (2005:266–267). These conclusions sting all the more, being delivered to cultural critics by one of their own.

Yet this lucid and powerful diagnosis of the problem stands in contrast to Tsing’s resolution. Tsing calls for ethnography with greater humility, listening skills, and attentiveness to local processes; she asks others to follow her lead in showing an openness to the “romanticism and commitment” of activists who put themselves on the line, often without the luxury of full analytical scrutiny of every complexity and connection. She invokes Gramsci’s famous exhortation for intellectuals to maintain an “optimism of the will,” which engenders a welcoming pose toward these activists’ rough-hewn utopias while retaining the critical purchase necessary to think through the implications and consequences of the strategies they follow. Throughout, Tsing expresses a deep sense of solidarity with both local people in struggle and their middle-class activist allies and suggests that theory produced without these sensibilities is bound to be politically and intellectually sterile. Yet for all these sharp critiques and calls for renewal, Tsing is surprisingly silent on the question of how anthropological research practice needs to change. Marcus would likely be fairly comfortable with Tsing’s recommendations: conduct multisited ethnography, deconstruct the powerful, keep theoretically current (without being theoretically driven), strike a balance between receptivity to, and critique of, your allies’ political discourses, and tell the story in an engaging and accessible manner. One is left with a double perplexity: If the production of scholarly theory really has gotten so far off track, are conventional anthropological methods not at least partly to blame? Can we really hope to address the problems Tsing has identified while conducting anthropological research more or less as we always have?

This analysis yields the following juxtaposition: Cultural critique, and the approach to ethnography it has spawned, is politically positioned, with primary (or even exclusive) commitments to the institutional space from which it emanates. Activist research, in contrast, affirms dual political commitments from the start. Activist anthropologists attempt to be loyal both to the space of critical scholarly production and to the principles and practices of people who struggle outside the academic setting. These dual political commitments transform our research methods directly: from the formulation of the research topic to the dissemination of results, they require collaboration, dialogue, and standards of accountability that conventional methods can, and regularly do, leave out of the equation. I suspect that this last facet—accountability—might be the crux of Marcus’s disquiet with the

activist question. Activist research involves commitments that are not accountable to arbitration, evaluation, or regulation from within academia. Instead, it requires constant mediation between these two spaces, insisting that one need not choose between them nor collapse one into the other.

Dual loyalties to an organized group in struggle and to rigorous academic analysis often are not fully compatible with one another. They stand in tension, and at times, the tension turns to outright contradiction. At the same time, such tension is often highly productive. It not only yields research outcomes that are potentially useful to the political struggle with which one is aligned; but it can also generate new insight and knowledge that challenge and transform conventional academic wisdom. This brings us to the heart of the argument. Although I do hope my recent research on land rights has been politically useful, such an assertion has little or no meaning in an academic setting. Some colleagues may be inspired by the political contributions; others will find them lacking. For most in anthropology, however, this facet of activist scholarship will not evoke any evaluation at all: it simply becomes another, perhaps unusually idiosyncratic, way of being “in the field.”

Within an academic setting, the case for activist research can only be made in rigorous academic terms. To state this in the concrete terms of the case at hand, activist research in support of the *Awas Tingni* trial and aligned with broader struggles for indigenous land rights must be justified by the claim that it yields privileged scholarly understanding. It must generate new knowledge and theoretical innovation on questions of identity politics, on the problems of using the law to advance indigenous rights, and more broadly, the challenges of such struggles in the face of neoliberal multiculturalism. Outside academia, however, activist research will be judged in starkly different terms: what is its potential contribution to the political struggle underway? At the end of the day, activist scholars must embrace two quite distinct sets of objectives and forms of accountability, and they must negotiate the often considerable tensions between them.

Awas Tingni v. the Illustrious Nicaraguan State

Commission lawyers gave Rodolfo Stavenhagen the mandate, as expert witness, “to testify on the topic of indigenous peoples and their connections to ancestral lands” (Corte Interamericano de Derechos Humanos 2000:69), a task he accomplished with virtuoso authority. Ancestral rights, Stavenhagen explained, “are the rights that a community enjoys, by virtue of historical continuity with its pre-Hispanic origins, to maintain its identity as a self-identified indigenous people” (Corte Interamericano de Derechos Humanos 2000:75). He provided dramatic affirmation of how indigenous people’s claims to ancestral rights are grounded in radical cultural difference:

There is an old saying, that an Indian without land is a dead Indian. And I think this is valid for many of the indigenous populations in our countries. This concept

is deeply rooted in the culture of the indigenous peoples themselves; it is something that, unfortunately, those of us who live in the cities, who have become disconnected from our natural origins, often do not completely understand (Corte Interamericano de Derechos Humanos 2000:72).

Government lawyers tried a number of tactics to discredit a claim for rights grounded in cultural difference, most of which ended in failure. Earlier in the trial, they argued that Awas Tingni community members could not possibly use all the land that they have claimed. This assertion was quickly trumped by a remarkable sequence in the cross-examination of Jaime Castillo, a monolingual community leader:

- Nicaraguan State:** Señor Castillo, could you tell us what distance you normally travel to hunt and fish?
- Witness (through an interpreter):** In the whole area that we have marked off as ours, we carry out different activities, given that there is no other way to earn a living.
- NS:** Excuse me, what distance do you travel to hunt and fish?
- W (through an interpreter):** He does not specify distances, rather, he thinks in terms of the area as a whole; it doesn't interest him to be measuring distances from here to there [please note that the interpreter begins to refer to the witness as a third party in this passage].
- NS:** But really, the Nicaraguan State wants to know this distance.
- W (through an interpreter):** In this case, the government has the obligation to come to our community and see for yourself, rather than asking these questions without ever having been there.
- President of the Court:** Could you reformulate the question?
- NS:** It is very difficult. . . . He is not cooperating. [Corte Interamericano de Derechos Humanos 2000:15]

This back and forth continued for a considerable time, until finally the government lawyer, sputtering with frustration, was forced to ask the question in a way in which Jaime Castillo would be comfortable answering. In the process, the government lost the specific point and ended up proving inadvertently that Mayagna people do indeed think and talk about their land in very different ways. My own testimony and that of my Nicaraguan colleague Galio Gurdían helped to close off other avenues of the government's objections. We demonstrated that the size of Awas Tingni land claims was in keeping with those of other communities throughout the region. We assured the court—contrary to the government's contention—that overlaps between the claims of Awas Tingni and neighboring communities cast no doubt on their legitimacy. These overlaps, we explained, were an expression of traditional patterns of indigenous land tenure.

As the trial proceeded, the government lawyers focused increasingly on the question of ancestral rights. Although the observation that “indigenous people”

lived in the region prior to the arrival of the Europeans is uncontroversial, it is much harder for a present-day indigenous community to prove “continuity” in culture and identity back to some discrete group of pre-Hispanic inhabitants. “The only proof,” a government lawyer insisted, “in support of the supposed ancestral occupation of these lands that they claim is a document constructed solely on the basis of oral testimonies of the interested parties, a study that has no documented source, no archeological evidence, not even testimonies of the neighboring communities” (Corte Interamericano de Derechos Humanos 2000:232). He concluded in a seemingly conciliatory tone, with an offer to grant title to Awas Tingni community lands “in sufficient magnitude to guarantee cultural subsistence and community development in lands that are *not* ancestral” (Corte Interamericano de Derechos Humanos 2000:236). The government lawyer apparently reasoned that if he could eliminate the ancestral rights argument, the entire claim would collapse or, better yet, revert to the generic category of claims by landless peasants, who (if they are lucky) receive a miserable 10 hectares per person from the Agrarian Reform Ministry.

Whether in response to the risk—however minimal—that this final salvo could sway the judges or whether it was as a premeditated strategy, Anaya used his rebuttal to give the legal argument a dramatic new twist. “There are two approaches [*tendencias*] that states may follow in response to indigenous people’s claims for rights,” Anaya began. One is the “modern” approach. Anaya never gave the second approach a name, but he associated it with the past, the out-of-date, the backward looking. This backward approach, Anaya explained, seeks to assimilate indigenous peoples, “stripping away their cultural attributes [*rasgos*], their cultural essence, preventing them from prospering in the lands where they have lived” (Corte Interamericano de Derechos Humanos 2000:238–239). The modern approach, in contrast, is found in all the recently approved international laws, backed by the United Nations, which “strengthen the cultural essence, the life ways of indigenous peoples, assign value to indigenous religious and philosophical beliefs [*cosmovisión*] and to their relations with the land” (Corte Interamericano de Derechos Humanos 2000:238).

Anaya gave the word “modern” and its cognates a striking amount of airtime in those final minutes, which was in stark contrast to the word’s near absence during the prior proceedings. For example, to refute the “they move around too much” objection, he insisted, “It does not matter. . . . According to the *modern* criteria of the *modern* approach, reflected in the *modern* judicial instruments, it doesn’t matter how much you move around; what matters is the continuity of a historically constituted group, which maintains traditional traits and patterns. This has not been disputed” (Corte Interamericano de Derechos Humanos 2000:239, emphasis added). Modernity was a space that both the judges and the representatives of the Illustrious Nicaraguan State imagined themselves to occupy, especially in contrast to the monolingual Mayagna who filled the courtroom. Anaya had simply added a key attribute to that same space: judges and states alike, if they are indeed

truly modern, recognize and affirm the rights of indigenous communities like Awas Tingni. After lengthy deliberations, the judges delivered a sentence that resoundingly supported this contention.

The Case for Activist Research

Activist research has a rich intellectual genealogy that deserves more attention than I can devote here. The substantive analytical project that such a genealogy would bring to the fore is to link the practice of activist research with key moments of theoretical innovation. This would involve identifying key bodies of social theory and asking whether the dual commitment to a political struggle and intellectual work on these issues has in fact yielded new and challenging ideas that later achieved a central place within academia. One thinks immediately of Antonio Gramsci—to name just one of many who have worked in the Marxist tradition; Franz Fanon's and Walter Rodney's contributions to our understanding of race, class, and anticolonial struggle also come to mind, as does Barbara Smith's and Audre Lorde's work on the intersection of race, class, and gender oppression.¹⁷ The point here is not to name individuals but, rather, to identify important theoretical advances in understanding patriarchy and racism, for example, or political consciousness and action, and then to trace them back to settings in which people are simultaneously politically active, carrying out a systematic analysis of some facet of the political process in which they also are engaged. The conditions of possibility for this knowledge production are likely to be collective rather than individual, and the research methods producing it are sure to be unconventional in other ways as well. Regardless, two key criteria apply: the new knowledge later has a transformative impact on establishment canons; and the knowledge is produced, in part, through active involvement in the political problem at hand. The next step in this genealogical project would be to draw together the key methodological characteristics of the work to generate a general frame that could inspire and guide future activist research projects. My argument is neither that activist research methods are appropriate to all academic projects nor that all innovative, radical, or transformative knowledge is produced in this way. Rather, activist research methods stand as one option among many, but they are especially appropriate to employ when an organized group in struggle is intensely concerned with the analytical question at hand and when the very conditions of their struggle involve a challenge to the existing analytic paradigms.

I am perplexed by how difficult it seems to be to make the case for activist research on methodological grounds.¹⁸ On the one hand, there is a tendency for writings on activist research methods to take on the quality of "how to" manuals, which are quickly relegated to the marginal and devalued category of "applied anthropology." On the other hand, these writings often turn into treatises that uncritically endorse and celebrate popular knowledge or otherwise cut too quickly to a political bottom line.¹⁹ Such efforts seem to lose the vibrancy produced by

the tension of being accountable to two worlds; perhaps their authors grow tired of being held mildly suspect by both.

This mandate for dual commitments carries risks that are best confronted from the outset. I do not hold a simplified view of inside versus outside academia, nor do I want to downplay the crucially important processes of sociopolitical change that occur within the university. These processes encompass high-stakes battles over theory, curriculum, and institutional practices and battles over the gender, race, and class composition of the people who occupy its offices and classrooms. These battles have the potential to yield new forms of knowledge and institutional change that reverberate far and wide. It is also true that innovative or transformative knowledge produced in activist research settings generally enters the canon not through reasoned intellectual exchange but as a product of political organizing and struggle. At the same time, although we can recognize that the institutional space of academic validation is permeable (not bounded) and political (not neutral), it is also generally recursive and highly susceptible to appropriation. This appropriation occurs because the arbiters of academic standards and the key actors in the associated political struggles for change in the academy tend to be one and the same. Although it is true that transformations of establishment canons occur in close connection with political struggles within academia, it is doubtful whether these challenges would continue to occur if they were not nurtured and driven by new generations of activist scholars with novel dual loyalties of their own. Without these infusions, today's radical and transformative knowledge produced through activist research methods becomes tomorrow's cultural critique.

This distinction between cultural critique and activist research raises another problem, that of the "masters tools." Many historians and social scientists have noted, correctly I believe, that people in struggle against oppression generate privileged practical and theoretical insight into their own conditions, which scholars at best can echo and at worst appropriate and distort. Robin D. G. Kelley has made the point clearly in his recent historical account of black social movements:

I am increasingly surrounded by well-meaning students who want to be activists but exhibit anxiety about doing intellectual work. They often differentiate the two, positioning activism and intellectual work as inherently incompatible. . . . I am convinced that the opposite is true: Social movements generate new knowledge, new theories, new questions. The most radical ideas often grow out of a concrete intellectual engagement with the problems of aggrieved populations confronting systems of oppression. [Kelley 2002:8]

At the same time, these movements against systems of oppression rarely have the resources and other means available to choose the language and conditions of their own struggles. More often, they are contradictory, expressing the grain of radical, emancipating ideas that Kelley emphasizes, combined with a language of contention and strategies of struggle that partly reproduce the very systems of inequality that oppress them. This contradiction, in turn, presents activist research with a serious dilemma: how to acknowledge the deeply compromised space of a

given political struggle without letting this acknowledgement undermine the effort from the start? Let me illustrate by turning back to the Awas Tingni trial and the broader panorama of black and indigenous land rights struggles where the trial must be situated.

Land Rights Struggles on Contradictory Terrain

Political-economic conditions for the poor and marginalized in Central America today are nothing short of desperate. The specter of starvation in which whole families are dying of hunger, a situation virtually unknown since the 19th century, has now returned. Serious movements of opposition are small and fragmented. Even the strongest and most visionary hold barely a glimmer of hope for a truly alternative political-economic model that might be equal to the promise, however illusory, of revolutionary transformation in the previous era. At least among indigenous and black organizations, political energies are focused much more on the here and now, on concrete demands that can bring immediate relief and benefit and that perhaps can set the stage for more expansive achievements in the future. Community land rights are given a unanimously urgent and high priority in this agenda. Yet, in many cases, the only viable offer to support efforts toward demarcation and titling of community lands comes from multilateral development organizations such as the World Bank—the same organizations that are responsible, in structural terms, for the economic devastation from which these communities suffer. The World Bank offers a Faustian bargain: recognition of multicultural rights in return for endorsement, implicit or otherwise, of the broader political project of neoliberalism. Some leaders of black and indigenous organizations in Nicaragua and Honduras accept this without a second thought; others chafe and maneuver in defense of an independent political position from which to negotiate. Almost no one flatly rejects the offer.

When anthropologists aligned with these organizations follow them into the Faustian bargain, we live a version of these same contradictions. The “we” in my case is a group of academics and activists who founded a nonprofit organization called Caribbean Central American Research Council (CCARC) to carry out activist research under conditions relatively unimpeded by university bureaucracies. We offer our academic training and credibility to organized groups of black and indigenous Central Americans who are engaged in struggles for rights and redress and who see social science research as playing a role. This has involved a range of activities, central among them the participatory mapping of community land claims. The principal research products are computer-generated, geo-referenced maps that represent the territories that communities claim as their own and ethnographies that provide a historical and contemporary rendition of the community’s justification of its claims. This work is carried out with teams of local intellectuals, who gain skills useful to carrying on the struggle. In the case of two of these projects, one in Nicaragua (1997–98) and the other in Honduras (2001–02), the

research contracts were funded by the World Bank. Activist research funded by the World Bank?

During the spring of 2002, while the Honduras land rights research was still underway, a Garífuna leader named Gregoria Flores spoke at the University of Texas, and in the course of her lecture she provided an answer to that very question. Flores, one of the most analytically acute activist-intellectuals I have met during my 20 years of work in Latin America, spoke on the Afro-indigenous roots of Garífuna identity and on Garífuna struggles against antiblack racism and for community land rights. She then recounted her organization's successful campaign to postpone a tourist project funded by the World Bank until Garífuna land claims over the same territory where the tourist development was planned could be adjudicated. Dragged to the negotiating table, the World Bank agreed to fund a study of Garífuna community land rights, which later expanded to encompass neighboring indigenous communities as well. Flores and other leaders sought consultants sympathetic to their interests to carry out this study, which in turn could lay the legal, technical, and analytical groundwork for the granting of land titles. CCARC applied for and won the research contract for this study. Sharply critical of World Bank policies and neoliberal ideology throughout her talk, Flores concluded: "We [turning to us, the codirectors of the research, she seemed to reserve judgment as to whether the pronoun should include us] are using the system to fight the system."

The theorist who now comes to mind in an implicit dialogue with Flores is not James Clifford, George Marcus, or Anna Tsing, but Audre Lorde. The logic behind Flores's assertion of strategy is clear enough: Oppressed peoples, in the vast majority of cases, have no alternative but to wage struggles for rights and redress using the language, the legal and political tools, and even the funding of their oppressors. They regularly engage in subversion, imbue the dominant with alternative meanings, find room for maneuver, and in so doing, bring about consequences that are quite different than the ones that the dominant actors have in mind. Yet these conditions also impose formidable constraints, which analysts caught up in the "romance of resistance" often tend to gloss over or minimize.²⁰ Audre Lorde's (1984) famous dictum—"The Master's Tools will never dismantle the Master's house"—serves as a pointed reminder of these constraints and could even be read as explicit critical dissent from Flores's strategy. An influential body of theoretical work, mostly by feminists of color, has backed up Lorde's injunction, contributing to what Chela Sandoval has called a "methodology of the oppressed."²¹ If we do not fundamentally transform the language of politics, Sandoval argues, our struggles will be destined to reinforce and reproduce the very structures of oppression they intend to resist. Many believe that the work of cultural critique—finely tuned to the language of contention, to the ironies and unintended consequences of people's struggles for rights under uneven conditions—contributes directly to this same transformative project. I agree, while also insisting that the contribution that it can make is inherently insufficient. I seek an alternative on the improbable meeting ground between Gregoria Flores and Audre Lorde and ask what we might

learn from positioning ourselves there. Ultimately, there may be no way to begin casting off the Master's tools of our trade, except by putting them to use in radically alternative ways, following Flores's contradictory path of struggle from within.

We find a good illustration of the power of this insight, as well as the potential problems it raises, by turning once more back to the Awas Tingni trial and, more specifically, to Anaya's dramatic strategic shift in the final arguments of the case. The Inter-American Convention, written in the 1960s, must be located squarely within the "backward" mentality that prevailed prior to the international recognition of indigenous rights. Indigenous people, collective rights, and rights to culture are not even so much as mentioned in the convention, and Article 21, which became the lynchpin of the entire case, defines property rights strictly in terms of individual ownership. Anaya and the commission lawyers used the system to fight and (assuming that legal precedent matters) change the definition of what property rights can mean. In a more subtle sense, Awas Tingni lawyers and their witnesses also attempted to invert the political valence of ideas that have had, up to that point, a very different meaning. The notion of "ancestral," for example, even though it was ultimately set aside as an explicit focus of the judges' decision, still provided ballast for the crucial assertion of the cultural difference of indigenous peoples. Expert testimony confirmed that Mayagna culture can be traced back to pre-Hispanic times; it is still imbued with the "natural" attributes that Westerners have long since lost; and its members are guided by a cosmovisión that ties them inextricably to the land. "Un indio sin tierra es un indio muerto" [An Indian without the land is a dead Indian.]

All these attributes, echoed in the testimonies of community members themselves, added up to a compelling argument for special rights assigned to cultural difference, irrespective of whether cultural continuity back to a time immemorial could be proven. In the previous phase of state ideology and practice, these very premises had placed indigenous people in the time-frozen space of "tradition," which connoted an incapacity to handle the rigors and demands of society's upward climb to modernity. They provided an elegant justification for assimilation, if not ethnocide. Although the argument to assign political rights to indigenous cultural difference won the day, this is in part, ironically enough, because the older notion of what it means to be indigenous continues to circulate.

The work of the CCARC in participatory mapping of community land rights has faced similar dilemmas, and we have tried to resolve them in similar ways. How does one formulate indigenous land claims and represent them in a language necessary to achieve legal recognition from national and international bodies, without portraying them in terms that reinforce internal rigidities or create criteria that other subaltern communities would be unable to meet? Specifically, we have worried constantly about the way a certain legitimizing language of indigenous rights could implicitly delegitimize the claims of Afro-Latin communities.²² The dilemma also brings the essentialist–constructivist conundrum to the fore. Participatory mapping produces land claims that inevitably have a constructed

feel to them: how could it be otherwise, when a novel set of research technologies is used to set in motion such an unprecedented political process? At the same time, if the process is done right, the resulting map representing the claim resonates with the participants, connecting with their emotionally charged understandings of identity, ancestral rights, and deeply rooted meanings assigned to material surroundings. Is there a theoretical language that captures both these facets of the process (the constructed and the deeply rooted) that can also create a standard generally inclusive of other similar communities in struggle? We have tentatively begun thinking in terms of a community's "social memory of struggle" (see Gordon et al. 2003). This concept provides us with a means to acknowledge the political meanings that have been passed down from previous generations, which can provide a continuity between then and now and generate that spark of recognition while also recognizing that political mobilization must always be re-created anew and according to articulations of the moment. Publishing an article that summarizes this idea was the easy part; it now remains to be seen whether or not this notion could be useful to future land rights struggles.²³

A methodological argument follows that speaks directly to the challenge of using the master's tools to dismantle the master's house. The process of participatory land rights research and the experience of offering expert testimony in the *Awas Tingni* trial both bring questions about social-scientific authority and positivist research methods to the fore. Community members asked us to make forceful and authoritative claims to the state and other powerful actors and to put social science to the service of their struggles, just as my colleagues in revolutionary Nicaragua did a decade earlier. To state it bluntly, anthropologists, geographers, and lawyers who have only cultural critique to offer will often disappoint the people with whom they are aligned. This is true for a combination of reasons. On the one hand, positivist research methodologies may be necessary to get the job done. I am thinking here not only of computer-based cartography but also certain types of data collection and causal analysis that might be called on as critically important inputs to political strategy. On the other hand, social science also is necessary, because the struggles are taking place within a system that lies in the grip of hegemonic, Eurocentric criteria of knowledge validation. Simply to critique this hegemony or adamantly to disassociate the research from the dominant discourse might be right in the intellectual sense and constructive in the long term, but it may also be utterly irrelevant (or even counterproductive) to the immediate struggle at hand. Rather than attempt to disentangle these two modes of analysis, the activist researcher must do both: deploy positivist social science methods and subject them to rigorous critique while acknowledging with acceptance the cognitive dissonance that results.

Conclusions

In a recently published essay entitled "Taking Identity Politics Seriously," James Clifford (2000) anticipates much of the theoretical insight that I have

mustered here. He has stepped back considerably from the trenchantly antiessentialist position carved out in the Mashpee essay a decade earlier. Whether out of sensitivity to struggles of indigenous peoples who make their case through “essentialist” categories, or with some other impetus, he now calls for a distinction between “cultural *integrity*” and the “essentialist assumptions of *authenticity*” (Clifford 2000:99, emphasis added). He asks us to be much more attuned to the “connecting” and “contestatory” facets of identity politics, even while knowing that there is at best a blurred line between these political sensibilities and various forms of fundamentalism. He emphasizes that identity politics are enacted on inherently contradictory terrain and enjoins us to probe these contradictions, tracing their consequences rather than focusing unduly on their formal qualities. This space of anti-anti-identity politics is smart and well considered; the consummate cultural critic, Clifford’s analytical vision on this topic is 20–20. Yet in one important dimension Clifford’s essay falls short: he stands outside the fray, sifting through the contradictions of identity politics as distant problems that he understands but does not experience. His 20–20 vision has all the advantages, but also the shortcomings, of spatial distance and temporal hindsight. Activist research, in contrast, asks us to refuse this resting place and participate directly in the contradictory process through which claims in the name of identity politics are made.

This direct participation has complicated effects for the process of theory building. On the one hand, it tends to require analytical closure, which cultural critics will always view as intellectually suspect. There is always another level, another twist or turn in the analysis, another irony or unintended consequence. The *Awas Tingni* trial amply illustrates this point: the legal strategy deferred a series of questions relating to race and gender inequities, to reified notions of community, and to the myriad dangers of rights justified in terms of “indigeneity”—questions that, if fully addressed, would make the dramatic legal victory appear fraught and compromised. On the other hand, this need for analytical closure also tends to generate productive theoretical scrutiny, with an angle and an edge that otherwise would be absent. In the case at hand, for example, it leads us to reexamine the tried and true notion of “strategic essentialism” and the closely related provisional objectivity of “situated knowledge.”²⁴ As key phrases in the stories that cultural critics tell one another, these are probably apt; as such, they form an indispensable part of our intellectual repertoire. But they are also insufficient. Anyone who has worked closely in support of indigenous land claims, for example, cannot be completely comfortable with the way these phrases sit with our allies. Quite apart from remaining awfully abstract, they often do not capture very well what is going on. When *Awas Tingni* members speak of land rights and cultural continuities from time immemorial, should this be called essentialism? I suppose so, if you must. If so, are they likely to understand their assertion as merely “strategic”? Certainly not. Similarly, Clifford’s carefully crafted space of anti-anti-identity politics requires us to withdraw and turn circumspect at precisely the same moment when indigenous

activists themselves turn most assertive. This discourages us from viewing political alignment as a source of inspiration for theoretical innovation.

I also have argued that the mandate of activist research, of producing theory grounded in the contradictions that the actors themselves confront, ultimately requires us to straddle two disparate intellectual worlds. We teach culture theory, but we also use the language and invoke the authority of science to defend the legitimacy of our research. One foot remains firmly planted in the rarified space of cultural critique while the other returns cautiously, but confidently, to law, demographics, statistics, human ecology, geographic information systems, and other technologies of objective (no quotation marks allowed) social science. It is not a comfortable, or even a very coherent, position. It requires deft deployment of varied intellectual registers—even epistemologies—depending on the exigencies of the moment. It leaves all of our varied audiences edgy and mildly suspicious. But this alternating endorsement of both cultural critique and objective social science may be a necessary concession to the political realities of the worlds we live in and seek to engage with. It certainly embodies a more accurate reflection of the utterly contradictory struggles of the people with whom we are allied, and more importantly still, it entails a commitment to generating the kinds of knowledge they ask and need us to produce.

Recall, one last time, the high point of the Awas Tingni courtroom drama: the delicious sequence when Jaime Castillo suggested with subversive innocence that if the government inquisitor were so interested in how community members use their land, perhaps he should travel there and see for himself.

Nicaraguan State: But really, the Nicaraguan State wants to know this distance.
Witness: In this case, the government has the obligation to come to our community and see for yourself, rather than asking these questions without ever having been there.

When the courtroom audience broke into smiles and some scattered laughter, it was in response to a utopian image, remote but vivid, in which the oppressive apparatus of the state, and the regulatory legal regimes to which land rights struggles must appeal, could both be triumphantly cast aside. In a similar spirit, it might be possible to endorse both the pragmatic analytical closure that victory in the courts requires and the utopian sensibility that calls into question the very premises of that victory, embracing a more expansive and transformative political vision. But only if we remember, as I suspect Jaime Castillo would hasten to remind us, that the utopian image lies on a distant horizon, and the path to get there confronts harsh constraints and immediate needs that must be met with whatever contradictory means we have on hand.

Notes

Acknowledgments. I presented earlier drafts of this article in numerous settings, and critical feedback in each has been helpful in guiding its evolution to its present state. Its

earliest incarnation was a paper at a 2002 AAA session. I later presented it at the Rockefeller seminar on “Race, Rights and Resources” at the University of Texas, in a talk sponsored by Latin American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, and at a SSRC seminar on activist scholarship held in the offices of the Center Against Police Abuse (CAPA) in Los Angeles. I am especially grateful for the critical commentary, in one or more of those settings, from Kamran Ali, S. James Anaya, João Costa Vargas, Karen Engle, Richard Flores, Edmund T. Gordon, Beatriz Manz, Samuel Martinez, Marcie Mersky, Donald Moore, Brandt Peterson, Harley Shaiken, and Shannon Speed. Ann Anagnost generously provided detailed and engaged feedback on the initial submission, as did two anonymous readers for *Cultural Anthropology*. I am especially grateful to Orin Starn for his extensive critical commentary, which extends a spirited dialog of mutual critique between us for the past 20 years, especially useful and memorable when we disagree. The standard disclaimers of course apply.

1. Awas Tingni inhabitants are members of the Mayagna (previously Sumu) indigenous people who, together with the Rama and Miskitu, live in Nicaragua’s Atlantic Coast region.

2. For more information on the Awas Tingni trial and its consequences, see Anaya and Grossman 2002 and other materials in the same issue. An electronic transcript of the courtroom proceedings was sent to me by one of the Awas Tingni lawyers. This is not, to my knowledge, a public document. It is entitled *Corte Interamericano de Derechos Humanos. Caso Comunidad Mayagna (Sumo) Awas Tingni. Transcripción de la audiencia pública sobre el Fondo, celebrada los días 16, 17 y 18 de noviembre de 2000, en la sede de la Corte*, 241 pages. All translations of the transcript are my own.

3. The reference here is to James Clifford’s (1988) discussion of a trial to determine Mashpee claims to Native American status. This essay has become a classic reading in anthropology on the critique of the culture concept, as deployed in contexts of political contention.

4. This research follows a methodology that we call participatory ethnomapping. It brings together the skills of interdisciplinary research teams, especially geographers and anthropologists, to document the claims of indigenous and Afro-Latin communities to land and resource rights. As outside threats to their resource base increase, communities have been driven to defend their rights through both political and legal means. Participatory ethnomapping creates the possibility for communities to marshal social science evidence in support of their claims. Two previous participatory ethnomapping projects that I have codirected are referenced later on in this article. Dr. Edmund T. Gordon and I are currently codirectors for an ethnomapping project funded by the Ford Foundation (Mexico Office).

5. The two economists most closely associated with this phrase are Victor Bulmer-Thomas (personal communication, November 2002; Bulmer-Thomas and Kincaid 2000) and Alexander Segovia (2002).

6. The text of the first Declaration of Barbados was published in Dostal (1972). The declarations of 1977 and 1993 were published, to my knowledge, only in more specialized “solidarity” venues (e.g., Abya Yala News).

7. Donna Haraway’s essay (1988) has been a touchstone for anthropologists in this regard. The essays in Rabinow and Sullivan 1987 provide a good selection of essays framed from within this sensibility.

8. The critical literature on the impact of neoliberalism in Latin America is abundant and uneven. For a good overview and critique, see Green 1995 and Phillips 1998. For more specific analysis of how the neoliberal turn has affected black and indigenous Latin Americans, see Collier 1995, Gill 2000, Yashar 2005, and the essays collected in Postero and Zamosc 2005.

9. I have elaborated on this concept of “neoliberal multiculturalism” in an essay focused specifically on Guatemala (Hale 2002) and another focused on indigenous politics more generally (Hale 2004).

10. Two initiatives are related to the argument developed here. The first is a Wenner-Gren sponsored seminar organized by Les Field and Richard Fox called “Anthropology/At Work/As Work.” It is scheduled to be published in 2006. The second is the Center for Integrating Research and Action (CIRA) at the University of North Carolina. Established clusters of work on activist research in anthropology and related disciplines also exist at Cornell University, University of New Mexico, and University of California, Berkeley, among other places. Some of the fruits of this effort by me and my colleagues at the University of Texas can be found on our website: <http://www.utexas.edu/cola/depts/anthropology/activist>.

11. This assertion is of course difficult to substantiate because sociocultural anthropology is a large and heterogeneous subfield, which defies any such sweeping generalizations. Two pieces of circumstantial evidence in support of my claim are: (1) in a massive methodology volume edited by Bernard (1998), there is only one chapter that treats “ethics” in the conventional sense, and the only other mention of the methodological implications of these broader ethical–political issues comes at the end of an essay on feminist methods, and (2) in my own department and a few others that I know well, the rising challenge to ethnographic authority tends to be associated with a de-emphasis on research methods rather than a concerted effort to offer seminars that explore how research methods might be transformed in light of this critique.

12. I can now acknowledge that this reaction came from a political mindset that had its share of blind spots, which in turn might have been constructively challenged had I oriented my graduate training more in the “stories and culture” direction. However, I still contend my reaction then speaks directly to the problems with cultural critique that this article is meant to identify and work through.

13. These are what I take to be the canonical texts, although this list barely scratches the surface.

14. The essay was published originally in Marcus 1995; it is commented on extensively in Marcus 1998.

15. Charles Briggs (1996) provides an excellent portrayal of the politics of that space, emphasizing its fundamentally privileged character, in contrast to the resources available to subaltern people who engage in self-representation. It should be added that this, in general, is a space of white privilege, occupied by significant and probably increasing numbers of nonwhite people. This contradiction—of being fundamentally a white space while also being aligned with a basically “progressive” political vision—merits a separate article.

16. I am very grateful to Ann Anagnost for urging me to come to terms with Tsing’s book before finishing this article.

17. Relevant citations include Fanon 1965, Gramsci 1971, Lorde 1984, Rodney 1969, and Smith 2000. On intersectionality, the key originating essay is Combahee River Collective 1983.

18. One such text, which deserves much more attention in mainstream anthropology than it has currently enjoyed, is Greenwood and Levin 1998.

19. An example here would be Fals Borda and Rahman 1991.

20. The term comes from Lila Abu-Lughod 1990.

21. See Sandoval’s book (2000) of that same name.

22. Juliet Hooker (2005) makes this point at greater length.

23. The publication referenced here is Gordon et al. 2003.

24. These widely used concepts are generally attributed to Gayatri Spivak (1985) and Donna Haraway (1988), respectively. I am engaging here less with the original coinage of these concepts than with their broad circulation in academic discourse.

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ABSTRACT *With indigenous and Afro-Latin land rights in Central America as ethnographic context, this article makes the case for politically engaged anthropology. The argument builds from a juxtaposition between “cultural critique” and “activist research” distinguished mainly on methodological grounds. Activist scholars establish an alignment with an organized group of people in struggle and accompany them on the contradictory and partly compromised path toward their political goals. This yields research outcomes that are both troubled and deeply enriched by direct engagement with the complexities of political contention. A case in the Inter-American Human Rights Court, where an indigenous community called Awas Tingni forced the Nicaraguan government to recognize the community’s ancestral lands, illustrates the promise of activist research, in spite of the inevitable contradictions that present themselves even when the struggle is ostensibly successful. [activist research, cultural critique, indigenous land rights, identity politics, Central America]*