

“Zones of Conflict”: Exploring the Ethics of Anthropology in Dangerous Spaces

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Abstract

In recent years, anthropologists have become increasingly involved in work surrounding issues of human rights, democracy, social justice, and conflict. In doing so, ethical questions concerning the authority, obligations, and, most broadly, the role of anthropologists working in areas and with populations experiencing circumstances of violence, suffering, and oppression have come to the fore. The central theme of this paper is to engage the ethics of not only doing fieldwork in such places and with people experiencing these social realities, but to also consider whether it might be considered an “ethical imperative” on the part of anthropologists to conduct such work. Ultimately, I intend to address the conflicted ethics of anthropology conducted in dangerous spaces and to confront the concept of an “anthropology of liberation” and what it signifies for the discipline and its practitioners both as an academic endeavour and as a field of practice which is profoundly and intimately enmeshed in the often harsh realities of human existence.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall, the decade of the 1990s was proclaimed by many to herald the “end of history” and the triumph of the regime of democracy and the free market on a global scale. However, in the years since this invocation, rather than witnessing the ascendancy of a new world order based upon peace and prosperity, the world has experienced a proliferation of insecurity and conflict. In this context, anthropologists have become increasingly involved in work surrounding issues of human rights, democracy, social justice, and conflict. In doing so, ethical questions concerning the authority, obligations, and, most broadly, the role of anthropologists working in areas and with populations experiencing circumstances of violence, suffering,

and oppression have come to the fore. In this paper, it is my intention to engage the highly conflicted ethical zone of anthropological work in places where circumstances of life are such that endemic violence, poverty, disease, and political and social oppression, to name but a few characteristics, are present. My inquiry is situated in places where human suffering is not merely apparent, but profoundly so. The central theme of this paper is to engage the ethics of not only doing fieldwork in such places and with people experiencing these social realities, but to also consider whether it might be considered an "ethical imperative" on the part of anthropologists to conduct such work. In pursuing these questions I will engage the positions of anthropologists such as Lynn Stephen, Philippe Bourgois, Faye Harrison, Nancy Scheper-Hughes, Edmund Gordon, and Linda Green, all of whom work in highly politicized field sites with individuals whose lives are characterized by circumstances of profound conflict. Ultimately, I will address the conflicted ethics of anthropology conducted in dangerous spaces and confront the concept of an "anthropology of liberation" and what it signifies for the discipline and its practitioners both as an academic endeavour and as a field of practice which is profoundly and intimately enmeshed in the often harsh realities of human existence.

In order to effectively examine the notion of an "anthropology of liberation", it is first necessary to examine some of the principles upon which such a concept might be founded. In order to achieve this, I will first illuminate some of the most salient ethical arguments marshalled by anthropologists who advocate for the discipline and its practitioners to be positioned preferentially on the side of the "powerless" before proceeding to a more developed critique of aspects of this "ethical imperative". In her paper entitled "Living in a State of Fear" (1995), Linda Green asserts that while anthropology as a discipline has certainly not shied away from studies of social conflict, the "anthropological gaze" in such studies has more often than not been a "diverted" one (Green 1995: 107). In explaining this notion of a "diverted gaze", Green states:

[a]nthropologists...have traditionally approached the study of conflict, war, and human aggression from a distance, ignoring the harsh realities of people's lives...What is at stake, it seems, are the struggles between the powerful and the powerless and what is at issue for anthropologists is with whom to cast their lot (Green 1995: 106-107).

Thus, for Green, the ethical issue is not that anthropology or its practitioners have avoided difficult circumstances or, what I would term, "dangerous spaces", rather, it is that this engagement has occurred at a level which has not meaningfully challenged relations of power and thus offer no possibility for the amelioration of human suffering. In opposition to this position, Green offers the notion of the anthropologist as "scribe", a role which entails documenting "what the people themselves narrate as their own histories, that which they have seen, smelled, touched, felt, interpreted, and thought" (Green 1995: 108). Furthermore, anthropological monographs may themselves become "'sites of resistance', 'acts of solidarity', a way to 'write against terror'", a practice which allows "[a]nthropology itself [to be] employed as an agent for social change" (Green 1995: 108). In her vision of anthropology, Green constructs a discipline which takes as its first ethical priority the obligation to give voice to the experiences of the powerless, the oppressed, the victimized, and to serve as a vehicle for realizing social change, not simply one which articulates social critique. For Green, there can be no meaningful anthropology of human suffering if its practitioners do not choose to actively "cast their lot" on the side of the powerless in opposition to the powerful.

While Linda Green articulates the basis of the ethical imperative of anthropology practised in dangerous spaces, Nancy Scheper-Hughes takes many of these notions much further in expressing her own vision of anthropology in her article "The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology" (1995). In her article, Scheper-Hughes outlines the moral and ethical framework upon which she builds her own notion of a "politically committed and morally engaged

anthropology" in the following manner:

I suggest that cultural relativism, read as moral relativism, is no longer appropriate to the world in which we live and that anthropology, if it is to be worth anything at all, must be ethically grounded: "If we cannot begin to think about social institutions and practices in moral or ethical terms, then anthropology strikes me as quite weak and useless" (Scheper-Hughes 1995: 410).

Scheper-Hughes names this position which she sees as morally and ethically responsible as that of the "companheira", one which was fashioned out of her own experiences and encounters with politically and socially engaged and committed research partners in the field in Brazil and South Africa. The question which informs her own position as anthropologist and "companion" and which Scheper-Hughes asks of all of us is "[w]hat makes anthropology and anthropologists exempt from the human responsibility to take an ethical (and even a political) stand on the working out of historical events as we are privileged to witness them?" (Scheper-Hughes 1995: 411). In essence, Scheper-Hughes questions the fundamental value of doing work in highly conflict-ridden spaces if the anthropology produced as a result of such work does nothing to bring about an end to conditions of misery and suffering (Scheper-Hughes 1995: 416). In fact, in marshalling this critique against a more "objective" or "neutral" anthropology, Scheper-Hughes takes direct aim at the post-modern "crisis of representation", asserting that "[n]ot to look, not to touch, not to record can be the hostile act, and act of indifference and of turning away" (Scheper-Hughes 1995: 416). Thus, the ethical imperative here is once again one which demands more than engagement, it demands interaction and affiliation; furthermore, it requires anthropologists to commit to political and moral stances rather than to explanatory models when confronting situations of human suffering.

In articulating her vision of a "militant" anthropology, Scheper-Hughes asserts the potential for anthropology to not only operate as a tool "for critical reflection" but, much more

powerfully, for “human liberation” as well (Scheper-Hughes 1995: 418). In expressing this potential and the “primacy of the ethical” which informs it, Scheper-Hughes outlines her vision of the anthropological project in the following manner:

[a]nthropologists who are privileged to witness human events close up and over time, who are privy to community secrets that are generally hidden from the view of outsiders or from historical scrutiny until much later...have, I believe, an ethical obligation to identify the ills in a spirit of solidarity and to follow...a “womanly” ethic of care and responsibility. If anthropologists deny themselves the power (because it implies a privileged position) to identify an ill or a wrong and choose to ignore (because it is not pretty) the extent to which dominated people sometimes play the role of their own executioners, they collaborate with the relations of power and silence that allow the destruction to continue (Scheper-Hughes 1995: 418-419).

Thus, for Scheper-Hughes, anthropologists who do not take explicit moral and political positions with regard to situations characterized by conflict are not only guilty of not working to achieve human emancipation but are in fact guilty of perpetuating the very violence to which they bear witness. In fact, Scheper-Hughes goes so far as to assert that the “ethical” is “pre-cultural” insofar as “in presupposing all meaning, ethics makes culture possible”, a position which allows one to become a companion of people whose lives are enmeshed in circumstances of violence and suffering by virtue of the notion that “we are thrown into existence at all presupposes a given, implicit moral relationship to an original (m)other and she to me” (Scheper-Hughes 1995: 419). Our very existence therefore becomes the basis and entails the obligation of a fundamental moral debt to one another, one which exists prior to culture and which must be seen as transcending all difference. It is in this sense that Scheper-Hughes insists that anthropologists cease to be “observers” and instead embrace the role of “witnesses”; professionals who are bound to act in a politically and morally engaged fashion as companions to the people we work with in order to help achieve their emancipation from systems of

violence.

In the work of both Green and Scheper-Hughes, the thread of an ethical obligation to assist in the emancipation of the people with whom we work runs quite powerfully. In "Anthropology and Liberation" (1991), Edmund Gordon focuses upon many of the same concerns and questions that both Scheper-Hughes and Green engage, however, he proceeds further in an attempt to define an "anthropology of liberation" and the ethics which inform it. Much like Scheper-Hughes' assertion that any anthropologist who does not participate actively in speaking out and acting against violence and oppression is in fact guilty of perpetuating it, Gordon asserts that anthropology as a discipline has a certain ethical and moral debt to pay. This ethical and moral debt cannot, according to Gordon, be repaid solely through the production of "anti-colonial critiques" or even "liberating knowledge" (Gordon 1991: 149). Rather, anthropologists interested in "decolonising our discipline" and creating an "anthropology of liberation" must move from simply "intellectualizing" problems to praxis (Gordon 1991: 149). Significantly, such a move would need to occur in conjunction with "the creation of counter hegemonic world views and practices, and the construction of institutions for their propagation and dissemination" (Gordon 1991: 149). In Gordon's view, an "anthropology of liberation" is thus a discipline which is not only ethically committed to the people with whom anthropologists work, but is in fact bound to the creation and dissemination of "counter hegemonic world views and practices" in cooperation with larger popular projects dedicated to the same ends. Gordon advances his vision even further by positing that anthropological knowledge "empowers Western elites...whether utilized in specific instances of oppression, or as a contribution to their general knowledge [and therefore] reinforces the power differential between these elites and the Third World" (Gordon 1991: 151). The only response to this situation, argues Gordon, is to formulate and practice an anthropology which "no longer serves the interests of the oppressors", opting instead to "actively [serve the interests] of

the oppressed” (Gordon 1991: 153). The fundamental basis for an “anthropology of liberation” for Gordon thus embraces the views expressed by both Scheper-Hughes and Green, but which also exceeds them. In Gordon’s formulation, notions of the anthropologist as “scribe” or “witness” are conspicuously absent, replaced instead with a vocabulary focusing on participation as a member of a larger counter-hegemonic struggle between the oppressed and their oppressors.

The vision forwarded by Gordon of the anthropologist as a counter-hegemonic agent entails several significant ethical dimensions with respect to its articulation. Firstly, in order to conduct an “anthropology of liberation”, it is of primary ethical importance that the anthropologist “involve him/herself with a community or people who s/he believes will be empowered by knowledge and ideas developed in interaction with them. The anthropologist must identify in an organic way with the community with which s/he works” (Gordon 1991: 154). The notion of organic identification with a community, within the scope of Gordon’s theorization, involved being an “insider” with respect to the community itself, thus eliminating the possibility of anthropologists doing work with groups or communities with whom they have no capacity to personally identify. The choice of research topic, also a point of significant ethical concern, is one, which Gordon asserts must “contribute to a people’s effort to understand the nature of their own oppression and to conquer it” (Gordon 1991: 154). It should be a topic, which emerges both from the anthropologist’s assessment of what is “the nature and source of oppression” as well as from what the people themselves believe lie at the core of their own problems (Gordon 1991: 154). Following this, Gordon’s “anthropology of liberation” draws its impetus from the ethical imperative to move beyond “intellectualizing” these issues and towards activism (Gordon 1991: 162). The anthropologist-as-activist “must participate in breaking down the web of hegemonic ideas which is blocking the acceptance of liberating knowledge so that the latter may be instrumentalized” (Gordon 1991: 162). In Gordon’s view, this struggle can be accomplished only by the

anthropologist becoming involved in "creating and consolidating a counter-hegemonic movement through active political struggle" (Gordon 1991: 162). Anything less, according to Gordon, merely reproduces already existing systems of domination and exploitation and reinforces the pre-eminence of the West over the Third World.

The concept of an "anthropology of liberation" and the ethical principles, which inform it is further, advanced by Faye Harrison in her work "Ethnography as Politics" (1991). In her article, Harrison argues for the "construction of an 'anthropology of liberation' to subvert the established discipline and lay the foundation for a new field of inquiry...based on conscious political choices about standing on the side of struggle and transformation" (Huizer cited in Harrison 1991: 88). In articulating this vision of anthropology and the ethical imperatives which underlie it, Harrison reflects upon her experience conducting fieldwork in the highly politicized and conflicted environment of Kingston, Jamaica in the 1970s; a time during which the government was striving toward democratic socialism in the face of staunch internal and international opposition and a social and economic climate dominated by violence and crime. As Harrison explains, her choice is one, which was itself informed by her own identity:

as a child growing up in the South in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement; as a university student involved in the campaign to exonerate and free political prisoners such as Angela Davis, a Black scholar/activist framed for kidnapping, murder, and conspiracy; as a fledgling ethnographer exploring the politicization of adolescents in a poor, working-class West Indian neighbourhood in London, England; as an activist concerned with providing grassroots political education, building alternative organizations, and mobilizing support for Southern African liberation struggles; and, finally, as a graduate student stimulated by the debates among social scientists regarding uneven capitalist development, class formation in peripheral formations, and the rocky road to socialism (Harrison 1991: 91).

This statement of personal affinity reflects Gordon's assertion that anthropologists practising an "anthropology of liberation" must be able to organically identify with the communities they involve themselves with. As Harrison herself notes:

[m]y social identity as a Black American rather than as a racial and cultural derivative of Euro-America enhanced my ability and my commitment to engage in a critical dialogue with Jamaican blacks as well as with brown and white progressives who identified politically and culturally with the Afro-Jamaican majority...I recognized the organic responsibility and relationship that I had to oppressed peoples, especially to peoples of Africa and African descent (Harrison 1991: 101).

Thus, categories of identity and subjectivity form the basis for the ethical imperative to engage in struggles for the liberation of oppressed peoples through anthropological work. By virtue of this "organic responsibility", Harrison insists that anthropologists committed to human emancipation "must form pacts with their oppressed 'brethren and sistren'", pacts which "must take precedence over many conventional professional expectations and requirements, which, as presently constituted, serve to reproduce (neo)colonial domination" (Harrison 1991: 104). An "anthropology of liberation" as characterized by both Gordon and Harrison is therefore one which takes as axiomatic the identification of the anthropologist with oppressed peoples and insists upon a commitment to active political participation in larger struggles which seek to subvert hegemonic constructions, dominating systems, and oppressive institutions.

In his article "Confronting the Ethics of Ethnography: Lessons from Fieldwork in Central America" (1991), Philippe Bourgois argues powerfully for an anthropology which is not only intellectually rigorous, but which is unabashedly socially and politically engaged as well. Bourgois takes specific aim at the "limited dimension of ethical dilemmas" in anthropology, a criticism that is worth quoting at length:

[w]e worry about whether or not our research subjects have truly consented in an "informed" manner to our study; we ponder over the honesty of our presentation of self; we condemn

the distortion in the local economy caused by the resources we inject into it in the form of "informants" gifts or wages; we are wary of the social disapproval foisted on our primary informants when they become the objects of envy or ridicule from the rest of the community because of the resources, prestige, or shame we bring them; we no longer steal ceremonial secrets unapologetically; we examine our emotions introspectively to control our ethnocentrism; we uphold cultural relativism and avoid unconsciously conveying disrespect for traditional institutions and values through our lifestyle; we preserve the anonymity of our research subjects and host communities; we feel guilty for violating the privacy of our informants and their culture; we worry about "scientific colonialism" and our "responsibility to the host community" (so we send extra copies of our publications to our research site); we do not take photographs indiscriminately and we do not tape record without obtaining prior permission; we discuss the pros and cons of consulting forbidden archives or quoting from personal diaries and letters; we question the ethics of accepting financial support from governments and politically biased institutions; we worry about the potential misuse of our research material once it has been published in the public domain; and finally we take care not to jeopardize the access of future colleagues to our fieldwork site by our actions and publications (Bourgois 1991: 111-112).

The thrust of Bourgois' summary of contemporary ethical concerns in anthropology is that nowhere in this list is there a mention of "the larger moral and human dimensions of the political and economic structures ravaging most of the peoples that anthropologists have studied historically" (Bourgois 1991: 111). In fact, Bourgois goes so far as to assert that many of the ethical considerations characteristic of contemporary anthropological practice in fact serve to undermine any significant attempt made on the part of anthropologists to confront these structures of violence and domination as he asks "[h]ow does one investigate power relations and fulfill the researcher's obligation to obtain informed consent from the powerful?" (Bourgois 1991: 111). Thus, for Bourgois, the

problem with ethical debate in anthropology is not that it has not occurred but rather that it has avoided addressing issues of human rights, power, domination, and conflict in any substantive manner.

In constructing a vision of a politically engaged and committed anthropology, Bourgois notes that the ethical considerations of human suffering rarely occupy a place of primacy within anthropological discussions of disciplinary ethics. What are the ethical imperatives that anthropologists working in highly conflicted spaces need to consider? Bourgois articulates what he perceives as the fundamental ethical challenge to anthropologists in the following manner:

[w]e have chosen to study the wretched of the earth. These are the individuals too often condemned to periodic famines, to below subsistence-level incorporation in flooded labour markets, to relocation, dislocation, or more simply extermination. Many of our discipline's former research subjects are fighting back in organized political movements; but as the Central American experience demonstrates, their struggles are prolonged, bloody, and often unsuccessful. Although as uninvited outsiders it might be naive and arrogant for us to think we have anything definitive to offer, we can still recognize the ethical challenge. Why do we avoid it? (Bourgois 1991: 113-114).

Thus, Bourgois considers the question of the "right" of anthropologists to involve themselves in circumstances and with peoples who are living realities which "outsiders" will probably never be able to fully comprehend; however, his response to this is not to withdraw from this problematic, but to engage it. In illustrating this ethical challenge, Bourgois relates his own experiences conducting fieldwork in highly conflict-ridden field sites in Honduras and El Salvador where his primary ethical challenge and obligation became the exposure of the tremendous human rights violations occurring at the direction of the Salvadoran government, despite the fact that such a commitment nearly resulted in his termination as a graduate student due to his serious violation of several academic disciplinary standards

(Bourgois 1991: 116-119). In responding to the ethical concerns of fieldwork in highly conflicted spaces, Bourgois raises several points, which are at once compelling and profoundly complicated:

[a]re we supposed to abandon controversial research? Most political economy studies can be defined as potentially unethical. A fieldworker cannot obtain important information on unequal power relations by strictly obeying the power structure's rules and laws...What are the limits to "informed consent" in settings of highly unequal power relations?...How does one decide whether a host country government is sufficiently repressive to warrant breaking its laws?...Most dramatically, the ethics of informed consent as it is interpreted by human subjects review boards at North American universities implicitly reinforces the political status quo (Bourgois 1991: 120).

What Bourgois draws from this ethical challenge is the assertion that anthropological ethics need to be reformulated in a manner, which contributes to the empowerment of the "poor and powerless" (Bourgois 1991: 122). While he acknowledges the fact that such studies are certainly fraught with more "traditional" ethical concerns and that there is no guarantee that anthropologists will have "something concrete to offer" people in their struggles, Bourgois reinforces the notion that the world is a politically polarized place and that if we choose not to actively engage it on behalf of the people we work with, these very same people will "continue to be crucified" (Bourgois 1991: 122-123). Thus, much as Green, Scheper-Hughes, Gordon, and Harrison have argued, non-involvement in political struggle is not merely a passive act of indifference, it is in fact a hostile act, which supports conditions of violence and oppression. It is therefore the primary ethical principle of an "anthropology of liberation" that its practitioners be activists in the contexts within which they work, operating at the direction of the people they work with and in cooperation with larger struggles which aim to subvert systems of domination and oppression.

While many of the ethical issues surrounding

anthropology in highly conflicted and even “dangerous” spaces discussed thus far have revolved around rather abstracted notions of “organic identification” and struggles against oppression, the work of Lynn Stephen (2002) provides an excellent example of the practice of what might be termed an “anthropology of liberation”. In describing her fieldwork experience over the past decade in southern Mexico and particularly her work conducted in the state of Chiapas since the Zapatista uprising of January 1, 1994, Stephen illustrates the ethical and methodological issues, which confront anthropologists conducting research in zones of conflict. Given the continuing political and social oppression occurring in Chiapas against indigenous communities supportive of the Zapatista movement, Stephen draws from her own experience and argues that “‘the field’ is all inclusive”, a proposition which she further develops by stating that “[a]nthropologists are a part of the field, responsible for their place in the moral economy and political economy of the broader relations encompassing them and those they work with” (Stephen 2002: 21). In situations such as those involving low-intensity warfare Stephen asserts that the notion of “neutral participant observation is not credible” and that researchers must be prepared “to participate more than observe and to take responsibility for using their access to the media and other resources to report on what they see and participate in” (Stephen 2002: 22). Stephen clearly indicates here the unique ethical and methodological challenges posed by situations of profound conflict for the discipline of anthropology and its practitioners. Situations characterized by circumstances of violence and oppression such as those present in low-intensity warfare pose unique challenges to the anthropologist and also entail certain obligations to the people suffering under such conditions.

In situations of profound conflict, such as those present in the southeast of Mexico, Stephen asserts that a re-evaluation of the role of the anthropologist needs to occur. As she states from her own experience, “I did not see myself as being an ‘investigator’ seeking to unearth all mysteries and answer all questions, but more as what Liisa Malkki calls a witness”

(Stephen 2002: 22). The notion of the anthropologist as witness, a category also invoked by Nancy Scheper-Hughes, signifies for Stephen "trying to be an attentive listener, recognizing the situatedness of one's intellectual work, and affirming one's own connections to the ideas, processes, and people one is studying" (Malkki cited in Stephen 2002: 22). Importantly, Stephen notes that while one role the anthropologist can play is that of "witness" to situations involving conditions such as low-intensity war, it is not the only role (Stephen 2002: 23). Thus, "witnessing" can become part of a larger anthropological project, a role within which the "tools and resources of an anthropologist" can be mobilized to report effectively on these situations (Stephen 2002: 23). The demands of working within highly conflicted contexts, however, pose unique ethical and methodological challenges to the practice of anthropology. Obstacles to conducting classical long-term fieldwork in situations such as those described by Stephen include: the dangers involved in working in communities that have been "displaced, divided, and militarized"; governments actively working to prevent the witnessing of situations which they wish to hide; and, finally, the dangers posed to communities being labelled "suspicious" due to the long-term presence of foreigners as well as the dangers such a situation would imply for researchers themselves (Stephen 2002: 23). Thus, more flexible methodologies involving such issues as fieldwork duration, a greater emphasis on participation rather than observation, a willingness to serve in capacities such as human rights observation in order to work in situations of extreme conflict, and a commitment to engaging power structures preferentially on the side of those who are suffering within them are but a few of the aspects of the ethical and methodological problematics involved in the role of the anthropologist as witness.

In discussing the potentials and perhaps even the moral imperative to engage in an "anthropology of liberation" which would seem to include the role of the anthropologist as "witness", it is necessary to consider the foundation upon which such notions ultimately rest. As Stephen indicates, the discourse

of human rights is one which is intimately tied to “witnessing” and which is most certainly implied by an “anthropology of liberation”. Within anthropological theory and practice, a discourse of universal human rights can be certainly seen as a problematic foundation upon which to build a disciplinary project. By attempting to universalize human rights, do we not run the risk of imposing specific cultural values and historically contingent ideologies upon other peoples? What are the ethics of attempting to “liberate” people based upon a set of assumptions which, many would argue, are culturally and historically specific and which posit a particular kind of subject? Stephen responds specifically to the criticism that a discourse of universal human rights is one which has emerged from the Enlightenment and “specifically to the production of a particular document, at a particular time, tied to particular ideological interests: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, written in 1948 in the aftermath of World War II and tied to a political philosophy seeking to unify Europe” (Stephen 2002: 29-30).

While Stephen notes that the traditional anthropological response to understanding conditions of violence, oppression, and conflict rests upon the foundation of cultural relativism, she also asserts that this approach is “no longer acceptable or even viable” for anthropologists, for the very reason that the discourse of human rights is no longer one bound exclusively to the Western world as “[h]uman rights discourses now exist in a globalized context and have been deployed and debated by a wide range of states and by indigenous communities and movements [and a great range of social movements] from a variety of perspectives” (Stephen 2002: 30). Thus, while the discourse of universal human rights has indeed emerged from a specific cultural and historical moment, it has since been refashioned and employed by a multitude of diverse groups globally in pursuing their own claims. It is in this sense that an “anthropology of liberation” and the role of the anthropologist as “witness” can be seen as operating in accordance with already-existing political agendas of people challenging the circumstances of their own oppression and marginalization.

Stephen summarizes her vision of the anthropologist as witness in the following manner:

[t]he human rights discourse is a political tool that marginalized communities and organizations are now using to make their voices heard and to gain access to political and social systems - and to nations - from which they have long been excluded. If we anthropologists possess skills, tools, resources, and access useful in carrying out human rights work, and are expected and requested to do so by the people work with, then we must seriously consider the relation between such work and anthropological fieldwork...People in communities living under the circumstances of low-intensity war often request assistance in publicizing their situation and dare not wait for several years while an anthropologist collects, analyses, and publishes data. They may ask anthropologists to take responsibility for their privileged access to the media, other intellectuals, government officials, and policy makers, and to disseminate information to as many people as soon as possible through public presentations, teaching, writing in popular forums, and, last, perhaps, in such traditional academic products as articles in refereed journals or books published by university presses (Stephen 2002: 31).

Thus, according to Stephen, in choosing to work in areas characterized by conflict and violence, as anthropologists we are implicitly involving ourselves in a scenario, which does not allow for positions of "neutrality" or careful academic distances. In this case, our first ethical imperative is to serve the communities and people we work with in order to advance their own political agendas. As Stephen argues, given our access to resources and venues beyond the circumstances, which characterize the lives of people suffering within these zones of conflict, as anthropologists we must be committed to offering

something beyond production of knowledge for the academy; we must be committed to advancing the struggle of peoples striving toward their own liberation.

From the work of Green, Scheper-Hughes, Harrison, Gordon, and Stephen, the contours of what could be labelled an “anthropology of liberation” can be traced. While the vision is one, which is certainly compelling and undoubtedly informed by a fervour to aid in the elimination of injustice, oppression, and marginalization of peoples globally, beneath the rhetoric there exist certain fundamental problematics, which need to be confronted. Firstly, it needs to be noted that there is a clear difference between the role of the anthropologist as “witness” and the larger project of an “anthropology of liberation”. For anthropologists such as Gordon and Harrison, the goal of anthropology is nothing less than the emancipation of peoples suffering under conditions of profound oppression and violence. Furthermore, within their shared vision of anthropology, Gordon and Harrison posit that this work can only be done by individuals who identify in what they term an “organic” manner with the people and communities with whom they are involved¹. In addition to this, the primary ethic of this kind of anthropology becomes participation in counter-hegemonic political struggle, a struggle that is a part of larger political movements. While the rhetoric used to support this vision is powerful and persuasive, it is also loaded with assumptions of morality and righteousness, which are somewhat discomfiting. In essence, this “liberation struggle” becomes reducible to whether one chooses to side with the powerful or the powerless, the oppressors or the oppressed. The argument becomes one, which already posits a certain preconceived and dichotomous social and political reality, one that establishes a prefabricated path for anthropologists to follow in striving toward liberation.

This sense of moral righteousness is also powerfully invoked by Nancy Scheper-Hughes in her call for anthropologists to become “witnesses” and “companheiras/companheiros” as she reduces the argument to one which involves the anthropologist in essence choosing a “side” in the

battle of "life and death, good and evil" (Scheper-Hughes 1995:411). This type of polarization serves the purpose of clearly delineating positions within a larger struggle, but it is a polarization, which serves to obscure rather than illuminate the complexity of lived reality. If anthropology as a discipline is one which aims to provide "thickness" in conveying the multiple and tremendously varied realities of the lives of those people with whom we work, how does such a facile and reductionist moral position assist in helping others to understand situations of violence and conflict? Moreover, the assertion made by Scheper-Hughes that ethics are in fact "pre-cultural" illuminates the precise problem with this "anthropology of liberation", namely that in asserting the obligation of the anthropologist to operate as an agent of emancipation and social transformation, the very issues of how ethics and morality are constituted and how relations of power are constructed recede from debate. All that one need worry about is "being on the right side" and struggling against monolithic forces bent on perpetuating cycles of violence and oppression.

After reviewing the arguments for and adoption of an "anthropology of liberation", I will now attempt to address the question of whether the practice of this type of anthropology should be considered a "moral imperative". Clearly, this question is one, which depends heavily upon the context in which different anthropologists work. For those who conduct research outside of these "zones of conflict", this notion of an "anthropology of liberation" could in fact imply a hierarchy of value depending upon the area in which one chooses to work. Will work conducted in areas outside of highly conflicted areas come to be seen as "less than" work done within them? If so, the discipline of anthropology risks closing itself off to areas of inquiry and to the deepening of human knowledge in the service of a unitary political agenda. More than this, seeing an "anthropology of liberation" as a moral and ethical imperative evokes notions of submitting intellectual curiosity, freedom, and creativity to a political agenda, which determines the ultimate trajectory and goal of anthropological work. Within these "zones

of conflict”, an “anthropology of liberation” can, in fact, limit the ability of anthropologists to understand the complexity of any given social reality.

Reflecting upon this situation, Scheper-Hughes notes that, “I had to accept that there were places where I was not welcome...that were irrevocably closed to me and consequently to anthropology” (Scheper-Hughes 1995: 411). Despite the rhetoric of “good and evil, life and death”, it is an unfortunate truth that social reality and the individuals who operate within it are rarely as simple as this polarization would seem to suggest. How are we to understand the complexity of conflict and violence conducted systematically within tremendously varied contexts if we allow ourselves to close doors to a range of venues within these contexts? What service is being performed if there is no attempt to deepen our understandings of why these situations exist, how they are perpetuated, who they benefit, and who they harm? If an “anthropology of liberation” by virtue of its ethical and moral imperatives eliminates entire avenues of inquiry before research has even begun, what is the ultimate value of such research and what liberating effects will it have? Clearly, there remain numerous unanswered ethical and methodological questions that pose significant challenges to the viability of an “anthropology of liberation”.

While the ethical primacy of anthropologists’ obligations to the people with whom they work appears axiomatic to many practitioners, particularly those who work in highly politicized and conflicted contexts, the shape and nature of these obligations remains somewhat obscure. Of the anthropologists I have discussed in this paper, Stephen, Green, and Bourgois go the furthest in attempting to articulate an explicit position for anthropologists working with peoples in situations of extreme conflict. Conveyed explicitly through their theorizations on the purpose of anthropological inquiry in these “dangerous spaces” is the notion that it is the obligation of the anthropologist to serve as a “scribe” or “witness” for these communities. While Scheper-Hughes also uses the concept of the “witness”, her formulation tends to follow much more closely in

the path of an "anthropology of liberation" rather than the visions of Stephen, Green, and even Bourgois who advocate a much more refined position. Each of these three anthropologists note that in situations of profound human suffering, it is the ethical obligation of the anthropologist to serve as a witness to these circumstances and to make themselves and their skills and resources as anthropologists available to the people and communities with whom they are involved. In this sense, witnessing entails a transformation of some of the more traditional methodological standards of anthropology to allow for access to areas, which might be off-limits to more traditional anthropological approaches. It also entails a shift toward an ethical orientation, which obligates anthropologists to speak out against these conditions of violence and the human suffering it causes in the most productive and public forums possible. What is significant with respect to the role of anthropologist as witness, particularly within the work of Lynn Stephen, is that there is an explicit acknowledgement that this is not the only role anthropologists could or should play.

Furthermore, there is an emphasis in this discourse of "witnessing" not of closing doors to research but of opening them more widely. While there is an acknowledgement that "what is at stake is with whom anthropologists choose to cast their lot", this conceptualization lacks the revolutionary fervour of an "anthropology of liberation" and instead attempts to find pragmatic solutions to challenging situations of endemic violence and profound human suffering through the use of anthropological tools, rather than simply attempting to subject anthropology as a discipline to a singular overriding ethical-political agenda. Moreover, ethical debate in the formulations of anthropological inquiry as proposed by Stephen, Green, and Bourgois does not recede from view, rather, it remains central to the project of anthropology practised in "dangerous spaces". Rather than emphasising the importance of serving as an agent within a larger counter-hegemonic struggle against the oppressors, the role of "witness" challenges the anthropologist to reaffirm their obligations to the people with whom they work

without presupposing a set of principles explicitly aimed at “liberation” and which could in fact only lead to greater polarization and simplification and ultimately reduce our ability to comprehend some of these tremendously complex and varied circumstances by representing them as a caricature of a battle of “good against evil”.

Throughout this paper I have attempted to trace the contours of what some have termed an “anthropology of liberation”, the ethical concerns which inform it, and the question of whether or not there exists an ethical imperative to practice it. In evaluating the work and writing of Green, Scheper-Hughes, Harrison, Gordon, Bourgois, and Stephen, the profound complexity of conducting anthropological research in situations characterized by extreme violence and profound human suffering can be seen as giving rise to the assertion that an activist, liberatory anthropology is a moral and ethical imperative for the discipline and its practitioners. However, as I have argued, while anthropologists such as Harrison, Gordon, and Scheper-Hughes strongly advocate for an “anthropology of liberation”, others such as Stephen, Green, and Bourgois provide a much more nuanced vision of what an ethical practice of anthropology in highly conflicted spaces could look like.

While the debate over the ethical imperative to assist in ending human suffering and confronting cycles of violence, conflict, and oppression is a profoundly important one, the project embodied by an “anthropology of liberation” as expressed in the work of some of these anthropologists remains a concept riddled with internal problematics and contradiction. By issuing the call for anthropologists to actively work to emancipate the people they work with, anthropologists such as Gordon, Harrison, and Scheper-Hughes employ a line of argumentation and an appeal to ethics and morality that is rooted in a facile conception of power, oppression, and violence; one which reduces the world to victims and victimizers and then demands that anthropologists choose a side. While the objective is undeniably noble, the zeal and righteousness evoked in these works is as problematic and potentially dangerous as those

anthropologists who continue to claim "neutrality" and "scientific objectivity" in their relations with people and communities². The most basic and disturbing issue here is that in asserting an "anthropology of liberation" as the only ethical course to take when working with people living in these "dangerous spaces", any meaningful discussion of ethics recedes from discussion as the "ethical imperative" of liberation takes a position of primacy. If liberation is the objective and it is perceived as the most ethical and moral goal, then it becomes the ethical standard in and of itself. Considerations of what "liberation" is, whom it will benefit, how specifically it will be achieved are nowhere to be found in this discourse. In order to confront systems of power and privilege and attempt to transform relations of domination and oppression into relations of empowerment and emancipation, as anthropologists we must first work toward a nuanced understanding of the complex and complicated lived realities experienced by people. In this vein, an anthropology which views the role of "witness" as one role the anthropologist can play is, I believe, a much more powerful and sophisticated tool. Rather than making calls for the liberation of humanity, an anthropology which embraces the act of "witnessing" ethically requires anthropologists to be responsible for the events they view and to participate in the lives of the people with whom they work, always at the direction of those same individuals and communities. In this sense, "witnessing" both exceeds and becomes part of a larger anthropological project. While the tools of anthropology are brought to bear on situations of extreme conflict, anthropologists must be prepared to engage in acts both to conduct research and to disseminate it that fall outside of traditional disciplinary boundaries. Yet at the same time, the notion that this act of "witnessing" is subject to a single over-arching ethical-political paradigm of "liberation" is conspicuously absent.

Acting as "witness", the anthropologist working in situations of extreme conflict and human suffering is indeed responding to what could be termed the "ethical imperative" to act preferentially on behalf of those with whom we work and

who consent to share their experiences and lives with us. The difference between this response to the ethical obligation of anthropologists to those they work with and the notion of the “ethical imperative” of an “anthropology of liberation” is nuanced but profound. Through witnessing, the anthropologist gives voice to circumstances of conflict, violence, and oppression thus utilizing the tools and resources of anthropology to speak out against gross injustice in particular contexts and even to inform a larger political struggle. In an “anthropology of liberation” the political struggle itself becomes the guiding force for the discipline and its practitioners. Anthropology and the ethical debates involved in its practice in essence disappear within a framework of “liberation”, a framework which relies upon starkly drawn lines between the powerful and the powerless and which posits the ultimate goal of anthropology to be the articulation, within the formation of larger political struggles, of a counter-hegemonic front.

While it is tempting to believe social and political realities are ultimately reducible to a struggle of “good against evil”, and that as human beings in the world we must place ourselves on one side or the other, the practice of anthropology itself has taught us that lived human experience is rarely this simple. In pursuing the work of an ethically committed anthropology, rather than committing ourselves to agendas and frameworks which cloak ethical and intellectual dilemmas in the language of liberation and emancipation, we must instead reaffirm our commitment to the people with whom we work, to the challenge of conveying as effectively and widely as we can the richness, the complexity, and sometimes even the harshness and the horror of human experience. Anthropologists can be witnesses, we can lend our voices and our access to those with whom we work in an ethical and responsible manner. What we should not do is allow ourselves to be seduced by a rhetoric of “liberation” and self-righteousness, which, while claiming the ethical and moral high ground, serves instead to obscure the very complexity of the worlds, we, and the individuals and communities with whom we work, inhabit.

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Notes

1 See "Gender, Ethics and Empowerment: Dilemmas of Development Fieldwork" (2000) by Helen Leslie and Regina Scheyvens for an overview of both the problems with this focus on organic identification as well as the potential benefits of research conducted by those who are outsiders to communities.

2 Jean Schensul and Donald Stull (1987) argue for the centrality of applied collaborative research to the production of scientific knowledge in *Collaborative Research and Social Change: Applied Anthropology in Action*

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