

As an activist, a student, and a person of color, my trajectory into academic research can be seen as a convergence of my interests in addressing difference and inequality, both as they have been theorized and as they are lived. The immediate experience of growing up as a minority within a minority (a *Hawaiano* among Latinos in the state of Arizona) made an awareness of the politics of difference unavoidable. Daily exposure to discourses of marginalization, struggle, and solidarity formed a foundation for my later interest in social justice. But, it was through two, specific field experiences that I was able to re-orient my educational interests from a strictly theoretical anthropology toward a critical approach to engaged social science research.

During my sophomore year in college, I was fortunate to work and study for two months under Professors William Kimbel and Kaye Reed at the Hadar field site in Ethiopia. In addition to these prominent academic figures, I had the privilege of surveying and digging alongside a group of local Afar men, some of whom had become expert at identifying hominid fossils having worked for decades on various projects such as Donald Johansson's discovery of the Lucy fossil in the 1974. Less than a year after returning to the states from this first taste of the field, I received the worst email I've ever read. An Ethiopian student had written to the field school informing us that two of the younger Afar men we had worked with, both in their mid-teens, had been killed in a gun battle outside a newly-built health clinic. The clinic, which had been built by a foreign NGO, was located on the border between the Afar and Issa, two groups which have been actively fighting a war over territory in eastern Ethiopia for generations. Even as undergraduate student researchers, we had been aware cautious enough to trust our Afar colleagues' advice not to go to certain conflict areas. And yet, well-meaning foreign aid workers had come in and unintentionally contributed to this violence, creating a situation which resulted in the deaths of two people I had worked and joked with, people who I knew personally. The profound inequality the NGO was seeking to address was real. But the way they had approached the problem seemed so obviously wrong to me, as someone who had only spent two months in the region, that I could not help being drawn to these issues.

Directly after this event, I became more involved in development studies: taking on a social justice minor and pursuing an undergraduate certificate in philosophy, politics and law through the Honors College and Sandra Day O'Connor School of Law at Arizona State. I also accepted an opportunity to study community development in Tena, Ecuador through the Anthropology and Religious Studies Departments. Living for a summer in an indigenous community and taking rudimentary classes in a dialect of Quechua - Runa Shimi - I was exposed to the day-to-day experience of development restructuring. Projects in the area then included International Red Cross and Ecuadorian government initiatives to improve health services, as well as attempts by multinational oil companies to raise public support for oil extraction through investment in road and recreation infrastructure. Discussions with residents about the limited impacts such projects had had in the long run, as well as the destabilizing effect of Ecuador's dolarización as they felt it, pushed me to look at my role as an aspiring academic, embedded in transnational political and economic networks. The resilience with which individuals and communities had responded to

these changes, such as adapting traditional, shared-labor practices to the building of an eco-tourism center, inspired me to think of the local solutions which were already available and which development work had often ignored or valued less than the universal solutions I was learning about in my coursework. The tension between increasing opportunity and increasing demand which international aid and economic restructuring had meant in these two communities made it apparent to me that more communication and more critical reflexivity were required in the ways scholars engaged with marginalized populations. Because of these experiences, I feel very strongly that we must continue to challenge the assumptions which divide “the academy” and “the community” as the source of the solution on one hand, and the site of intervention on the other. I am confident that rigorous, scientific investigation has a crucial role to play for social change, but its value is directly related to the degree in which it is developed in conversation with the rest of the world.

One way in which I have been able to work towards this is through my continued involvement with activist organizations in the United States. Two in particular have been: El Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (MEChA), a Mexican-American student association, and No More Deaths/No Más Muertes, a diverse, consensus-based organization which provides humanitarian aid to migrants on the Arizona/Mexico border. Through both groups I have been able to help advocate for better immigration policies while also contributing directly to community-based solutions for improving the ability of 1st and 2nd generation migrants to access higher education. In the case of MEChA, I was even able to use ethnographic research to document the group’s activities and suggest ways to improve the organization and its relationship with other activist groups. In the year after I received my Bachelor’s degree, I also worked as a student advisor at an online high school, advising primarily students who were unable to attend traditional high schools. Among my students were numerous young mothers, students who needed to work full time for various reasons, as well as students taking courses from correctional facilities. As an ongoing point-of-contact for over 200 students and their parents, I was able to share the frustrations and successes they experienced working towards their high school diplomas, finding jobs or pursuing further education. As a recent college graduate myself, I was especially excited to leverage my familiarity with the university system to help students find programs, start applications and look for resources. As a result of this experience, I have become more certain of my desire to teach and continue working with young people, especially those whose life experiences have made traditional paths to education difficult. Throughout my own educational, volunteering, and work experiences, the thread which has persisted is my motivation to build dialogue which challenges the ways interventions for social justice are conceived. These experiences are what drive my motivation to continue participating in collaborative, community-driven research and to teach within the university and community college settings, the anthropological theory and methods which I have found so critical in shaping my view of the world. By engaging as many minds as possible in the project of collective, critical reflection which anthropology makes possible, we can only stand to benefit as individuals and as communities.