

# VoICES

DECEMBER 2001

VOLUME 5 NUMBER 1

A PUBLICATION OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR FEMINIST ANTHROPOLOGY

## Lawrence Says, “Life Was Better Then”; Agnes Says, “Life Is Better Now”: The Lessons Of “Indigenous” Women For Theory And Activism In Feminist Anthropology

BY BRIGHAM  
GOLDEN  
Columbia University,  
Department of  
Anthropology

Among my photos from Sugapa is a peculiar image of Agnes Belau. Her eyes, bright within the broad dark planes of her cheeks, flash with laughter. But surrounding her face is a strange collage of colors and text—a sort of frame—formed by labeled goods stacked on shelves behind her. The baby on her shoulder is crying. I recall the conversation we shared on the day that photo was taken. We discussed the problems of Moni women, the changes she has witnessed in her life, and her hopes for her children. At one point I asked her the question I had posed to the male employees of the mining company: “is life better now, or was life better then?”. She paused, then answered confidently, “life is better now...for me”.

### THE PROBLEM OF “INDIGENOUS” WOMEN FOR A FEMINIST PUBLIC ANTHROPOLOGY

Despite appearances to the contrary, so-called “indigenous” women are troubling figures to a feminist public anthropology. They are troubling not because their doubled identity renders them more complex as objects of analysis—though that is true—but rather because their actions point to unsettling conclusions about

how to reconcile the logic of feminist anthropology with its activist aspirations.

Of course challenges to feminist analysis have been leveled over the figures of the doubly marginal before (Mohanty 1991, Spivak 1989), and as a result feminist anthropology has come to confront its intersections with other axes of difference. But the dilemmas and lessons of indigenous women diverge from those of their third-world sisters in important ways, and in so far as they do, the discussion that follows is in large part a meditation on the peculiar category which distinguishes them: the indigenous.

The transformation of a modern discourse of primitivity (Barkan and Bush 1995) into an internationally-recognized legal and political identity (Kingsbury 1995) has been a strange process, having peculiar effects upon the communities that now find themselves cast as indigenous. Alcita Ramos (1998) in particular has traced both the discursive underpinnings and the realpolitik that has driven the development of this globally-circulated ethnic politics—which she has named “indigenism”. But for all



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American Anthropological  
Association**

4350 North Fairfax Drive  
Suite 640  
Arlington, VA 22203-1620

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its complexities, indigenism seems reducible to an ethic and a logic of *preservation*.

But indigenous women are troubling figures to feminist public anthropology because their actions often defy the preservationist logic of indigenism. Not only are indigenous women content to transform their own communities, but do so by drawing upon what seem to be globally-circulated discourses of hegemony. Thus the feminist anthropology that seeks to join indigenous women in their projects of self-empowerment must not only yield its indigenist aspirations of preservation, but may even have to support the reproduction of discourses that make other forms of domination possible—even dominations directly threatening to central tenets of feminism. Feminist theory must account for these kinds of interventions. Indeed, in the case of indigenous women, the unsettling position that stands at the fulcrum between analysis and activism seems particularly insecure.

As we will see, the reconciliation that indigenous women demand of feminist theory and activism is essentially a call for more subtle analysis of the field in which they act. This analysis entails a rearticulation of Manichaeic categories of discourse (globality/locality) and practice (domination/resistance) upon which much feminist and all indigenist analyses are founded. Instead, we find the milieu of indigenous women to be one of discursive *hybridity* (Comaroff 1992, Spyer 1998, Tsing 1993), and we find their most strategic practices to be deeply *contingent*.

It is for this reason that the transformations indigenous women seek to author will almost certainly forfeit as much as they gain. While a feminist public anthropology has no choice but to join this process, only subtle analyses of the field in which indigenous women act can provide a guide for its endeavors to engage these transformations.

**THE MONI OF SUGAPA: AN INDIGENOUS  
COMMUNITY WITH "OUTSIDE INFLUENCES"**  
In June and July of 1996, I lived and conducted field research in Sugapa, a village in the highlands of West Papua (Irian Jaya), Indonesia.

This village, and the network of ridges and sharply cut valleys that surround it, is among the most remote places on the temperate earth. To this day, there are no roads to Sugapa, and all transportation into or out of the area is conducted by aircraft.

Despite its remoteness, Sugapa lies in the heartland of a culturally and linguistically distinct human population. These people, who call themselves "Moni" and number around 25,000, have experienced a history of radical isolation. Indeed, only since the arrival of Catholic missionaries in 1959 can they be said to have had appreciable relations with what the Moni ethnographer Elias Japugau calls "outside influences" (46:unpublished). But while the geographic isolation of the Moni explains the persistence of local practices into the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, outside influences—which include the missions, the Indonesian State, the cash economy, and a multinational mining company—were having tremendous effects upon the people of Sugapa at the time of my research.

While my primary task in 1996 was to study the social impact of mineral exploration by the company Freeport Indonesia, I was also interested in other modes of change in Moni society. Since my studies in feminist theory had taught me that gender relations are often an important index of continuity and transformation in societies, I began to investigate relations between Moni men and Moni women. As it was, the state of gender relations in Sugapa at the time of my research proved more indexical than I could have imagined.

**INDIGENISM: THE LOGIC OF A MODERN  
OBSESSION**

"Indigenous" is a peculiar term, and dense with meanings. Its contemporary usage as a category of radical human alterity invokes its primary reference to a site of genesis, but elides the difference between the two meanings to naturalize the relationship between a group of people, their lifestyle, and the territory in which they dwell. Drawing upon the antecedent discourse of "primitivity" (Barkan and Bush 1995), the indigenous ultimately becomes a ridiculous, almost cartoonish figure in the

representations of popular media and much academic literature—the final bastion of crude culturalism (Morris 1994).

But these garish representations are crucial to the construction of indigeneity. Through them, indigenous people come to assume their most essential—and essentialized—role, the embodiment of local particularities threatened by so-called “globalizing” forces. And thus, as mascots of locality and human diversity, indigenous people acquire, ironically, a shared transnational identity. This general equivalence of peoples is ultimately sustained through marked forms of practice and material culture—including dress, subsistence strategies, beliefs and rituals (Conklin 1997)—that become fetishized as signs of local particularity. And it is through this fetishization that indigenist politics finds its fundamental form—as a global project of *preservation* (Morris 1994).

But what gives this project of preservation its surprising power is its enhancement through political linkages and critical affinities with other marginalized movements that are imagined to be represented in the practices of indigenous peoples—particularly environmentalism (Brosius 1997, Gedicks 1993), but also anti-consumerism, spiritualism, and even feminism (Jacobs 1994).

With this we have begun to identify the peculiar ethnic politics that Alcita Ramos (1998) calls “indigenism”. While this politics can offer a great deal of political and economic leverage to people who have been historically marginalized, what is less obvious is that this leverage also contains risks, and demands sacrifices. To understand these risks and sacrifices it is essential to unpack the logic that drives indigenism.

*Indigenism is an effect of an insecure modernity that is convinced of its totalizing destiny and yet suspect of its origins, its modalities, and thus, its birthright. In the indigenous, modernity finds a powerful obsession, the specter of a vanishing alterity—at once more moral and more authentic—that must be preserved and somehow incorporated.*

The logic of this modern obsession is characterized by a crudely Manichean analytics in

which oppositional categories of discourse (“local/global”) and practice (“resistance/domination”) are the tools for investigating and intervening in the lives of indigenous people. Thus, in indigenist formulations, the indigenous milieu is cast as a site of besieged alterity, where local particularities—i.e. authentic traditions—are threatened by the powerful economies and politics of a modern global order. Interventions and representations of this type tend to enact either the culturalist enframements of a salvage/preservationist project (Morris 1994), or the “romantic” search for—and magnification of—resistant practices by local actors (Abu-Lughod 1991).

But while these kinds of projects imagine themselves in sympathetic affinity with their local subjects, the crude logic upon which they are founded actually prohibits efforts to understand, or to empower those individuals who live in “out-of-the-way” places (Tsing 1994). Invariably, indigenism forces communities into the role of front line troops in battles with powerful orders, and too often it rejects them when they do not conform to the image of the “untouched” and resistant native.

Of course this critique of indigenism does not deny that the radical transformation of isolated communities is a profoundly distressing process, inflicting much suffering upon the transformed. The point, instead, is that the crude analytics of indigenism can understand neither the modes by which this process occurs nor the real strategies that indigenous pursue in attempting to control their transformation. Herein lies the responsibility of public anthropology and the possibility of meaningful engagements with indigenous communities.

**SUGAPA IN 1996: “LIFE WAS BETTER THEN”**  
Among the first initiatives of my research in Sugapa were interviews with the 36 full-time Moni employees of Freeport—all of whom were male. As part of my larger investigation into transformation and continuity, I asked questions about life in Sugapa today and in the past. One such question was, “is life better now, or was life better then?” Almost unanimously, employees answered that life was better then.

#### **Anthropology Newsletter Contributing Editor**

Kelli Ann Costa  
Department of Anthropology  
Franklin Pierce College  
Crestview 334  
Rindge, NH 03461  
Costaka@fpc.edu  
(603)899-4207  
f- (603)899-4324

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Millersville University  
PO Box 1002  
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Dept. of Anthropology  
UCLA  
3207 Hershey Hall  
Box 155307  
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Kathleen Sterling  
Dept. Of Anthropology  
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Berkeley, CA 94720  
sterling@sscl.berkeley.edu

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This wasn't surprising. Before the missions, the government, and the company, everything was, they said, "as we wanted". These outside influences contained new authorities that superseded local orders under the control of Moni men.

As another goal of my research was to identify major tensions in the area, I asked a different question: "what is the biggest problem in the community now?" And while these responses were not so uniform, a surprising answer kept coming back: bridewealth. Apparently, deforestation caused by the company, and the rapacious practices of the Indonesian military, were considered secondary to problems associated with bridewealth. While one would expect frustration among the men of societies that have this form of kinship exchange (Collier and Rosaldo 1981), it was clear that Moni men were not upset about the standard difficulties of affording a wife.

In the past, I was told, Moni bridewealth consisted of a sum of pigs and shell belts known as *kigi*. This sum was agreed between male relatives of the groom and the bride. In recent years, as imported goods became available and desirable, cash was also expected in bridewealth. Unfortunately, these large sums of Indonesian *rupiah* (sometimes in excess of US\$1000) were extremely hard to get. Wage-paying jobs were almost non-existent in the area. But problems ran deeper still. Prices, I was told, were increasingly difficult to negotiate, and refusals to pay agreed-upon debts were becoming common. Men in every position were extremely angered by these developments. Why then, the sudden breakdown of the system? This answer too, was unexpected.

In the past the threat of violence always drove the terms of negotiation. But since fighting was outlawed by the Indonesian government, the police and military provided the only recourse for families whose debts were not paid. Not surprisingly, the police and military—made up largely of immigrants from the distant islands of Java and Sumatra—rarely resolved these disputes to the satisfaction of Moni men. I even heard that the military accepted bribes to settle

disputes favorably. It was clear that I was witnessing a profound transformation. The "outside influences" of the Indonesian State and the cash economy were catalysts for the disintegration of the bridewealth system.

But to understand why the disintegration of this system was so troubling to Moni men it is imperative to grasp the significance of bridewealth. For this I defer to the Moni ethnographer Elias Japugau. The final chapter of his major work begins as follows:

*The mode of life for the Moni tribe in the area of Dugindoga-Kemandoga is pigs, Kigi, bridewealth, the yield of the forest and the yield of the land. The five objects above constitute the foundation of life for the Moni tribe as long as the Moni people have been on the earth in these two areas. (44:unpublished)*

What Elias calls the "mode of life for Moni people", is principally the exchange—between men—of women, pigs and *kigi*. It is a system that links into a single order the reproductions of kinship, status, politics and economic exchange. Further, it is this order that, according to Elias, defines and produces their identity as Moni men (44). Setting aside the problems of casting male practice as the essence of culture (Ortner 1996), the fact remains that the bridewealth system was crucial to the men of the Moni community. Its collapse, due to a particular constellation of outside influences, was proving deeply traumatic.

#### HYBRIDITY AND RESISTANCE IN FEMINIST THEORY AND ACTIVISM

In seeking alternatives to indigenist analysis and its crudely oppositional categories of discourse (locality/globality) and practice (resistance/domination), recent scholarship on 'out-of-the-way' places has turned to a model of "hybridity" (Comaroff 1992, Spyer 1998, Tsing 1993). *In a hybridized space the discursive terrain is layered (Moore 1997), and unfixed. Here, signs and practices are in simultaneous dialogue with exogenous and indigenous discourses—breaking down the distinction between locality and globality. While processes of hybridization might be universal, nowhere do they seem so clearly expressed as in indigenous communities. In fact, it may be that radical hybridity—not radical*

alterity—is the true hallmark of indigenous communities.

But if the terrain in which indigenous women act is powerfully hybridized—which is to say that their actions are in dialogue with multiple discourses—the possibility exists that their practices can simultaneously be strategies of resistance and reproducers of disempowering hegemonies. If so, how can an activist feminism join such projects with any confidence? The effort to reform the indigenist model through a concept of hybridity simplifies neither the descriptive nor the activist aspirations of feminist anthropology. This is a call to develop more subtle analytical tools with which to describe and engage these communities as feminists.

Over the past twenty years feminist anthropologists have made strides towards accommodating the concept of hybridity. In particular, the deconstruction of 'women' as a singular conceptual category (Ortner 1996, Mohanty 1991), and the elucidation of systems of "partial hegemony" (Ortner 1996), have set the stage for further reconciliations. But to understand the implications of hybridity for feminist studies of indigenous women it is essential to reevaluate feminism's commitment to the categories of domination and resistance.

Although many of the most pointed critiques of so-called resistance studies have come from feminist perspectives (Abu-Lughod 1991, Ortner 1994), it seems that feminism—particularly in its activist mode—remains deeply invested in the Manichean logic of resistance and dominance. What is a project of liberation without a clear discourse of oppression and a belief in the possibility of resistance? What are the implications for activism if its engagements also serve undesirable ends? It is clear that indigenous women are troubling figures to a feminist public anthropology, and that the issues they raise be explored.

#### SUGAPA IN 1996: "LIFE IS BETTER NOW"

In July 1996, nearly twenty stores selling imported goods stood along the main path between the market and the government offices

in Sugapa. All were owned by western Indonesian immigrants, primarily Javanese and Sulawesans. One store however, was decidedly smaller than the others. It stood separately, up the hill and adjacent to the Catholic Church. This store was owned by Agnes Belau, the woman in the photo I described. But Agnes was not only a storeowner; she was a founding member of the "Social Women's Group".

The Social Women's Group was based at the Catholic Church and had about ten regular members. Every Wednesday they convened to develop projects that ranged from Church-sponsored events, to training programs, to investment opportunities such as handicrafts or imported goods that could be sold. While Agnes was the only member that owned a store, the other women sold goods at the semi-weekly market.

Besides the mission planes, the only aircraft servicing Sugapa were operated by the government and the mining company. Since air-cargo space was limited, and western Indonesians had privileged access to these planes, the smaller and less-frequent missionary planes were the only option for Moni people. But of the Moni, it was the Social Women's Group—through their association with the Church—that had privileged access to these planes. Thus these women were the only Moni with regular access to imported goods.

Certainly the biggest event in Sugapa was the semi-weekly market, held on Tuesdays and Fridays in the center of town. Most individuals within a five-hour walk would gather on these days—often forming a crowd of more than seven hundred. The market was a bustle of enterprise, with a myriad of produce and handicrafts available for purchase with Indonesian rupiah. The few individuals selling imported goods at the market were members of the Social Women's Group.

Given its centrality in community life, and the specialization of many of its entrepreneurs, I was shocked to learn that the market was barely twenty years old. Apparently it started when the Indonesian government introduced cash exchange and built the covered space beside the

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municipal offices. Before then, I was told, families farmed, gathered and created what they needed for themselves alone. The only system of exchange was bridewealth.

But certainly the most peculiar aspect of the market was its apparent domination by women. Men were rarely involved in transactions—and in particular the act of selling seemed to be women's work. It seemed this peculiar phenomenon had its root in local practices predating the market. According to Moni tradition, only women harvest crops and make handicrafts. Now women could take their produce and crafts directly to the market to sell. While men could demand cash earned by their wives, I found that women could usually keep it from their husbands by spending it immediately on other goods. Savings were more difficult for women to protect, and in fact one of the Social Women's Group's most important functions was as an institution of collective savings—a strategy observed elsewhere in New Guinea (Nash 1984). Ultimately, the majority of cash in the region seemed to move between the hands of women. Men were interested in acquiring cash through employment, but due to the scarcity of jobs in remote Sugapa, this was rarely an option.

But the market was not the only new public forum that women seemed to dominate. The other major event of each week in Sugapa was the Catholic Mass held on Sunday. Much like the market, women greatly outnumbered men at Mass—by a ratio usually exceeding 3 to 1. Most notably missing were *sonowi*, Moni men of the highest status—individuals with multiple wives and large numbers of kigi and pig debtors. But most shocking was the performance of the Mass itself. Under the unobtrusive supervision of a Dutch missionary, the unorthodox ceremony of processions, hymns and sermons was conducted almost entirely by a group of women. These women, among them Agnes Belau, were the members of the Social Women's Group. It seemed the church—both as social performance and as instrument for collective action—was theirs.

CONTINGENCY AND RESISTANCE IN SUGAPA  
While an ethnographic setting yields many of its truths reluctantly, the images of Sugapa's church and market filled with women while men sit on the margins tell a very clear story. An indigent order in which men had controlled the forms of exchange and the discourses of authority was being transformed, and women were key agents of this transformation. Indeed, if one has any respect for the notion of agency—even an agency deeply shaped by discourse (Bourdieu 1978, Ortner 1996)—then any analysis of Sugapa in 1996 must account for these observations as strategic efforts on the part of Moni women.

However, given the extreme hybridity of a community like Sugapa, one can assume that the church and the cash market have effects other than those of strategic advantage to women, and indeed some of these effects might even be disempowering. Without delving into a feminist critique of Catholicism (Daly 1985), it seems likely that the Church could also have disempowering effects for women. In the case of cash exchange the detrimental effects are more obvious. Indeed, what chance do Moni women have of moving from the secondary economy of the market into well-paid positions with the government or the mining company? In 1996, the few positions that did exist for Moni people were all held by Moni men. To understand the strategic actions of Moni women, we must acknowledge and theorize the ways in which the Church and the cash economy also produce hegemonies disempowering to the Moni community as a whole, and to Moni women in particular. Can these strategies still be called resistance?

Since Foucault's radical reconceptualization of power, much work has sought to flesh out the nature of resistance, a project which Foucault (1978) largely deferred. In particular, Scott (1985) showed the subtlety and significance of everyday forms of resistance, while Abu-Lughod (1991) and Ortner (1994) further enriched the theorization of such practices by emphasizing the contexts in which they are enacted, as well as by exposing the "romance" and poor ethnography that characterizes most so-called resistance

studies. Even so, the fact that seemingly resistant acts can also serve forms of domination that are directly subversive to the goals of actors begs one to consider abandoning the category altogether. Most feminist anthropologists have been loath to come to this conclusion and instead seem content, like Ortner (1994), to call resistance “a reasonably useful category” (283). It is clear then, that to salvage the concept of resistance requires analytic tools that can account for the fact that strategic acts often occur in milieus of discursive hybridity.

Herein lies the need for a concept of “contingency”. *Practices that resonate at multiple discursive registers are best understood as contingent. Contingency opens both the possibility of a multiplicity of strategic domains and the reality that actors can have only partial control over the meanings and effects of their most strategic acts.* Nowhere is this more true than in the hybridized terrain of indigenous women.

For Moni women, the hybridities of exogenous and indigenous cut both ways. It is both the source of their opportunities (women traditionally control the crops, hence they can now sell them for cash) and the reason that their most strategic transformations—indeed their project of generating hybridities—is at best a contingent resistance.

#### INDIGENOUS ANTI-INDIGENISM AND THE POSSIBILITIES OF ASSISTED TRANSFORMATION: WHAT MONI WOMEN DEMAND FROM A FEMINIST PUBLIC ANTHROPOLOGY

Ultimately, the demands that indigenous women make of feminist anthropology seem to be the inverse of those made by third world women (Mohanty 1991, Spivak 1989). Indigenous women do not ask feminism to acknowledge, or be superseded by, another axis of difference (e.g. race, class), but instead demand that feminism join them in the transformation of that axis (indigeneity). Indeed, it may be feminism’s special responsibility to emancipate the analysis of indigenous people from the logic of indigenism. In turning this project of emancipation into activism however, feminist anthropology will have to participate in troubling processes of transformation. Indigenous

women, of course, will pursue their strategies regardless of whether feminist anthropology has the stomach to join them.

Such is the case with the Social Women’s Group in Sugapa. These capitalist Christian women are revolutionaries on a number of fronts. They are transforming their own community, and they challenge feminist anthropology to join them. Indeed, their project might best be called *indigenous anti-indigenism*. But it is a mistake to imagine that these transformations are ever total. Even as Moni women promote exogenous discourses for strategic effect, they also draw upon and strengthen indigenous discourses—such as the female ownership of garden products—to do so. In this sense Moni women are seeking to be the authors of their hybrid milieu—though of course these very hybridities are what render their strategic acts forever contingent.

In the end, joining indigenous women in authoring the transformation of their community is the mode of activist engagement for feminist anthropology. But because the only way to evaluate these interventions is through intimate knowledge of a site, the challenge to feminist public anthropology is clear. In a sense, indigenism’s call for attention to particularity must be heeded, but in another way. Instead of seeking to preserve the imagined particularities of an authentic local, it is the dynamic constellations of a hybrid and contingent milieu that feminist anthropology must seek to know and to engage meaningfully.

*Thus Sugapa’s Social Women’s Group stands as a call for a rigorous ethnography that can understand and critically engage the complex strategies of female actors within their hybridizing community—even as these strategies are understood as powerfully contingent.* Such a commitment to subtle knowledge of the field will not erase the self-doubt of feminist anthropology as it assists indigenous women in authoring the transformation of their communities, but it will unite theory and activism in such a way that self-critique does not become paralysis. And indeed, insofar as hybridity and contingency are not phenomena exclusive to indigenous communities, these lessons should inform the activist aspirations of all feminist anthropologists.

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# Editor's Report

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As the current editor of *Voices*, I feel I must apologize to each of you, the members of AFA, for the lateness of this issue. The fault for the lateness of this issue lies entirely with me, and not with any other officer of AFA, nor with anyone else at the AAA. The reasons are personal, rather than anthropological, but let's just say that internationally adopting a 10 year old boy has proven to be like so many of our fieldwork endeavors — a bumpy ride into the great unknown, filled with laughter and tears.

Having made that apology, I must also say that there is something serendipitous to the delay. For if this issue of *Voices* had come out according to the old schedule (May 2001) or even in line with our new schedule (September 2001 — more about that later), we would not have been able to say, in print, anything about the events of September 2001 and the current state of affairs, until September 2002. Given that much of this issue had already been compiled several months before the attacks and subsequent war, we are not going to address these circumstances in article form, but our regular feature, "Voices Looks at the Internet" is devoted to websites about and by Afghan women. What prompted me to include this information is a book for which I just wrote a review. The book, *War's Dirty Secret: Rape, Prostitution, and Other Crimes Against Women*, edited by Anne Llewellyn Barstow, is a powerful anthology that clearly demands that we ask, in any war, "what is happening to the women?" In many ways, this question fits right in with the overall theme of this particular issue of *Voices*: "The Public Face of Feminist Anthropology." Louise Lamphere and Helena Ragoné described the aim of the 2000 AAA Meetings as an attempt to increase "our discipline's ability to shed light on complex issues affecting people's lives both here in the US and abroad," and there is no better time than the present to do just that.

## CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

As I indicated earlier, AFA has decided to move the annual publication date of *Voices* from May to September, in an effort to provide grist for the intellectual and activist mill as we move, each autumn, into preparations for the AAA Meetings. As Sandi Morgen's article describes in this issue, the 2002 issue of *Voices* will have as its central theme the impoverishment of women. If you have articles you would like to submit for review for this upcoming issue, please send them to me by May 2002 at the following address:

Dr. Suzanne Baker  
Dept. of Sociology and Anthropology  
4<sup>th</sup> Floor, Administration Bldg.  
Creighton University  
Omaha, NE 68178

## CALL FOR EDITOR/ASSISTANT EDITOR

I have been the editor of *Voices* for several years now, and it is a job I have thoroughly enjoyed, but now as I move on to other phases in my own journey, it is time for someone else to take *Voices* even further on another journey. If you are interested in directly helping AFA as either the editor or assistant editor of *Voices*, please send a letter of interest to me by the end of March 2002, and I will review and forward the letters to the AFA Board.

THE BOOK, *WAR'S DIRTY SECRET: RAPE, PROSTITUTION, AND OTHER CRIMES AGAINST WOMEN*, EDITED BY ANNE LLEWELLYN BARSTOW, IS A POWERFUL ANTHOLOGY THAT CLEARLY DEMANDS THAT WE ASK, IN ANY WAR, "WHAT IS HAPPENING TO THE WOMEN?" IN MANY WAYS, THIS QUESTION FITS RIGHT IN WITH THE OVERALL THEME OF THIS PARTICULAR ISSUE OF VOICES: "THE PUBLIC FACE OF FEMINIST ANTHROPOLOGY."

BY SUZANNE  
BAKER  
Creighton University

# The Impoverishment of Women

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BY SANDRA  
MORGEN  
Chair of AFA

Over the past three decades feminist anthropology has flourished across the sub-fields of anthropology. Our theories and methodologies are diverse. Our substantive interests range broadly over historical and contemporary aspects of human life and culture and of the relationship of humans to other living things on the planet and beyond. Our epistemologies are critical; our approaches to scholarship are connected with our varied understandings of the realities of women's lives and a collective desire to promote understanding, justice, and/or social change.

The phenomenal growth of feminist scholarship in anthropology makes it difficult to capture, even momentarily, the "state of the field", something that seemed possible in the late 1980s, when I directed a project that ultimately produced *Gender and Anthropology: Critical Reviews for Research and Teaching*, published by the AAA in 1989. However, last November the AFA Board decided that we would choose a theme every two years to focus some of our activities toward the goal of bringing our collective attention to bear on an important issue in women's lives across the world. We plan to promote dialogue about this issue among ourselves and within the AAA and collect and disseminate resources for research and teaching about this issue to our members and the field at large.

It was not hard to choose the theme of the impoverishment of women for our first step in this long-range endeavor. Despite active women's movements across the globe and women's efforts to work within families, communities, workplaces, nations and internationally, the impoverishment of women has increased over the past quarter century as income inequality nationally and globally has widened and neo-liberal economic

arrangements and policies have economically disenfranchised and marginalized many women and their families, especially women of color, women in the South, and women with limited economic and political resources.

I do not have to recount the by-now all too familiar statistics that document, for example, the hunger, violence, economic insecurity, morbidity and mortality, and lack of access to decent health care or safe water, as well as the continuing economic, social and political marginalization that face so many women. However, anthropologists who do research on women, gender, and the complex matrices of domination and exploitation have much to offer in the way of understanding the structural and cultural forces that have promoted the impoverishment of women historically and today. Beginning with our focus on the impoverishment of women, we plan to address particular themes over the course of two-year cycles. We will organize at least one scientific session on the theme each year at the annual meeting of the AAA; develop a bibliography (including books, articles, films and videos, and web resources) that faculty and students can use for their research and in their teaching; and work to bring the perspectives and findings of our research into public policy debates and, more broadly, to various publics nationally and internationally.

You can support our collective efforts in a number of ways:

- Join us in dialogue at AFA sponsored and co-sponsored sessions at the AAA;
- Send us material for our bibliography on the impoverishment of women;
- Promote dialogue about this theme among your colleagues, with your students, through your practice, and within your communities.

This is not an effort that is meant to emanate from the AFA leadership outwards, but to create opportunities for us to work collectively and individually together to strengthen scholarship, and to link research, teaching and political and social engagement.

Some of our specific activities for the year include sponsorship of a session on anthropological perspectives on welfare "reform," and contributing to a Presidential session on poverty. Others in AFA plan to work with colleagues in SANA, AES and other units to 1) bring a resolution about welfare

restructuring to the AAA Board and business meeting and 2) meet with members of Congress during our visit to Washington as a way to bring anthropological insights and research into the upcoming public policy debate about reauthorization of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). We want to highlight important research on the impoverishment of women and share our successful teaching strategies about this topic on our web site. This is just a beginning. How can you be involved? What expertise and energy do you have to share? Join us!

# Activist Anthropology in a Women's Center

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I've been director of a university Women's Center for several years now. It is an odd job for me because by training and deportment I'm an anthropologist. My training and fieldwork were in media anthropology, which combines anthropology with public education. An interest in culture has proven helpful, however, because I seem to be viewing the problem of violence against women on campuses with different "eyes" than those of the student personnel administrators in charge of it.

Someone once defined insanity as "when you do the same thing over and over and expect different results." I realized after some time working at the Women's Center that women who work on the problem of violence against women do so mostly as they always have: by trying to help women be more safe. Typically, Women's Centers have taught self-defense and "mopped up the blood," as my predecessor called it, because that is what is at our door. An unhappy outcome of this triage approach to campus violence is that we never find time (let alone funding and a mandate) to address the causes of violence or even confront perpetrators.

If we break down the issue of violence against women as we deal with it in this situation, we have (1) offenders and offices meant to deal with them - the police and administrators responsible for conduct; (2) victims and offices meant to deal with them - women's center, affirmative action office, clinic and therapists; and (3) higher level administrators and attorneys who oversee policies and procedures for one and two. I don't know how to say it nicely: what I've come to think is that number three reflects the age-old problem of 'foxes guarding the hen house' — not because administrators are "bad" people but for two other reasons. One, they are guardians of the status quo and — although being conservative may keep universities operating — the status quo by definition withholds real power from anyone who doesn't already have it, including women. Two, so-called "women's problems" just are not on the radar screen of central administration. As long as we're invisible and don't spend money, they don't care what we are doing.

For example, in the past seven years I've had one opportunity to meet with university attorneys on

BY SUSAN L. ALLEN,  
PHD

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the topic of policy change. The goal of the two women attorneys seemed to be to inform me our policies work just fine, as in “they meet the letter of the law.” My goal was to tell them the policies do not work for women.

I’m not sure why such bright women do not acknowledge (perceive?) the problems most women face. I used to think Phyllis Schlafly and her ilk were motivated by simple “survival of the fittest” fear. They saw as clearly as feminists that women live their lives in institutionalized economic and physical jeopardy; but instead of reacting with anger they react like threatened mother lions and fight to maintain the status quo because they’ve been taught our present system assures that they have one man and perhaps his brothers to protect them.

The reality that one in every two or three of them experiences violence themselves leads me to believe the real reasons are more complicated and include privilege, socialized self blame and a kind of willed naiveté that looks a lot like denial. In addition, many women do not want to “make matters worse” by complaining or calling attention to themselves, and the myths go on.

Sociologist Torry Dickinson once told me that women (and many other groups) feel *tarnished* by the discrimination they experience. “Women don’t like to admit they face discrimination and male violence,” she said, “because to be non-discriminated against in this society is to be whole.”

At any rate, after an hour of circles and exasperation between me and the attorneys, I asked them to consider the following parallel I learned from a women’s studies colleague. In our society we assume when we park our vehicle in a lot, other folks are supposed to leave it alone unless we give them permission to touch it; we aren’t required to go from person to person saying ‘don’t touch my car’. Same with money. (Same with a penis.) Things we value, that is, the things men value, are presumed to be off limits. Even if a man acts a little irresponsibly and lays his wallet on the bar, we assume that if we touch it without permission we are in violation of laws and ethics.

So why is it different with a woman’s body? Women are taught always to dress in a manner that is attractive but not teasing, not to go for a walk alone at night, etc., and that if we don’t want sex, we’re to “just say no.” In a court of law we have to *prove* we said no — and that we said it forcefully enough to have bruises — if not, the assumption is our body was fair game. Is a woman’s body not as valuable as an automobile?

Until these ‘hang-ups from way back’ about women fade, it will take legal sanction to change behaviors, but this is not insurmountable. For example, although it is still difficult to *prove*, some progressive campus sexual violence policies now are based on *affirmative consent*. If a woman doesn’t say “yes” to being touched, unless she gives permission, anyone who touches her is in violation. Like the car.

There are many other problems stemming from these old ways of thinking that are so endemic on most campuses we don’t even see them. For example:

- Administrators responsible for adjudication of violence complaints, including date rape, are often the same officials responsible for student recruitment and fundraising;
- Most sexual harassment and other abuse-of-power complaints are against males who have power over the victims in the hierarchy. Women have learned over the years that retribution and further harassment are the primary outcome of reporting a problem so most of them don’t. Victims who decide to take the risk of reporting often have to “go around” the perpetrator-supervisor to complain to another official (a real no-no on a university campus). Usually this official has a closer tie to the higher-ranking employee (both usually are male) and cases rarely pass beyond the silent, hand slap level, if that;
- The campus authorities overseeing adjudication of campus crime are attorneys whose job is to protect the university from lawsuits, not seek justice for victims. And, of course, such premises as “due process” and “innocent until proven guilty” protect the alleged offenders;
- Balancing the conflict of interest between advocating for the complainant and

- protecting the university usually falls to women's center or the affirmative action staff and their own supervisors – always a stressful and risky procedure for the lower in rank;
- “Was it on campus?” is the first question administrators ask when informed a student has been victimized because making the university appear unsafe turns gathering the annual crime statistics into an annual worry for recruiters;
  - Wording of federal reporting laws does not necessarily guarantee that *all* crimes are reported. For example, if a rape victim seeks help from a campus health center her case is not counted. If she reports it to a Women's Center, it is counted (that is, if it occurred on *campus* – which does not include surrounding housing where most student rapes occur). Clear protocol for reporting information is now being forced by federal mandate, but it is still dependent on the decision of attending personnel. (Importantly, students tend to think if they've told *any* adult on any staff, their report is legal and official.)
  - Jurisdiction, in general, is a source of constant confusion. There are various geographical designations (campus, city, county), various types of campus citizens (state employees, faculty, administrative staff, students, on-campus contractors), as well as partially independent groups like athletics, Greeks, and student housing. All of these entities maintain differing policies, procedures, and authorities. Confusion over responsibility and accountability make conflicts harder to resolve and easier to become obscured.
  - Most student personnel administrative positions function as “blockers” – to keep problems out of the press and the president's office.
  - There is even misinformation about what rape means and what *counts* as violent behavior. Further, since it is assumed that fathers, brothers, husbands and other nice guys could not possibly be rapists, we pretend women are being preyed upon by strangers, thus totally ignoring the fact that nearly all rapes occur between people who have at some point had a trusting relationship.

In summary, there are so many pulls that keep violence hidden: administrators need the university to appear safe because recruiting keeps a university open; laws protect perpetrators unless they are proven guilty and most violence against women is, at best, difficult to prove. (Even if you prove sex happened how do you prove it was rape if “she says” rape and “he says” consensual sex?); advocates for women and women themselves seek and need confidentiality; and sometimes women won't accept the help they are offered partly because the legal system beyond the university is even more complex and unfriendly to victims. There are many reasons universities do not acknowledge violence and they have not even begun to address the systemic cultural, structural, and functional problems that conspire to keep it silent and, thus, ongoing.

#### BREAKING INTO THIS CYCLE

At some point, while trying to make sense of these things, it dawned on me that if we're going to *get ahead* of the violence we need to stop agreeing only to clean up afterwards. Women rarely act out violently, and men who abuse women do not listen to women who ask them to stop it. Consequently, to break into the cycle we need to focus more of our effort on the offenders – on men and on a culture that blindly, even smugly tolerates the lesser abuses that precede violence (endemic, institutionalized misogyny, harassment, and discrimination).

I don't mean this as criticism of the women's advocates who have come before me. Furthermore, I'm sure my predecessors wanted to 'get ahead of the violence,' too. Unfortunately, the time just wasn't right. Thirty years ago there weren't even emergency shelters for battered women. There was little awareness of discrimination and even less knowledge of what constituted violence. Rape was a *bad date* (for women) and *sewing wild oats* (for men), domestic violence and child abuse were *family matters*, and incest was part of the privilege of ownership. Just naming these things and bringing them into the daylight has been groundbreaking. It has been within the past 30 years that social and cultural attitudes about

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women have evolved even to the point where laws and policies (however inadequate) have been written to guard their rights. And, in offices like mine, where we continue to see victims of violence each and every day, we know our first obligation is to continue helping them.

However, we may be at another turning point in the evolution of our attitudes about violence and about our work. But, if we agree to continue communicating only between women service providers and women victims, we are enabling the system that begot subjugation and violence against women in the first place.

On a university campus, as in the world at large, change doesn't come because it is the "right thing." In a society that continues to benefit financially from discrimination against women, privilege for men, institutional financial and political inequities, abuse of power and even the use of violence to solve its problems, we who are assigned the tasks associated with stopping violence are rarely in positions with enough power to change anything. Certainly we can not do so in systemic ways. Change means sharing power and that is just too threatening to those for whom the status quo works just fine.

#### THE CATCH 22 FOR WOMEN WHO TRY TO HELP

In my position as director of the office overseeing the university's sexual violence policy (and working with those who oversee the harassment and discrimination complaints) I have had a cumulative set of experiences that have made it clear to me that my office helps preserve the system we need to reform. I provide not only the mop but also the smoke screen. Even though we need places like Women's Centers now as much as before, the existence of our offices provides the hierarchy with a semi-legitimate claim to be working on behalf of women while keeping violence a women's issue and preserving the status quo.

In the early 80s a cartoon appeared about the Equal Rights Amendment in which the Founding Fathers are writing the Declaration of Independence and one says, "Look guys, why don't we just say that all men are created

equal...and let the little ladies look out for themselves." Today in 2001, we little ladies can have our women's offices and organizations and even our *issues* as long as we leave the real power firmly in the hands of the male authority figures. This means being quiet, cleaning up the messes, maybe teaching kick-boxing but certainly never insisting, embarrassing, offending or for god's sake *blaming* anyone.

#### THEN HOW CAN WE CHANGE THINGS?

We need a way to break into this entrenched (campus) culture if we are ever going to change the structure of power and therefore the treatment of people. But how? Much has changed so quickly, but not only is "patriarchy" still in place but actual male human beings I personally recognize on sight are still in charge on a day-to-day basis. Consequently, we have the added challenge of changing course in midstream, with bosses, who don't want to change course, still paying our checks and hiring and firing us.

I've come to think our only shot at breaking into this requires a mix of "civil disobedience," taking advantage of help from a growing number of female and male sympathizers in the administrative hierarchy who care about justice, and of "teaching as a subversive activity." Maybe there are many ways this can be accomplished but I'm particularly excited about an idea I don't believe has been tried in a campus setting.

#### TEACHING NONVIOLENCE

Ultimately, the only way to stop the violence in women's lives is for women to have a fair share of real power. We need to address economic and political inequities and we still need to rectify esteem issues that have plagued women from thousands of years of disenfranchisement. But until then or leading up to this, the question I'd like to examine right now is: "Can we begin to change the culture of violence on our college campuses by teaching nonviolence?"

Until we can begin teaching and practicing nonviolence in the "real" world, beginning in kindergarten or before, what better place than a university campus to try an approach that, among other things, has potential to get ahead

of some of the violence and is so positively framed that it can suit even the public relations office? However, even some of my best friends have doubts about trying to practice nonviolence on a campus. "It's "too 60s," it "sounds like Gandhi and King," and "are we going to the president's house in a VW microbus and have sit-ins?" are some of the comments I have received.

In my opinion, the one critical point these people are missing is that Gandhi and King were right. The power and the potential of nonviolence are real (which is why it has not been embraced by the establishment) and those who are serious about ending violence shouldn't be embarrassed to give it a try. The world has yet to make a sincere attempt to contest violence with "nonviolence" as a pragmatic set of tactics and tools as well as a philosophy that is far different from our naive view of it as pacifism or passive-ism.

An obvious advantage this method may have is that it is gender-neutral. It addresses violence against women but it does so in a way that neutralizes the worries those in power have about blaming men or making them change their ways. Both women and men who claim to value fairness and who have peaceful spirits can appreciate nonviolence and work as allies. (And we just agree not to tell them for awhile that our plan will lead to more power sharing with women.) Nonviolence as a theme is timely, as well. The first ten years of the new millennium have been designated the UN Decade for a Culture of Peace and Nonviolence.

### THINK GLOBALLY, ACT LOCALLY, ACT NOW...

When I realized this was the decade of nonviolence and that nonviolence by definition could address campus violence problems, it was an epiphany. Using a nonviolence framework as the rationale for beginning a whole new focus for our work to name and then address violence can succeed if we have the will.

The fact is, everyone wants a safe campus. I think part of the resistance to a campaign such as the one we are planning comes from trying to *underlay* a web-like structure within a hierarchy accustomed to budgeting and controlling by pecking order. A union of regular people assuming control of anything requires new-think. Needless to say, a collusion of cosmic and grassroots forces had to happen between the occurrence of the epiphany and getting the approval to begin, but I take my hat off to them: my university's administration has agreed to initiate a "Campaign for Nonviolence."

It is just getting underway; and with a large and diverse campus-wide (and even community-wide) committee of men and women representing all segments of the university — we're gathering momentum that will be hard to stop. I'm hopeful, for the first time, that we can begin actually to solve some of our violence problems in this new (for a university), proactive, preventative way. The campaign's motto is "Nonviolence Starts With You," but our challenge for every campus citizen is to stand with us and claim the goal by stating, "Nonviolence begins with me."

### AFTERTHOUGHT

I keep thinking about my talk with the bright women attorneys I mentioned earlier in this piece. After explaining the automobile-ownership parallel, I could see that the more conservative of the two had a flash of something closely resembling reality. She stopped, looked right into my eyes, and said, "We can't do that. It would mean.....changing the entire culture!" She might as well have said, 'It would be like making the Mississippi River run north instead of south.'" She'd got it. I looked back into her suddenly open eyes and said, "Yes, that is exactly what we want to do."

Nobody said it will be easy. My conviction though — one that I learned from the holistic perspective of anthropology — is that if we can nudge a critical mass of citizens' perspectives to a high enough hill, changes in behavior may follow like the flow of a river.

# Claims to Knowledge, “Dr. Laura,” and the Contestation for Marriage Rights<sup>1</sup>

BY EVELYN  
BLACKWOOD  
Purdue University

Anthropologists are frequently called to intercede in global human rights cases, where our status as culture “experts” give us legitimacy in speaking out against violence and discrimination. Within the United States our voices are much more muted when it comes to addressing current social ills. At my university journalists have interviewed my colleagues in sociology and psychology on issues such as domestic violence and child abuse. I have been asked to comment on “The Three Stooges, the Movie” and on gift-giving around the holidays, but the local mainstream press has not beaten down my door to get comments on lesbian and gay rights, same-sex marriage, or the Vermont Civil Unions legislation, despite the relevance of my research to those topics.

All anthropologists are affected by journalism’s view of what constitutes news (Allen 1994) and what therefore gets past the gatekeepers. If we are interviewed by the media, it is generally as “experts in the exotic,” commentators on other peoples’ lives rather than on life in our own society (Lollar 1994: 34). As a number of anthropologists have pointed out, our voices are nearly absent in national debates (see Forman 1994). Lesbian/gay/transgendered anthropologists’ efforts to publicly address issues of sexuality or civil rights for lesbians and gay men confront additional problems. Scholarly research on gays, lesbians, and transgendered people in this society or elsewhere often gets framed by religious conservatives as propaganda rather than science. This framing contributes to a climate of suspicion in the media in which our research gets cast as politically motivated, biased or activist rhetoric, not fit for the news. Efforts in several states to pass laws prohibiting the

teaching of “homosexuality” only add to the credibility problem. In the 2000 national election, Oregon voters cast their ballots on the question of whether or not to prohibit any discussion in schools that “encourages, promotes or sanctions homosexuality” (SIECUS 2000). Reflecting on my own experiences working with the same-sex marriage project in Hawaii as well as writing editorials to a local newspaper in Indiana, I examine 1) how these issues are framed in the media and 2) how scholarly claims to knowledge are disputed and devalued. My discussion of “claims to knowledge” is not meant to reify science as disinterested and objective but to argue for the importance of diverse scholarly interpretations in shaping public opinion.

## SAME-SEX MARRIAGE IN HAWAII

In Hawaii judicial efforts to gain the right to have same-sex marriage recognized by the state began in 1991 with a lawsuit filed by three same-sex couples. Because Hawaii is a progressive state with a diverse population, a strong record on civil rights, and a state Constitution that prohibits sex discrimination, it was viewed as the most promising state in which to get same-sex marriage recognized. A grass roots organization formed to support the legal efforts and spearhead educational outreach to the community. I became the coordinator of this group in 1994, just as conservative religious groups started to mount a well-funded effort to stop same-sex marriage.

The print media’s refusal to engage in complex issues and their preference for simplistic or reductionist explanations (Allen 1994), although a common problem for public anthropology, has problematic consequences in

<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this paper was originally presented at the 99th annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, San Francisco, Nov. 16-20, 2000.



the current debates about lesbian and gay rights and same-sex marriages. In Hawaii local media efforts to simplify the same-sex marriage issue led to the construction of two sides: "gay rights" advocates vs. religious conservatives.

Those groups supporting the same-sex marriage effort were a broad coalition of groups, including the American Civil Liberties Union, Japanese-American Citizens League, American Friends Service Committee, Hawaiian sovereignty groups, and religious groups (including Lutherans and Buddhists). Each group addressed the issue from their own perspective, arguing in court and in the newspapers that same-sex marriage should be approved as a matter of civil rights, non-discrimination, acceptance of all people, god's unconditional love, and social justice. Sovereignty groups stated that in a sovereign Hawaii, gays would not be treated any differently than anyone else. Despite the range of public interests these groups represented, their diversity was reduced to one perspective by the media, "gay rights." This term, unfortunately, closely echoed religious conservatives' arguments that lesbians and gay men want "special rights."

For their part, religious conservatives, who make up only a small minority in Hawaii, were constructed as the opposing "side." Media coverage of the same-sex marriage stories inevitably included comments by anti-gay religious spokesmen from the Roman Catholic clergy, Mormon leaders, and Protestant fundamentalist groups. As the issue hit national awareness, local clergy gained supported from well-funded mainland conservative organizations such as the Rutherford Foundation and the Family Research Council, among others.

Religious conservatives attacked same-sex marriage in both the legislature and at public hearings. Using the Christian Bible as their basis, they argued for the naturalness of the nuclear family and heterosexuality. They insisted that the primary purpose of marriage was for procreation, despite the fact that those past childbearing years or those who are infertile

are allowed to marry. Reiterating stereotypes of gays as pedophiles, disease-bearers, and sinners, they insisted on the priority of their Christian perspective over all other views. At the national level, religious conservatives pontificated about impending moral disaster. In a national newspaper, Family Research Council director of cultural studies, Robert Knight, declared that same-sex marriage "is part of the pan-sexual movements' attempt to deconstruct traditional morality in the culture and we take it very seriously" (New York Times 1994). By using "traditional morality" as the buzzword, Knight appealed to an imagined societal consensus on American morality even as he obscured the source of these morals in Christian religion.

The same-sex marriage organization in Hawaii used several strategies to educate the community and raise support for the legal change. In addition to arguing that same-sex couples come under the Equal Protection clause of the state, we aimed to show that ideas about marriage and family are culturally constructed and come in various legitimate forms. We drew on research into Hawaiian culture to show that Hawaiians recognized and valued same-sex relationships. When Captain James Cook arrived in 1778, he found same-sex relationships, called *aikané*, were an acceptable part of island life, especially among the nobility. Transgender *mahu* were important in sacred rituals and hula dances; many hula chants (later suppressed by missionaries) were love songs to same-sex love (San Francisco Bay Times 1994). Hawaiian families were typically extended families of various shapes and composition, not the nuclear male-headed family introduced by colonial missionaries (see Grimshaw 1989) and touted by the conservative religious groups as the "true" form of the family. To counter negative stereotypes about gays, we offered normalized views of lesbians and gay men. One press conference that we organized presented a professional couple, who were lesbians and both MDs, with their three children. The couple talked about the problems they face in both getting recognition as parents and in keeping the family together should one of them die.

As I ended my term with the marriage project,

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FORMS.

they shifted their efforts toward greater lobbying in the legislature rather than grass roots education and outreach. Whether or not this was a good move, the end result was the defeat of same-sex marriage in the legislature four years later. The far better funded religious conservatives and their shrill cries of moral decline had won the day in the court of public opinion.

#### MORAL INDIGNATION AND "DR. LAURA"

In Indiana the media has constructed similar "sides" in their coverage of local activists' efforts to seek protection from discrimination for lesbians and gay men. After I arrived in town in 1994, an old debate resurfaced as conservatives tried to remove sexual orientation from the city's non-discrimination clause. All opposition to that section of the clause came from conservative churches and those claiming the Bible as the source of their opinions. They spoke of god's plan for humankind as evidenced in the creation of Adam and Eve; they claimed that heterosexuality and the nuclear male-headed family were natural and ordained by god. Other forms of sexuality or the family were said to be deviant, against god's will, and unnatural. The response from local gay rights advocates was to build a coalition with progressive religious groups in town to provide an alternative religious viewpoint.

Religious conservatives claimed to hold the moral high ground in this debate. Some explicitly demanded the right as Christians to hold gays and lesbians accountable. One angry woman wrote a letter to the local newspaper arguing that it is a Christian duty to keep gays and lesbians from teaching young children.

"Everyone who is a true, born-again Christian, filled with the Holy Spirit, should take a stand against sin especially when it comes to teaching our children bad examples. We are living in a world where sin is outrageous and wickedness is more so. I, for one, don't want a homosexual or lesbian teaching my teen-ager. And it is my Christian duty to take a stand against these things" (Letter to editor, 7/24/98).

Another woman argued for the importance of

moral values to a healthy society: "A society without a basic agreement that responsible sexual behavior consists of celibacy outside of marriage and fidelity within marriage is a society in decline... living outside the bounds of solid religious teachings and common sense" (Letter to editor, 7/23/98). Like other religious advocates, this woman drew a connection between community morals and Christian morals.

All of these statements of public opinion cry for a strong cultural analysis of society, morality, and family values. My ability to respond as a cultural expert, however, was hampered by the climate in my department. Since I had arrived at the university, I had gotten the message that my lesbian and gay studies research was not considered valid, or good science, by a handful of full professors in my department. With tenure approaching, I kept quiet. In the meantime, anti-gay attitudes in town led to the firing of a gay male social worker and resignation of a closeted lesbian high school teacher who had been targeted for harassment by unknown individuals. Finally, during my tenure year my department head jokingly told my partner to keep me from writing any more editorials to the newspaper. Wasn't it nice that she treated our relationship as a serious one, but then used it as a way to warn me about writing editorials? It was meant to be in my best interest, as such statements usually are. What it really meant was that my editorials would not be seen as service to my university or outreach regarding pertinent social issues but only as activist trouble-making.

I couldn't resist taking on Dr. Laura, however. Her weekly column was published once a week, every week, in the "Behavior" section of the local paper. The popularity of Dr. Laura in the media (both newsprint and radio at that time) validated her claims to knowledge despite the fact that her doctoral degree is in physiology, not psychology (she holds a certificate in marriage and family counseling). Her columns ranged from simplistic to, at times, ludicrous. She was prone to making sweeping statements about parental neglect, sexual promiscuity,

sexual predators, and declining moral standards in America. Dr. Laura was eager to reduce every social problem to good and bad morals, and good and bad scientists.

In a column on sexuality, Dr. Laura took aim at Alfred Kinsey, calling his work “highly dubious research.” It was clear from her column, however, that she had never examined his work for herself; she was merely reiterating other conservative “experts.” In an amazing leap of logic, Schlessinger claimed that “[Kinsey’s] research and many of his original researchers are today behind the push to legitimize adult-child sex, elevate pornography to a subject fit for study at the university level and introduce graphic sexual education and instruction in schools” (2000, C6). In the same column she castigated the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) for their “Religious Declaration on Sexual Morality, Justice and Healing,” which gives support for sexual minorities and same-sex marriage. She called this declaration dangerous and morally unsound. Several days later the newspaper editor published an erratum revealing several errors and misrepresentations in her column. These errors underscored the lack of reliability of Schlessinger’s own opinion. Nevertheless, Schlessinger stands as one of the religious conservatives’ vanguard in delegitimizing scholarly research on studies of sexuality, particularly lesbian and gay studies.

Following the appearance of Schlessinger’s diatribe about sexuality, I wrote a letter to the editor, objecting to the special treatment given to Schlessinger’s columns. I stated that as a cultural anthropologist whose specialty is gender and sexuality, I knew that much of what she writes is extremely biased, inaccurate, and worse, highly inflammatory (Blackwood 2000). I asked that the “Dr. Laura” column be placed on the opinions page with other columnists, thereby ending her special status in the newspaper.

I live in a small town, but the suspicion about scholars like myself is already well entrenched. There were several letters rebutting my statements (and some supportive). One

particular letter writer noted that I “seemed well-educated” but then he immediately associated that education with a “sense of superiority,” casting me with the so-called “cultural elites.” He accused me of name calling because I had used the term “religious fundamentalists.” To my knowledge that is not a derogatory term! The writer attempted to discredit my claims to knowledge by saying, “We are led to believe that because [she] is a cultural anthropologist whose specialty is gender and sexuality that she is an authority on values” [not what I claimed, however]. He continued, “I also have found that one can be extremely biased as to what research they [sic] are engaged in as to how they wish to arrange the so-called facts” (Letter to the editor, 2/26/00). Another letter writer accused me of making vague accusations and claimed that I was not conducting “respectable intellectual practice” (Letter to the editor, 2/19/00). As these letters indicate, I was accused of being a poor scholar with an extreme bias, of arranging the facts to fit my beliefs, and worst, of speaking about something (values) for which I supposedly had no relevant training. All of these accusations attempted to dispute my claims to knowledge.

In addition to being subject to charges of bias and bad science, lesbian and gay scholars face a distinct disadvantage in access to media. In a decade in which biological theories of sexuality rule in the media, most of us do not receive calls about our work or get asked to talk about sexual practices in the United States or other cultures. Certainly no one called me about my recent anthology, *Female Desires* (Blackwood and Wieringa 1999), despite the fact that it has relevance to many of the issues that are hot-button topics today, such as same-sex marriage or changing family forms. I did, however, get e-mail from a concerned “psychologist” in Texas who asked me why I hadn’t included essays on ex-gays in my anthology and then accused me of being biased for excluding them.

#### CONCLUSION

In the U.S. media the credibility of anthropologists who represent or dare to speak for marginalized communities is often questioned (this is equally true for scholars in

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gender studies and ethnic studies). The fact that both our motives and the validity of our research are questioned means that media interest in what we have to say is very limited. We are usually only visible as commentators on sensationalized topics. But anthropological knowledge is important to the formation and development of public opinion. We are able to point out the fallacies in the culture debates and deconstruct some of the rigid oppositions that plague public opinion and the media. We have much to offer national debates concerning forms of the family, gender inequalities, community norms, and sexuality. Despite the difficulties of getting a voice, we need to continue our efforts to move the media and public opinion beyond simplistic biological or social explanations of these issues to a more holistic understanding that provides support for diversity, multi-culturalism, and social justice.

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# Feminist Anthropology and Public Health

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Public health, including women's issues, is an area of social, public and political concern where an anthropological perspective is particularly relevant. A focus on local knowledge and meaning is critical in identifying important health issues, formulating research questions, understanding barriers to addressing these issues, as well as identifying community strengths that could be significant assets in addressing health related problems. Public health and medical anthropology seem to be fields in which I will be able to combine feminist activism with a research interest in women's health and sexuality.

There are many timely women's health issues that have important policy implications both in the United States and internationally, including differential access to screening and treatment, differential access to reproductive health services, morbidity and mortality due to diseases such as cancer or HIV/AIDS, and issues of violence. Locally specific, ethnographic studies can offer important information for understanding the social, economic, and cultural implications of these (and any other) health issues. A feminist ethnography, such as that outlined by Diane Bell, privileges women's experience and knowledge, recognizes women as actors, and critically examines biomedical knowledge on issues of gender, race, class, and sexuality. The dynamic methodology that Bell calls for recognizes the position of the ethnographer / researcher and critically examines hierarchies of power.<sup>1</sup>

Discourse around reproductive rights and women's health has shifted significantly over the past thirty years within the United States and internationally. Recent feminist activism and scholarship has recognized the importance of both the local and the global in understanding women's reproductive health needs. According

to Ginsburg and Rapp, "reproduction simultaneously encompasses the impact of the international community of development agencies and local metaphors of childbirth."<sup>2</sup> One of the contributions of the anthropological method, with its focus on the culturally specific, has been to recognize that even within a specific culture, reproductive knowledge is often contested.<sup>3</sup>

Because it is women who become pregnant, women who physically carry the fetus during pregnancy, and women who give birth, women's bodies are the site of this contested knowledge. Cultural regulation of reproduction has complex and multiple meanings. In the US, legislation or regulation nominally designed to "protect" or improve the health of children in fact acts to regulate or control the actions of pregnant women. Included in this shifting discourse have been both the definition and changing standards of motherhood, as well as the creation of the fetus as a subject and medical patient, separate from the pregnant woman. It is critical that feminist anthropologists and other researchers, with their understanding of how medical knowledge is culturally embedded, contribute to these public discourses.

Ethnographic details about women's experiences with pregnancy and motherhood, including the circumstances under which they decide whether and how to use new reproductive technologies, access to information, as well as cultural background, religious beliefs, and family circumstances are important to this project. These can offer a deeper understanding of the ways in which technology and medicine affect women's experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, and parenting, as well as how women's belief and experience can help shape attitudes and beliefs about these technologies.

BY BETH FILIANO  
Interdisciplinary  
Program in  
Anthropology and  
Public Health,  
Columbia University

THE SCIENTIFIC,  
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The meaning of “reproductive rights” itself is context dependent. The availability and use of reproductive technologies varies greatly, depending on historical, social, political, and economic factors. Additionally, women may have different reproductive health concerns at different times in their lives. For a white middle class woman in the US, reproductive rights may consist of accessible contraception and abortion while a single mother receiving welfare assistance may be required to use Norplant as a contraceptive in order to receive her benefits. In China, family limitation is intricately linked to ideas about modernity, nationalism, and development.<sup>4</sup> In Poland, the Catholic Church was an active supporter of Solidarity under martial law; under a Solidarity-based government, strict anti-abortion legislation was passed.<sup>5</sup> For most women around the world, access to basic medical resources, including prenatal care, is a concern. Ginsburg and Rapp use Colen’s term “stratified reproduction” which describes “the operation of a transnational, highly stratified system of reproduction.” Further, Colen suggests that “physical and social reproductive tasks are accomplished differentially according to the inequalities that are based on hierarchies of class, race, ethnicity, gender, place in a global economy, and migration status and that are structured by social, economic, and political forces.”<sup>6</sup>

Historically, there has been a complex relationship between new technology, scientific knowledge, and women’s reproductive freedom. Structural issues, including race, ethnicity, and class must be taken into account when trying to understand these relationships. Additionally, the interactions between local meanings and national or global forces must also be recognized. The scientific, biomedical approach to reproductive health, pregnancy and childbirth that is dominant in the US often isolates individuals, reinforcing constructions of individual risk and behavior change to improve health outcomes. This is usually at the expense of a broader social analysis, which can be thought of as stratified reproduction. Women’s reproductive choices are relational, embedded in their experiences of other structural supports

and constraints. This concept of stratified reproduction “is a lens through which we can see how representations of pregnancy and parenting, gender relations, socioeconomic futures and collective as well as familial aspirations for the next generation are also being reproduced.”<sup>7</sup>

Ethnographic and theoretical works of recent feminist scholars have pointed to the limitations of the liberal, individualistic concept of “choice” when talking about reproductive rights. In every case, this language of choice fails to take into account the structural constraints or the social and cultural contexts in which women make decisions about their reproduction. In order to transform the reproductive rights movement by working within a rights-based framework, it would be necessary to expand the concept of rights to include structural change that would offer men and women the material resources to enjoy the benefits of those rights.

Given the structural constraints on reproductive choice, individual women’s agency must also be taken into account. Although new reproductive technologies often do have a place in the medicalization, and at times the pathologization, of pregnancy and reproduction, “our analysis must focus on the nexus of power shaping reproduction and not simply on the technologies themselves.”<sup>8</sup> Some of the factors that are important in understanding the place of reproductive technology in women’s lives include the circumstances under which technologies are offered, the populations of women to whom they are offered, the information that is given and not given, as well as the way in which information is presented. In the US, health care has become a commodity; women who have access to care can be seen, in many ways, as consumers of these new technologies. For women who are recessive carriers of fatal genetic disorders, prenatal screening may be seen as a great benefit rather than an oppressive force.

I hope to make the critical examination of categories such as gender, race, class and sexuality, and how these relate to individual agency, structural issues, and hierarchies of power an important part of any research

project in which I participate. Any attempt to address women's health issues must recognize the importance of social, cultural, and economic factors that affect health outcomes. These local meanings must be taken into account at all levels of research, including developing public policy and setting research agendas in women's health. Feminist activism that is informed by such rich, anthropological data about women's experiences, interpretations and decisions will be more powerful and relevant to real women's lives.

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# VoICES

A PUBLICATION OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR FEMINIST ANTHROPOLOGY

American Anthropological Association  
4350 North Fairfax Drive  
Suite 640  
Arlington, VA 22203-1620