

Colloquy



ARCHIVES AT THE MARGINS: Toward a Liberatory Pedagogy in Anthropology

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“To be in the margin,” bell hooks (1984, ix) says, “is to be part of the whole but outside the main body.” Speaking of her experiences living on the edge of a small town in Kentucky, hooks (1984, ix) describes how those in the margin develop “a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both.” This position provided “a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors, that sustained us, aided us in our struggle to transcend poverty and despair, strengthened our sense of self and our solidarity” (hooks 1984, ix). hooks (1989, 20) emphasizes that marginality is not simply “a site of deprivation. . . . [I]t is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance . . . a central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives.”

This essay reflects on the academic margins as a space of openness for anthropological teaching and learning. It builds on hooks’s call for an engaged, “transgressive” pedagogy that challenges traditional structures of learning and opens possibilities for social change (hooks 1994). I describe and reflect on an activity in which students in a medical anthropology course analyzed primary source materi-

als documenting Black health social movements that were curated for the class by a community archive in Los Angeles. I use this example to explore possibilities for reshaping anthropological teaching toward a more liberatory pedagogy that reconceptualizes knowledge as co-created, centers marginalized voices and experiences, and links theory to justice-oriented social action.

ENGAGING ARCHIVES

I teach at the University of California, Irvine (UCI), an institution that, in many ways, does not inhabit the academic margins. The university is a large, public research institution with a thriving anthropology program. Yet many of the university's undergraduate students represent groups historically excluded from the field and from academic spaces more broadly. Both a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) and an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander–Serving Institution (AANAPISI), UCI also sees first-generation college students earn more than half of its bachelor's degrees. The medical anthropology course discussed here enrolls around 250 students each term. Typically, most of these students are first-generation college students, and more than a third are classified by the university as low-income. Nearly half have never taken an anthropology course before.

In 2018, I added a module to the course in which students analyzed a collection of archival materials focused on Black health social movements in southern California. My introduction to thinking about pedagogy through archival engagement came from conversations with my colleague Damien Sojoyner about his work with the Southern California Library (SCL). This library is a community archive in Los Angeles that maintains extensive collections related to histories of social justice movements, including resistance against police abuse, labor exploitation, environmental racism, and health injustice. As [Sojoyner \(2021\)](#) describes, SCL has played a central role in historical and contemporary organizing efforts. The library preserves records of community resistance while also hosting community events and political education classes, as well as serving as a hub and meeting space for organizers.

One of SCL's projects involves curating packets of digitized archival materials for classroom use. As I revised my medical anthropology course, SCL archivists and UCI graduate student researchers worked to identify documents related to community health activism in Southern California. The final packet included a collection of materials focused on the Black Panther Party's 1970s health-related "survival programs" (see [Nelson 2011](#)). These included flyers, newsletters, artwork, and articles from the Party's newspaper, *The Black Panther*, that documented

projects like the People's Free Medical Clinics, the Free Food Program, the Free Breakfast for Children Program, and the Sickle Cell Anemia Screening Program, among others.

Incorporating these materials into my course aligned with several of my goals for it, as well as with a teaching approach rooted in critical pedagogy. The course focuses on the contributions anthropological theories and methods can make in advancing global health equity. Many of the enrolled students intend to pursue careers in health-related fields, and the course challenges individualized and behavioral biomedical understandings of health disparities. Just as my medical anthropology course recognizes that health is fundamentally political, my approach to teaching it recognizes that schooling is also never neutral. I especially draw on the work of Paolo Freire and bell hooks. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1998) argues that conventional education reinforces oppression and limits possibilities for transforming the world. hooks (1994) advances Freire's arguments through the lens of Black feminism, advocating for an "engaged pedagogy" that values students' lives and experiences and is connected to antiracist struggle.

My goals in using the SCL archival materials intersected with three aspects of hooks's engaged pedagogy. First, this approach calls for a reconceptualization of knowledge. In the "banking approach" of conventional pedagogy (Freire 1998), knowledge is viewed as established, disconnected facts or information that instructors deposit into students and that students memorize and regurgitate (hooks 1994, 5). Engaged pedagogy emphasizes that knowledge is co-constructed through mutual engagement. Teaching with archival materials can support inquiry-based learning (Hayden 2017), and the SCL packet supported my efforts to shift this large-enrollment course away from a conventional lecture-plus-exam format and offer opportunities for student-directed learning. Second, engaged pedagogy emphasizes student authority, situating knowledge in students' experiences and lived realities (hooks 1994, 83–84). Our university sits about 40 miles south of the SCL, and the packet's materials relate directly to the communities where many students grew up and continue to live. Third, engaged pedagogy links theory to social action and collective liberation. Class discussions about structural violence and health inequity often leave students feeling overwhelmed and helpless. The SCL packet offers a vision for future action by focusing on Black liberation movements rooted in a radically different approach to health systems.

Students engaged with the SCL packet through several course activities. First, they read Alondra Nelson's (2016) article titled "The *Longue Durée* of Black Lives Matter." Written for a public health audience, the article places the contemporary

Movement for Black Lives in a historical context that includes the healing practices of enslaved Africans, anti-lynching campaigns, and the Black Panther Party's health activism and survival programs. Using a collective annotation platform (Perusall), students added comments and questions to the article and discussed it together. Next, I developed a series of reflective questions to guide students' examination of the materials. Questions adapted from the National Archives' pedagogical resources introduced archival analysis ([National Archives n.d.](#)). Another question asked students to read a short article about the graphic artist Emory Douglas, the Black Panther Party's Minister of Culture ([Haddad 2018](#)), and examine one of his pieces in detail. Other questions asked students to connect the materials to concepts we had discussed earlier in the class (structural violence, for example, or illness metaphors in contested meanings of sickle cell anemia) or to consider how lessons from the Party's efforts might inform current health movements.

ARCHIVES AT THE MARGINS

Teaching with the SCL packet highlighted the parallels between critical archival practice and critical pedagogy. Both demand a re-examination of the power dynamics involved in knowledge construction. In a preface to the course packet, [SCL \(2018\)](#) archivists describe their methodology for analysis and collection building:

Committed to a process that is framed around a radically democratic exchange of ideas and information, SCL gives primacy to the multiplicity of truths. In this vein, we push for an analysis that is situated in the reality of the neighborhoods that give life to SCL. . . . Seeking first and prioritizing the thoughts, voices, and creations of the most vulnerable is an approach to research that reveals complex structures of conquest and violence as well as the visionary critiques and strategies of resistance that compose people's struggles.

This methodology recognizes archives' central role in making certain histories and perspectives legible while excluding and erasing others, particularly those of minoritized, oppressed, and poor communities. [Sojoyner \(2021\)](#) examines SCL as a site of "fugitive archival practice" that directly contests state-sanctioned knowledge production. This practice "positions communal knowledge at the center of solutions for lived experiences and works toward the elimination of violence and malicious forms of state governance." In this way, "fugitive archival practice is an

active, ongoing praxis that informs the possibility of multiple ways of being” (Sojoyner 2021, 660).

Jarrett Drake (2019) makes the parallels between engaged pedagogy and critical archival practice clear. Invoking Freire, he likens the hierarchies of teaching in the banking model of education to the hierarchies of knowledge creation in archives and argues for an “archive of the oppressed.” Like a pedagogy of the oppressed, an archive of the oppressed “requires rethinking and reimagining all dynamics of the archival process alongside oppressed people, positioning our collections materials for their usage in a way that aids them in coming into complete consciousness about the contours of their oppressors” (Drake 2019, 278).

RESISTANCE AND POSSIBILITY IN ANTHROPOLOGY PEDAGOGY

Teaching and learning with an archive of the oppressed opened possibilities for an anthropology pedagogy that supports a more democratic exchange of ideas within the classroom, is situated in students’ lived realities, and affirms a commitment to liberation. As they read Nelson’s (2016) article and examined the SCL materials, many students expressed surprise at the history they saw. Wendy Hayden (2017) notes that archival assignments often trouble public memory, and students commented that the materials challenged what they had been told about the Black Panther Party, which they had seen portrayed as singularly violent and dangerous. The packet introduced perspectives excluded from their previous learning and opened an opportunity to discuss that learning itself, as students recognized their exposure to a “state-sanctioned disinformation campaign” (Nelson 2016, 1735).

Students drew on their own knowledge to challenge this disinformation. In their annotations, student-initiated discussions connected Nelson’s arguments and the Party’s work to other examples of institutional power and oppression. Nelson, for example, discusses Fannie Lou Hammer’s description of the “Mississippi appendectomy,” the sterilization of poor Black women without their knowledge or consent. Students linked this example to forced sterilization in California and to ongoing reproductive injustice more broadly. They exchanged information about the *Madrigal vs. Quilligan* lawsuit challenging the sterilization of Latina women in Los Angeles, about medical experimentation with birth control conducted on women in Puerto Rico, and about contemporary Black maternal mortality. Other student dialogue connected the Black Panther Party’s activism to ongoing segregation, racial profiling, and police violence, and to the systems of racial capitalism that lie behind them.

Many students drew on their lived experiences for these conversations, identifying the oppressive effects of policing and government interventions they had witnessed in poor, Black, and/or Latinx neighborhoods. Some students expressed pride that the Party had been active in their hometowns, but they also felt frustrated and angry about ongoing injustice. They shared their dismay at having to fight many of the same battles the Party fought fifty years before, and others fought long before that. It was “disheartening,” one student said, to explore this history and see the ongoing mistreatment of Black people.

But students also felt inspired by the possibilities for long-term and collective action that the Party exemplified. “This goes to prove . . . that change CAN happen,” one student said. Another identified many of the Party’s achievements in its “long lasting effects . . . on Black empowerment groups today” and on a younger generation of activists. Various students described it as “amazing” and “empowering” to see oppressed communities work together to address issues that affect them. In a comment echoed by fellow students, one student explained that they often felt small against the crisis of health inequity and wondered whether their actions could make any difference. But after seeing the impact of an organization like the Black Panther Party, they knew that change was possible with broad participation. In an informal journaling assignment near the end of the class, I asked students to identify specific actions they can take to support health equity. Many students had shifted their responses from an individual perspective to a collective one, identifying organizations and activist groups they were or planned to become involved with.

CONCLUSION

Teaching with the SCL archival materials opened new possibilities for an engaged, liberatory pedagogy. But the activity also presented challenges. When I first assigned the SCL materials in 2018, I underestimated the time the class would need to engage with them, and our conversations felt rushed. I allotted more time when I assigned them again in the winter term 2020, but these plans were interrupted by the university’s rapid shift to remote operations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In both quarters, many students struggled with the assignments, particularly with analyzing the primary materials. As [hooks \(1994\)](#) points out, students are often accustomed to highly regulated, instructor-controlled classrooms, and even those who long for liberatory education may find themselves resisting. In many ways, students were unprepared to co-produce knowledge. Many had never considered knowledge to be actively produced, and they were uncom-

fortable with an assignment that had no pre-formed, “correct” answers. In the future, I would expand the time we spend with the archival materials and, as [Hayden \(2017\)](#) suggests, develop opportunities for students to participate in dialogue outside the classroom, either through contributing to scholarly conversations or by presenting their work to a larger public. Such activities can engage students in archival work themselves, helping them understand the archive as more than a repository and think through the politics of memory and knowledge.

Additional questions arise in collaborations between classrooms and community archives. What constitutes ethical engagement with fugitive archives for instructors and students who are not from the communities they represent? [Drake \(2019, 278\)](#) emphasizes that both pedagogies and archives of the oppressed involve grappling with interlocking systems of oppression and require “constant self-reflection by all actors of the ways in which the oppressor manifests itself within each of us.” How might instructors and students navigate traumatic or triggering content they encounter in these archives? Rather than disconnecting from such emotional experiences, [Bianca Williams \(2016, 81\)](#) points to the power of “radical honesty” to open space for instructors and students to “bring [their] full humanity to the classroom.” Such an approach mobilizes vulnerability and mutually constructed trust to turn truth-telling into action. Through these and related practices of engaged pedagogy, teaching and learning with students at the academic margins reveals multiple possibilities for re(writing) anthropology’s relationships with oppressed communities and commitments to future liberation.

ABSTRACT

This essay reflects on the academic margins as a space of openness for anthropological teaching and learning. I describe an activity in which students in a medical anthropology course analyzed primary source materials documenting Black health social movements that were curated for the class by a community archive in Los Angeles. Using this example, I explore possibilities for reshaping anthropological teaching toward an engaged, liberatory pedagogy that reconceptualizes knowledge as co-created, centers marginalized voices and experiences, and links theory to justice-oriented social action. [critical pedagogy; archives; health activism; knowledge construction]

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