



## TOWARD A FUGITIVE ANTHROPOLOGY: Gender, Race, and Violence in the Field

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The field in anthropology is *the* milieu for knowledge production. It is a physical place as well as an epistemological space of investigation shaped by histories of European and U.S. imperialism and colonialism. Fieldwork has been referred to as the “basic constituting experience, not only for anthropological knowledge but of anthropologists themselves” (Moser 2007, 243). The givenness of fieldwork as an individualistic rite of passage often obscures its constitutive and interlocking racial and gender hierarchies and inequities. These inequities structure the epistemic and ontological violence that undergird fieldwork. We write this essay as black, brown, indigenous, mestiza, and/or queer cisgender women

trained in the United States in the tradition of decolonial and activist anthropological praxis (Gordon 2007; Hale 2001, 2008; Speed 2008a, 2008b), whose research centers on marginalized, disenfranchised, and oppressed communities in the global South. Occupying gendered-as-female bodies, which were interpellated in racialized and sexualized ways, punctuated a process of embodied pedagogy during our fieldwork experiences. Our experiences with racialized gender and sexual violence compelled us to question the pervasiveness of dominant logics within activist research in relationship to our own fieldwork in El Salvador, Cuba, Palestine, Mexico, and Guyana.<sup>1</sup> Collectively we imagine alternative pathways toward a decolonial research praxis that advances a critical feminist ethos. This ethos is defined by its flight from an intellectual garrison, in which the idealized radical subject within leftist struggles figures as a martyr for the movement. This self-sacrificing subject coincides with the institutionalized notion of fieldwork as a masculinist rite of passage or an exercise of one's endurance. We call for a praxis of what we term *fugitive anthropology*,<sup>2</sup> a rethinking of the contours of the political in co-creating spaces of liberation and transformation. Activist research that does not pursue epistemological decolonization will, we argue, inevitably reproduce the very hierarchies of power that it seeks to help dismantle.

In this article, we foreground how racialized-sexualized-gendered violence is encountered, reproduced, and analyzed by women researchers.<sup>3</sup> We are interested in deconstructing performances of gender neutrality in representations of fieldwork, which abet a particular form of professionalism within the academy's patriarchal culture. While other scholars have written about the gendered dimensions of fieldwork (Golde 1970; Wolf 1996; Bell, Caplan, and Karim 1993; Kulick and Willson 1995), they have done so primarily in the absence of a race analysis. We refuse the emblematic racially privileged male anthropologist and the aforementioned assumptive logics of *doing* ethnographic fieldwork, both of which undergird the discipline's implicit masculinist "shut up and take it" mentality in reference to gendered violence in the field. In the spirit of furthering the movement to decolonize anthropology, our project is "not just [to] expose the lie but to find other ways of telling the truth" (Visweswaran 2011, 78). For that purpose, we borrow from feminist researchers (e.g., Speed 2008a, Rivera Cusicanqui 2012; Tuhiwai-Smith 2012; Craven and Davis 2013) to center the embodied experiences of black, brown, and indigenous (queer) women in grappling with the inherent contradictions of politically engaged research.

**all the women. in me. are tired.**<sup>4</sup>

Feminist interventions have debunked the dominant value ascribed to objectivity since the poststructuralist turn. Yet experiences of violence against women researchers continue to be dismissed, class privilege goes unquestioned, and the colonial effects of U.S. academic endeavors garner little consideration (Clancy et al. 2014). Numerous accounts of women's experiences with gender and sexual violence in the field (see C. Mahmood 2008; Winkler and Hanke 1995) point to the extra affective, physical, and intellectual labor required to reassert our legitimacy as researchers (Bell, Caplan, and Karim 1993; Wolf 1996). While we frame our analysis in relation to our training as activist anthropologists and theorize from our situated positionalities, the lack of representation of embodied experiences in many ethnographic accounts is not limited to politically engaged research methods. These silences are linked, in part, to the persistence of patriarchy, its accompanying culture of male bravado, and attendant notions of meritocracy that shape the discipline as a whole. We argue that the specificity that stems from our navigation of the field as black, brown, indigenous, and queer cisgender women provides pedagogically important insights into the practice of fieldwork and the conceptualization of a decolonized anthropology.

Paradoxically, while activist research narrates experiences of violence enacted upon racialized, gendered (queer) bodies, the complexities of those same bodies doing anthropology have tended to be erased. Thus, our critique is twofold: we reaffirm the important work of activist anthropology's critiques of sectors of the discipline that remain positivist, presume a putative objectivity, and efface questions of race, gender, and class in the research process. These sectors assert a neutral stance that, in fact, replicates colonial and extractivist forms of knowledge production. At the same time, we critically examine how dominant strands of activist anthropology replicate that which they critique, by silencing the racialized, gendered researcher's embodied experience or by inscribing it in new colonial narratives. These strands assume that rapport or intimacy with those with whom we are aligned necessarily results in more horizontal relations.<sup>5</sup> Patriarchal power dynamics within the collectivities we work alongside operate on our bodies in disciplining ways. Yet the notion of engaging in fieldwork is often approached by activist anthropologists in a gender-neutral way, one that still assumes an unencumbered male subject with racial privilege, to whom the field means a space far from home that can be easily entered and exited.

A common response used to silence these discussions is the notion that our relative privilege as academics mitigates the gender violence we encounter in the field and, that by raising the critique, we are setting ourselves apart from the experiences of women in “the community” writ large. We acknowledge how our relative privilege, as women who have completed graduate studies in U.S. institutions, could distance us from the unforeseen consequences of our engagements in the field after we finish our research and leave. We hold this acknowledgment in tension with the consideration that we are not merely conducting research, but are connected to the places where we work through familial ties, diasporic relationships, and investments in political struggles, all of which hold us accountable even after our departure. Our relationship to our research thus subverts the assumption that the field inhabits an/Other time-space, as well as the masculinist notion that the time-space of the Other is to be instrumentally penetrated and evacuated. Our entrances and exits do not hinge on geographical border crossings. In a sense, the field travels with and within our bodies.

In this essay, we point to the ways in which activist research methodologies have been complicit with the dominant logics of traditional research methods, including notions of fieldwork as a masculinist rite of passage. Being marked as racialized women inevitably shaped our research projects and the lines of inquiry we pursued during fieldwork. By engaging with our complex positionalities, our critical examination of activist methods builds on feminist ethnography to envision avenues for social transformation while recentering our physical, mental, and spiritual bodies in our methodological and epistemological toolkits. Our experiences call up the following questions: How do our gendered racial positionalities inflect the research process, and how can we push activist research methods to be accountable to the embodied aspects of conducting research in conflict zones, colonial contexts, and/or conditions of gendered and racialized terror? How can we produce feminist ethnography through activist research in a context of subordination and violence against women? Finally, how does our involvement in patriarchal relationships, as marked but relatively privileged women, affect local dynamics, the knowledge we produce, and our methodologies? In the following sections, each one of us shares an ethnographic vignette from our individual field sites to engage these questions, and then we collectively develop a more general framework for alternative pathways toward a politically engaged research we term *fugitive anthropology*.

### UNSPOKEN CHALLENGES: Political Alliance, Gender Expectations, Survival

In August 2011, I returned to my home country, El Salvador, to share the findings of my 2011 master's thesis with ex-army and ex-Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) guerrillas, whose postwar practices of coexistence I had studied—practices I called “grassroots peacemaking.” In those conversations and in the company of gang members, Diego, an ex-guerrilla, told me that some veterans had been informally mentoring their relatives, youth in gangs, in support of a gang-led peace effort. They suggested I include this intergenerational peacemaking practice in my doctoral research.

Nine months later, on March 14, 2012, *El Faro*, a respected online newspaper, reported that the rival Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio 18 gangs had negotiated a national gang truce in exchange for government funds, portraying them in the article as “criminal organizations” (Martínez et al. 2012). Days later, gang leadership published a memo emphasizing their desire to “contribute to the pacification of the country” even as they critiqued researchers who sought to understand their activities, noting: “To those who make a living from doing analysis . . . as long as you continue to analyze us like a criminal phenomenon your analysis will be wrong, as will your recommendations to solve it” (see Lemus and Martínez 2012). After the 1992 Chapultepec Peace Accords ended twelve years of civil war, El Salvador became one of the world's most violent countries. The state attributed this violence to youth gangs and, since 2003, has implemented punitive measures to end this violence, without success. Yet the gangs' 2012 truce reduced the national homicide rate from fourteen killings per day to five in the first months. Against this backdrop, one of my research questions became: why did those generally understood as perpetrators of violence represent themselves as peacemakers in postwar El Salvador?

To answer this question, I deployed activist research methods (Gordon 2007; Hale 2001, 2008; Speed 2008b), which call for researchers to establish political alliances with historically marginalized and organized groups of people engaged in struggle. They also call for research design, data collection, analysis, and dissemination of findings to be conducted collaboratively with research participants. At my prospectus defense, one committee member posed the methodological question: “How will you conduct politically engaged research in a context where men were both peacemakers and purveyors of violence?” I answered that most alliances are built upon strategic agreements where power dynamics exist, and that youth gangs are often themselves targets of state violence.

I hoped that the interest expressed by war veterans, gang members' peacemaking efforts, and my use of activist research methods would begin to address these complexities.

Having grown up in El Salvador, I was familiar with the country's dominant gender norms. Salvadoran society socializes women and men to believe that domestic roles, such as childrearing, housekeeping, and serving men, are women's tasks, and that men should provide for and protect the family and assume roles of authority. In my prior work with veterans, I observed that a few ex-guerrillas practiced selected principles of the leftist New Man ideology—which included gender equality—that had been part of FMLN guerrillas' understandings of solidarity.<sup>6</sup> Some of these ex-guerrillas encouraged women to hold leadership roles, volunteering to care for children while women took on leadership tasks. Others invited their friends, including army veterans, to practice more egalitarian gender relations. However, these advances did not seek to transform the structures that sustain patriarchy. They exemplified what [R. W. Connell \(2005, 79\)](#) calls "complicit masculinity," whereby men still benefit from the dividends of a patriarchal society without putting themselves on "the front line . . . of patriarchy." Though I often challenged veterans' patriarchal attitudes—at least in one on one conversations—during fieldwork, I never confronted them in front of other veterans nor publicly. Patriarchal gender norms structured the physical and verbal space I occupied. I entered the field thinking about strategies to develop shared objectives and political affinities with research participants. While ready to pursue the project of activist research, I underestimated what would emerge as a key methodological contradiction.

In August 2013, I returned to El Salvador to conduct my doctoral research. I met with Diego, an ex-guerrilla, and Roberto, an ex-army captain, at a Mister Donut fast-food joint in San Salvador. At their suggestion, we had planned to discuss their informal mentoring of relatives in youth gangs who were supporting the gang truce. After an hour, Diego's nephew, Beto, and his friend, Manuel, joined the meeting, both of them Mara Salvatrucha gang members for some twenty years. I described to Beto and Manuel the study I had conducted with veterans on their postwar practices of grassroots peacemaking. I noted my use of activist research methods, emphasizing their call for dialogue and political alignment. Then I asked, "Would similar research be of use to your peace efforts?" "Yes," they each replied. When I inquired about next steps for conducting participant-observation, Diego joked, "You come with the gringo method, wanting to plan everything." As everyone laughed, armed security guards who had taken

notice of Manuel's gang tattoos surrounded us. We ended the meeting to avoid confrontation. I felt a sense of accomplishment that these civil war veterans and gang members had agreed to participate in the study, yet I remained uncertain as to how I would actually conduct the research.

Weeks later, Manuel called. "I can help you in whatever you need," he said. I thanked him. Having a longtime gang member offer to support my research was significant. Due to confrontations among youth gangs and between youth gangs and the state, gang members tend not to talk to outsiders and keep a tight lid on who gains access to gang-controlled territories. However, the involvement of war veterans, my use of activist research methods, and gang members' own interest in a study about their peace efforts made Manuel's Mara Salvatrucha *clica* (group) enthusiastic about the research. It opened a path for dialogue and exploration of a potential political alliance through the research itself. Once I was positioned as an ally, gang members had honest conversations with me about their family lives, the state violence they faced, and their desires for a better future. To impress me as a young woman, they shared stories about outfoxing the police, but they also had patriarchal gender expectations. Months later, a gang member told me he wanted a romantic relationship with me. The clear implication was that romantic involvement would become a prerequisite for continuing my fieldwork, a cost I was not willing to pay. My longstanding academic relationship with the veterans and my activist research approach gave me access to study youth gangs' peacemaking efforts. However, the very strength of activist research methodology, in its calls for horizontal dialogue and political alliance, made my gendered sexualized body vulnerable to gender violence.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike ex-guerrillas, youth gangs' opposition to the government's punitive measures is not part of a movement to transform social relations. Instead, in a postwar context where patriarchy structures gender and political relations, youth in gangs use their identification with, and practices of, dominant masculinity to gain respectability (Gordon 1997; Connell 2005). For them, domination through violence or the threat of violence is a valid mechanism to demonstrate strength, compete, and resolve conflicts with the state and the rest of the population. Throughout our interactions, gang member research participants viewed me as a politically engaged researcher and middle-class Salvadoran woman affiliated with a U.S. university who enjoyed the privileges that my social-economic-political positionality granted. But ultimately, I was subordinated to them due to my gender.

My embodiment of activist research methods revealed the ways that multiple forms of oppression and power relations operated between a mestiza Salvadoran woman researcher and male research participants. For these men, there was no contradiction between participating in politically engaged research and the imposition of patriarchal gender expectations. Women researchers can be accepted as political allies, but this alliance does not entail horizontal dialogues within the framework of gender equality. This hypermasculine social context highlighted a shortcoming of activist research: attentiveness to the ways that multiple inequities (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality) affect research participants has not been accompanied by a serious discussion of how these participants can reproduce those power relations with racially marked women researchers.

Instead of retreating from this hypermasculine domain, I changed my approach for doing collaborative research. With other feminist scholars, I consider the analysis of patriarchal effects on women's and men's lives to be important. However, such an analytic must also take into account how intersecting oppressions target some women and men while privileging others, as Black feminist intersectional theory indicates (Collins and Bilge 2016; Crenshaw 1991). Any politically engaged research, I argue, should incorporate a discussion of gendered power relations within the collaborative research process. Though this is not a sure solution for mitigating the vulnerabilities of racialized women, my hope is that it will encourage researchers to envision strategies to grapple with gendered power relations in the field.

### WHEN HELP ISN'T ON THE WAY, OR BLACK WOMEN'S FIELDWORK

Humiliated and emotionally raw after my sexual assault by the brother of the boarding house owner in Havana, I sought guidance from the staff at the Cuban academic institution in charge of my placement. After listening intently and quietly, the staff member asked if I had done anything to bring on the incident. The institute had never received any complaints from foreign researchers who had stayed in that house before, he explained. "Was he white?" the staff member asked next. When I replied yes, he readily acknowledged that the assault was most likely racially motivated. As an Afro-Cuban man himself, he empathized with me but reminded me of the stakes of making such a serious criminal accusation. Pressing charges could put the family out of business or worse. And so, like many other women who know that help isn't on the way if we scream, I kept quiet. I learned to lock the door to my bedroom behind me.

My closest confidant, a working-class elder Afro-Cuban woman, expressed indignation that my foreigner status didn't grant me immunity from such a violation: "I keep telling you that you have to speak in English all the time, my daughter, so that people know that they can't do that [*Ya te lo dije, que debes de hablar en inglés todo el tiempo, mi'ja, para que sepa la gente que no es así*]". In other words, this woman thought that my assault was a result of my misrecognition as a Cuban national, with the assumption that I should not be treated like the average Cuban black woman, who is presumed licentious. In Cuba, the sanctity of white womanhood extends to *yuma* (foreign) personhood because of the way in which the national economy depends on the tourist as a vessel through which capital enters the nation.<sup>8</sup> In my case, the presumed innocence attributed to *yumas* was undermined within the libidinal structure of the *casa particular*, or boarding house, where there was a well-established demarcation between socially white (presumed innocent) and socially nonwhite (presumed guilty) people. I was the only black guest in a house whose clientele consisted primarily of socially white middle-aged men from Europe, the United States, and other parts of Latin America. The only other black people present in this house were the maids, who served both the foreign clients and the family who owned the *casa particular*, and the visiting sex workers or *novias* (girlfriends) of the guests. Thus black women's labor was socially marked as menial or dishonorable, even as it was vital for the business operations of the house. As fungible bodies in a competitive labor market, the black women in the house were dependent on socially white actors whose desires demarcated the terms of virtue and propriety.

As I confided in different people about the incident, their reactions revealed that my experience existed within a shared logic about blackness as a flesh that attracts sexual violence to itself. Their replies would begin with a sigh of resignation: "You already know [*Ya tú sabes*] . . ." followed by a long, weighted pause, signaling the commonplace nature of what was not said. More specifically, their responses reified a logic that black women's bodies are naturally prone to sexual advances, particularly in spaces where tourist commerce and white domesticity converge. Furthermore, the protection of private business interests was paramount. They all seemed to agree that, regardless of how modestly I dressed or how *educada* (proper) I behaved, the actions of the so-called man of the house were not, in and of themselves, out of order. The supposed naturalness of my white Cuban attacker's behavior granted him impunity, leaving the onus on me to take responsibility for the consequences of having a black female body. Perhaps my sexual assault was a physical corrective to my contradictory social positionality,

a response to my structural ambiguity as a foreigner with a native-looking body and with native-sounding Spanish fluency. In other words, one could interpret my sexual assault as an intimate disciplinary act fueled by the unsanctioned degree of relative power I held as an Afro-Cuban-American. As a U.S. citizen and with the privileges associated with that designation, my presence upset the otherwise stable distribution of power in the white domestic sphere. Accordingly, the man of the house was libidinally compelled to re-establish an asymmetrical equilibrium by toppling me over onto the bed, reasserting white patriarchal dominance over my flesh. The coercive force of U.S. Empire should have come to my rescue, the logic went, spurring the Cuban nation-state to protect its coveted consumer. However, given the naturalized rapeability of black flesh throughout the Americas, it was my status as a foreign academic that was out of order.

The legacy of Black women's historical relationship with field labor and sexual accessibility, as a result of chattel slavery in the Americas, bears upon our relationship to the proverbial field in ways that are taken for granted within activist research training structured around a gender-neutral researcher working with "the [gender-neutral] community." In reflecting on the unavoidably embodied aspects of conducting fieldwork in postcolonial contexts, then, I summon Dána-Ain Davis's (pers. comm.) description of the fieldwork experience as "flesh eating":

Because our research depends on intimacies . . . I wonder if as black feminist practitioners we engage in ways that makes entry points for external forces/ ideas/virus/people easier to enter us. . . . Cultural capital can be understood as flesh and therefore we are always in danger.

The colonial code of racialized gender hierarchy can overwrite any black woman's claims to rights, because her flesh is to be eaten. For black women anthropologists, having social capital is a dangerous liability. [Andrea Queeley \(2015\)](#) has researched how, historically, in Cuba, social mobility for black people triggers rather than mitigates white backlash. I join with Davis and Queeley to argue that my very claims to relative privilege in the field were undercut by targeted exercises of power on my flesh. Despite being a middle-class U.S. citizen, the kind of labor that was attributed to my body—as durable, accessible, and expendable—overrode my class status at critical moments. Black women's relationship to the field is, I argue, predicated on an ongoing struggle for recognition as sovereign humans, as well as scholars capable of producing valuable alternative understandings of social realities.

How do black feminist anthropologists who work in underdeveloped countries define redress for racialized-gendered injuries against our bodies? What would it mean if redressing my assault was a prerogative granted to me solely on the basis of U.S. imperial entitlement or on the basis of protecting the flow of capital? What satisfaction would criminal punishment achieve if it put this Cuban family out of business or tarnished my institutional relationships in my field site? Would the Cuban institution renew its sponsorship of my residency if I attracted negative attention? The kinds of political compromises and physical dangers we encounter while doing fieldwork are inextricably tied to how racialized and gendered bodies are differentially situated within intersecting structures of oppression. Bargaining for one's full humanity while charting an investigative course that privileges a political commitment to the lives we encounter on the ground means becoming skilled in applying multiple methods simultaneously: namely, a participant-observation that invites our interlocutors to feel at ease even as we negotiate the fact that their ease may be contingent upon our subjugation as sexual objects.

The kinds of (micro)aggressions we experience due to our contradictory racial-class-sex-citizenship positions do not vanish when we return home. Being a black woman got me assaulted and, in this case, my internalized ideas about being an activist anthropologist kept me quiet about it. I maintained my silence out of fear that talking about my assault would potentially overshadow the research or cause harm to its perpetrator. Activist anthropologists are expected to engage in lone acts of bravery in order to shed light on the struggles of others with less relative privilege. I had also internalized the idea that black women cannot afford to draw any more attention to our already hypervisible bodies. These two sets of controlling images—licentious black womanhood and noble servant researcher—unexpectedly converged, rendering me unable to seek redress for my violation. In other words, internalized scripts defining what it means to be a black woman and an activist anthropologist undercut my ability to disentangle myself from the very controlling affective structures that black feminism interrogates.

The embodied knowledge I gained through fieldwork has since compelled me to re-envision a politically engaged anthropology that is compatible with black feminist teachings during both stages of ethnographic research: while working in the field (praxis) and while representing that experience (product). Black women's structural positionality within postcolonial modernity prescribes a particular raced and sexed relation to our sites of investigation, aptly referred to as "the field." The ways in which fieldwork is described in the discipline of anthropology as a uniform, given rite of passage obscures the extraordinary tactics and

strategies that we, as black women, must develop to ensure our dignity while we work to answer our research questions. The rigor it takes to keep our bodies whole while becoming anthropologists is too often illegible in the colonial, patriarchal space of the academy.

### **INTIMACIES OF TERROR: Centering the Body as the Ground of Thought**

It is just after midnight. I am awakened by the sound of chanting. Distant at first, it rhythmically builds its way from a gentle hum into a thunderous uproar that passes just below my second story window. It takes a few moments for me to shake the sleep off and discern the crowd's refrain: "*Mavet al Aravim.*" The throng of people beneath my window repeats this phrase over and over again. I rise and cautiously peel back the curtain, just enough to see that the group of Jewish Israelis—fifty or so, most of them young men and boys, some armed with weapons slung over a shoulder, others holding up an Israeli flag—has now taken up post in the street below. They have done so in the middle of the night in a conscious effort to terrorize the Palestinian enclave that is encircled by Jewish settlements in Jerusalem's Old City. I try and block out the sound of their voices by shutting all of the windows, despite the stifling late summer heat. I place a pillow over my head to drown out their chanting, which is interspersed with bouts of boisterous laughter and whistles. After a while, the crowd disperses. There is no more chanting. Still, the muffled phrase, now seared into my mind repeats itself time and time again: *Mavet al Aravim*. Death to Arabs.

I drift back into a restless sleep, with this phrase and the voices of the crowd still in my mind. I am awakened, some hours later, not by daybreak but by the shadow of a figure in my bedroom—I know, instinctively, that he is a settler from the nearby Jewish Quarter—making his way closer and closer to my bedside until finally, he is stabbing me and my unborn baby as he screams out into the darkness: "Mavet al Aravim!" Clutching my swollen belly and breathing heavily, a cold sweat pouring out of my skin, I am relieved to discover it was only a bad dream, that my baby and I are safe. Still, I rise from bed and peer out the window—the streets are empty now. Nonetheless, I double-check the locks on the door.

In the Israeli settler-colonial imagination, each Palestinian child is a potential terrorist and women, as reproducers of Palestinians, are envisioned as a central component of an impending demographic threat (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2016). In my field site, occupied East Jerusalem, the Israeli state thus has a vested interest

in controlling women's movements and surveilling their bodies and sexualities, motivated by what Palestinian feminist scholar [Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian \(2015, 1199\)](#) calls "a biopolitical project of preventing Palestinian birth." By centering the testimonies of pregnant and birthing women, Shalhoub-Kevorkian reveals how Israeli settler-colonial power and militarism invades women's space, time, and physical and emotional selves, penetrating even the most invisibilized of spaces: women's dreams. As twenty-four-year-old Lama recounts:

My pregnancy was filled with severe anxieties, fear, and depression . . . always constrained. . . . I was thinking about each and every act, always trapped . . . to the degree [that I was] dreaming about being tied with wires . . . you know the wires the Jews put on the checkpoints, those filled with edgy ends [barbed wire] . . . that was my dream . . . being tied with wires around my face . . . even inside my body, preventing my lungs and heart from working. . . . The night before I had my baby—I had him four weeks prematurely [. . .] I closed my eyes to rest . . . and [then came thoughts of the barbed wire] . . . the inability to breathe . . . and so much anxiety . . . then I started feeling pain. . . . I called the doctors, and my husband, and they ordered the ambulance for me. At the checkpoint they questioned my pain . . . do you think they count us as humans? To question my pain, when I am wet . . . all wet . . . and they can see it . . . my water broke, the baby is drying up. . . . They just look at us . . . they have stopped [thinking of] us as humans . . . we are all imprisoned. ([Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2015, 1201](#))

Lama's words call on us to examine not only the visible aspects of state terror, but also the mundane and everyday exercise of settler-colonial power. For terror is not merely found in the hypervisible attacks on Palestinian bodies, lives, and land—in the constant military presence that defines life under Israeli occupation, the assaults on Palestinian spaces and bodies, and the disposable nature of Palestinian life in the settler colony. Terror also creeps into the most intimate realms of everyday life, invading the home, relationships between families, and the bodies and psyches of Palestinian natives: indeed, even the space of the colonized's dreams.

While my own nightmare has subsided, the nightmare of colonial occupation does not evaporate, an occupation vested in the surveillance and violation of native bodies and lands. As a first-generation Palestinian American anthropologist, the lived reality of Israeli racial terror is not an abstract concept to learn about from

my so-called informants in the field, but an affective force that comes to shape the social bonds of the Palestinian communities about which I care and am a part, one that is viscerally experienced in my own body and psyche. For I know well that those settlers calling for “death to Arabs” are not calling for the annihilation of some abstract Arab peoples—no, they are calling for my people’s annihilation, for my annihilation. For the death of the baby that grows in my womb.

While women-of-color feminisms have long carved out spaces for consideration of the racialized female body, the disembodied nature of much anthropological discourse—even in its most politically engaged manifestations—often obscures the lived reality of the researcher herself, who navigates regimes of racial and sexual terror. How might centering these corporeal realities as a form of embodied pedagogy, making the material body the “ground of thought” (Anzaldúa 2015, 5) in our praxis of activist research, change the kinds of questions that we pose, the methods that we pursue, and the scholarship that we produce?

It is, in fact, these affective embodied experiences (see S. Mahmood 2005) as racialized subjects that can provide the very material groundwork for identifying what Charles Hale (2001, 14) calls our “deepest ethical-political convictions,” which often “drive the formulation of our research objectives.” While activist research has traditionally privileged masculine domains of the political—aligning oneself with a formal organization, political party, or ideology more broadly—the mentorship of Palestinian feminists, stories of women and children in occupied territory, and my own embodied experiences pushed me time and again to examine the intimate, often elusive sites in which power is reproduced and contested. Understanding these sites often required a different methodological approach to activist research: one that relied on informal networks of women; one that attuned itself to the hushed whispers of those living under a regime of colonial surveillance where even the walls have ears and where everyday friendship and care among women were the invisible groundwork for more visible political struggles. Working through these avenues also showed me the ways in which colonial violence strengthens and enables the reproduction of patriarchal control and violence, highlighting that women’s bodily safety and sexuality must be at the forefront of struggles for liberation.

The intimacy with which terror invades our minds and bodies also poses a challenge to the idea of the researcher who is inherently privileged in relation to her field site or collaborators. Our gendered interpolation into racial structures in the sites where we work operates within a global “racial contract” (see Mills 1997) that follows the researcher wherever she travels. The global nature of white

supremacy affirms race as a fundamental, if adaptable structural logic that constantly produces and legitimates racial hierarchy and power (Jung, Costa Vargas, and Bonilla-Silva 2011). At the same time, these shared experiences of the embodiment of terror and its wounding effects bind us together across time and space in intimate, womb-like connection with those with whom we work, making us available to each other as ethical-political subjects who can choose to sustain reality (Abbas 2014, 514) or to re-birth life in spaces of social death.

**“COLLABORATION IS LIKE A COURTSHIP”: Embodying the Paradoxes of Engaged Research**

The road leading to this community in the mountains of southeast Mexico is full of turns; many of the edges of these curves have been lost to the oblivion of the adjacent chasms. I had come to meet with the leaders of a Maya organization that has been in open resistance to the colonial state’s neoliberal project, struggling for their political autonomy for more than two decades. Members of this pacifist indigenous organization were the targets of a bloody display of state violence in the 1990s, in which mostly women and children were killed. That morning I was submitting the results of an initial phase of collaborative work. After several months of fieldwork, I was still awaiting the organization’s decision regarding an expanded proposal for collaborative research, the results of which could be used as evidence to support their ongoing struggle for truth and justice in international legal arenas.

When I was finally called to enter the office where we were meeting—a single room with no windows—they asked me to sit on a stool placed several feet away from a long table, at which ten male leaders were seated. “It’s great that you came here today because we wanted to talk with you,” said the organization’s president. He informed me that they had recently discussed my proposal with other units of the organization and had decided that they could not allow the expanded collaborative research to go forward, “at least for the moment.” The president, a man in his late thirties with a strong command of Spanish, explained: “You know, collaboration is like a courtship [*la colaboración es como un noviazgo*]. We are just beginning to know you. Boyfriends and girlfriends do not get engaged or get married immediately after meeting each other. It is important to know each other well. It is important to *woo* each other,” he explained.

The sense of caution and distrust that his words conveyed was not what took me by surprise, especially in the context of the ongoing war of attrition in the region and the banning of academic research within other indigenous organi-

zations. What disconcerted me was his flirtatious tone and the polysemy of the courtship metaphor in these specific circumstances. The murmuring and concealed laughter of the other male leaders in the room made me feel extremely uncomfortable. All of a sudden, I became hyperconscious about my body, singled out in the middle of the dark room, away from the vigilant eyes of the women working in the kitchen. While the courtship metaphor is commonly used in the region, the way in which this organization publicly talks about collaboration is in terms of brotherhood (*hermandad*), not courtship. Was it precisely the male-centered idea of brotherhood that made this kind of ambiguous exchange possible? Would the president have chosen to use the courtship metaphor with me if I had not been a mestiza? My uncertainty regarding these speculations made me question my forms of privilege and weigh them in relation to my vulnerabilities, leading me to realize that the collaboration I was pursuing with this politically dissident organization was paradoxically subjecting me to the violence of its patriarchal norms. The more I tried to clarify with the leaders what the idea of wooing meant for them, the more I began to relive previous fieldwork encounters in which uninvited flirtatious remarks preceded other forms of harassment.

Entrenched patriarchy limits women's forms of socialization and defines access to the places we can inhabit as researchers. A female researcher's interest in the perspectives of men is constantly misrecognized as romantic desire. In an attempt to create respectful boundaries, the interviews we hold often reproduce the hierarchy of an all-knowing man lecturing a woman who is presumed naive and expected to listen. The act of listening to our interlocutors in the field as women belies a gendered assumption of passivity; as activist anthropologists, we are supposed to subvert that form and make receptivity the basis of an intersubjective construction of meaning. Therefore, the intimacy created through rapport is one of our greatest achievements just as it is, paradoxically, one of our deepest vulnerabilities as women.

After leaving the office, I decided not to dwell on the gendered connotations of this episode. I was familiar with this kind of interactions, having grown up in a culture of machismo in Mexico City and having learned as a lawyer that suppressing my own rage was key to survival in a male-centered profession. In the end, nobody was obligating me to do this research and I was conscious that my privilege as a middle-class mestiza, *chilanga*,<sup>9</sup> affiliated with a U.S. university made my collaborative efforts seem contradictory and even untrustworthy to my interlocutors. While I eventually managed to arrange for further collaboration with this organization and made a point to highlight women's continued experiences

of violence, it was a difficult process given that even my alliances with women in the organization were controlled by male leaders.

Moments of crisis during fieldwork led me and other indigenous and mestiza women to share our accounts of gender violence. I realized that the obstacles I had faced were directly linked to a particular racialization and gendering of my body, the product of local masculinist expectations based on the legacies of colonialism and collaboration's unequal exchange. Precisely because of these colonial legacies, access for *Kaxlanes* (nonindigenous people) often comes at a price. In the case of women-identified researchers, there is an unspoken assumption that access to traditionally male spaces must be paid with male access to our bodies, whether on physical, emotional, or discursive planes. So even as my "feeling-thinking" (see Méndez Torres et al. 2013) is what weaves my alliances together with the struggles I am invested in, in the field it is my body that has often been seen as instrumental for those alliances to materialize. Sometimes it has functioned as a human shield for more vulnerable populations, while at other times it has been expected to serve as a resource to be shared, a fact that visibilizes the logics of collaborative exchange within male-centered struggles.

Academia has censored accounts of gender violence at the hands of suboppressors (see Spivak 1988) in the name of a kind of advocacy that can only exist under patriarchy's patronage. Meanwhile, survivors of sexual violence know well that publicly sharing their experiences may revictimize them, especially when others take control of their narratives. Therefore, many of these accounts circulate among women in the form of traumatic secrets that we carry deep in our bodies. Internalized forms of oppression make us complicit with this violence, insisting that we believe we did something to provoke its outcomes. In the case of women-identified researchers, we feel that these incidents reveal our shortcomings as activist anthropologists. These secrets shame us. It is partly our incomplete understanding of the complexities around these unspoken truths that drives us to maintain our silence. When we realize that the possibility of collaboration can ultimately rely on these gendered silences, it is then that we need to re-envision our alliances and reorient our paths.

In the process of sharing my vulnerabilities with other women, deep sororal connections were formed, backed with a political commitment to help each other. Along one of the winding roads leading to the mountain community, I crossed paths with women who had fruitlessly pushed to get the massacre perpetrated against this organization during the 1990s recognized as a feminicide. They invited me to participate in a campaign against feminicidal violence, and the grassroots

work we did granted me a deeper understanding of the internal contradictions within the indigenous organization as well as the politics of solidarity surrounding it. I realized how much I had naturalized several forms of microaggressions, especially while doing research on more atrocious expressions of violence like massacres and forced displacements. As the *Mujeres Mayas Kaqla* (2010) have noted, ignoring these microviolences allows us to think that slaughters and femicides are the exception when in fact they are part of a continuum, structured by colonial forms of oppression and expressed in quotidian forms of violence to which women tend to be the most vulnerable.

Discussing this violence continuum with the male leaders of the indigenous organization was extremely complex. This was not only due to my position as an outsider mestiza, but also to the fact that the Mexican state has attributed the massacre to intercommunitarian violence, while simultaneously using indigenous women's bodies to repress the struggle for indigenous autonomy. However, it is not only state officials, but also the suboppressors who construct women's bodies as battlefields for preserving the patriarchal constitution of their social worlds. A similar situation occurs with female researchers' bodies: it is the white heteropatriarchal norms of academia that shape what becomes visible, discussable, and publishable about us, as key battlefields for truth in our discipline.

As the experience of women survivors within the indigenous organization taught me, speaking up is not always the best path for healing when patriarchal oppression is what compels us to share our accounts of sexual violence to promote awareness. One of the main challenges we face as feminist activist anthropologists is not only finding productive ways of speaking and writing about gendered violence in the field and its intricate connections with the violence we face at home, but also creating safe social spaces to do so and to heal without giving right-wing opportunists more leverage to suppress revolutionary resistance.

### **ON BEING ABLE: (Re)assembling Praxis in the Field**

"If she had just been up front and honest with me, I wouldn't have a problem with it," the elder sighed, wiping sweat from his brow. "If she had just told me she liked women, I would have been fine." Silently, I stared back with a careful, blank expression, replaying his words to try and understand what had signaled this swift, yet crucial turn in the conversation. We were meeting to discuss my research on the relationship between indigenous land struggles and gender violence within the context of neoliberal development in Guyana.<sup>10</sup> Discussing the logistics of travel within the nation's interior, he juxtaposed the region to the

ostensibly secure, ordered, and technologically advanced coastal capital, invoking the colonial imaginary of the interior landscape as lawless “bush,” an indigenous space in dire need of an anticipated development.

Recounting his experiences with a white female researcher in the past, the elder relayed with dismay how she “chain smoked and did not eat meat” and failed to disclose her sexuality. Despite his support of local queer organizations, his tone belied thinly veiled tolerance of her presumably transgressive femininity (read: against hegemonic white femininity), taboo sexuality, and behavior, as well as an implicit assertion that the establishment of trust necessitated full disclosure. He advised me to adhere to local custom by partaking in traditional alcoholic drinks, *piwari* and *casiri*, as this formed an integral part of socializing, during which people tended to discuss topics they might not otherwise broach. With a terse nod he said, “You would make it, since you have Amerindian heritage. The [other] girl, she wasn’t able.” This was one of the primary reasons he had accompanied this researcher throughout her fieldwork, an offer that was notably not extended to me. Unsettled, I wondered if he believed that she had “made it” under his heteropatriarchal guidance (and presumed safety). Because of my Amerindian heritage, I would have to endure. Unlike hers, my body and its presumed durability and elasticity, transmuted by blood, was “able.” As a cisgender queer black and indigenous woman, establishing trust would demand an intimacy concomitant with bodily precarity. In a context of gendered racialized state violence and pervasive heteropatriarchal rhetoric against “anti-man” (a local pejorative term indiscriminately leveled against cisgender queer men, as well as transgender and gender nonconforming persons), my body thus constituted, informed, and shaped my methodology.

I had lived in my village site for several months before it happened. I initially focused on building rapport with elders in order to collect oral histories about the riverine community composed of several Amerindian nations. Farmers who had migrated to the region in what is infamously known as the “gold bush gateway” had pursued the promise of renewed economic livelihoods. Subsequent generations were thrust into extractive industries like mining and logging, often as exploited laborers. While visiting part of the village with members of my host family, we unexpectedly ran into a well-known elder who had enthusiastically shared Carib oral stories with me on several occasions. After conferring or *gyaff-ing*<sup>11</sup> for an hour or so, we decided to tow his boat behind ours to ensure that he reached home safely, as he had been drinking. The water refracted the intensity of the sun’s descent; pink, coral, and yellow swathed the sky, effervescent against

stark white clouds. Squinting against the glare, I chuckled, unperturbed, with the others at his mumbling inquiries about where *his* researcher was. Soon, we arrived at our house. While I waited with the elder for the boatman's return, the others left to start the generator. Anxious that the elder's uneven steps from his boat to the adjacent one might throw him overboard, I squatted at the edge of the dock to steady it with a firm hold. His sudden grip on my wrist, fingers digging into my skin, barely registered before it darted between my legs. When I jerked back, he used my body as leverage to haul himself onto the dock. My mind separated from my body. I thought his invasive touch might be a fumbling blunder induced by stupor or imbalance until he began to mumble: "How much? \$10,000, \$15,000 . . ." And then, incredulously, "\$20,000? [US\$50, \$75, and \$100, respectively]." I pushed back against wandering, probing hands that sought more than flesh, as his tight voice admonished me: "Like you getting mad, researcher." In an attempt to mirror back to him what I saw as the loss of his integrity, I reminded him of his role as an elder, his accountability and obligations to his family and community. He quieted, his grip momentarily relaxing before tightening again. As though a film was passing over his eyes, he chose to see *his* researcher as property, as violable flesh.

After several weeks, I filed a report with a trusted member of the village policing group. This man acknowledged the prevalence of sexual violence and abuse against Amerindian women in both hinterland and coastal communities and the deeply embedded naturalization of and apathy toward substantive solutions to such violence. Then, with chagrin, he outlined the potential repercussions of reporting my assault, pointing to my skin while rubbing his similarly dark skin: "You shine like me." As a mixed-black Amerindian outsider, my story might be met with hostility or outright disbelief. Seeking redress through the policing group—ostensibly more grassroots than the state's police and thus equitable and just—might in fact extend the violence I experienced. My dark flesh, indeed my blackness, rendered me suspect, culpable in my own sexual assault. On the one hand, the elder's reference to me as "my researcher" seemed to suggest that I had succeeded in gaining the trust of the community. On the other, it revealed the conditional price that racialized women researchers must pay when entering spaces still perceived as the purview of men. "Like you getting mad" attested to the elder's incredulousness at my belief that I could navigate this space without a price. Entangled with racialized sexualized assumptions of my bodily worth-value as (pre)disposed for gratuitous violence, his statement attempted to discipline me into accepting those costs without protest. A pervasive and insidious

assumption surrounding fieldwork is that you put (read: insert) your body in a place or space where violence can be enacted upon you and thereby assume accountability for any potential violence that might occur. In order to grasp fieldwork as anthropological labor, the story goes, our bodies—mental, physical, and spiritual—must experience the milieu of doubt, alienation, tears, and frustration so as to return altered. Only by getting lost do we find our anthropological selves. Indeed, women-identified researchers are implicitly and explicitly told to expect sexual/gender violence as a risk that comes with the territory of fieldwork (and, by extension, the territory of everyday life), one that maps onto the racialized, sexualized territories of our bodies as property. Not only is the expectation of violence normalized, reinscribed, and dismissed, but women are expected to suffer in silence as stoic, durable, expendable, and rapeable bodies—we are “able.” This dissonance manifested itself in a sense of misalignment between my objectives as an activist researcher and an inherent need for redress. I knew that part of my paralysis stemmed from a void of spirit.

M. Jacqui Alexander’s (2005, 261) eloquent writing on embodied spiritual praxis as a source of knowledge gestures toward a “theory of the flesh,” one that resides within, but is not circumscribed by, one’s bodily experiences. A reorientation of the theory-praxis frame that refuses the mind-body-spirit division, what Alexander (2005, 329) calls “pedagogies of the sacred” are teachings known only through unknowing, unlearning, and surrendering to the realization that the methodologies we have (whether positivist or activist) inevitably approach a limit. Fundamentally, they are located and partial, as “there are Sacred means through which we come to be at home in the body that supersede its positioning in materiality” (Alexander 2005, 329). Embodied spiritual praxis is never complete, for Alexander, because it constitutes an ongoing “dance of balance” and demands challenge, not merely because we must confront the “cultural dissonance in daily living that can undermine the evolution of character, but also because the spiritual is lived in the same locale in which hierarchies are socially invented and maintained” (Alexander 2005, 310). Even as the spiritual as embodied praxis offers me redress for each of my selves—both physical and spiritual—it must also contend with the everyday forces that seek to dismember, categorize, and alienate. These realities form the terrain that we collectively navigate with others to construct spaces for imagining liberation and other pathways of freedom—even in the midst of internalized hierarchies and violences. Through listening to my body—as well as metaphysical and spiritual bodies—I learned that surrender never equates with retreat or loss, and not knowing does not mean fewer pos-

sibilities for envisioning forms of relationality not confined to the methodological and epistemological parameters we have come to accept as our horizon. Creating with fellow colleagues and friends who are also engaged in and committed to the “dance of balance” forms an intimate sacred space for reciprocal vulnerability and the openness to construct networks of support and affirmation.

### TOWARD A FUGITIVE ANTHROPOLOGY

The ethnographic vignettes we have shared depict differentially situated locations within global structures of power; to engage them within the same analytical frame therefore entails a commitment to the project of transnational feminist solidarity, one that deserves further discussion. By collectively voicing our experiences with gender and sexual violence in the field, we highlight assumptive logics within activist anthropology that, we contend, do not escape the hegemony of heteropatriarchal power that plagues positivist methods. When preparing for fieldwork activist anthropologists are required to be meticulous about how we will safeguard the rights and well-being of those with whom we work, while advancing collaborative processes of knowledge production. Yet our differentially marked physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being remains largely absent from discussion, a silence implying that such concerns fall outside the politics of research. This implication, we argue, reproduces the discipline’s legacy of white heteropatriarchy. The ethnographic scenes we have shared are not worst-case scenarios but rather point to the naturalization of how patriarchy operates as a continuum of violence that undergirds the field. Thus, activist anthropology must deconstruct the performance of gender neutrality in preparing students for fieldwork, encouraging intersectionality as both analytic and embodied praxis.

Centering the body in the stakes of activist research advances the path toward the project of decolonizing anthropology. We envision a critical feminist activist anthropology that holds us politically accountable to our interlocutors as well as to our own embodied reality, as part of the same liberatory struggle, albeit differentially located along the continuum of black and indigenous liberation. As feminist activist-scholars before us have insisted, oppressions and inequalities “at home” are inseparable from those “out there.” Although expanding the numbers of women of color faculty might influence cultures of training, the mere physical presence of women does not guarantee a critical feminist ethos, since women scholars are also socialized to reproduce and perform patriarchal norms.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, women of color in the academy are asked to expend ever more affective labor to work against patriarchal structures by providing emotional support to

students (Navarro, Williams, and Ahmad 2013). Our colleagues, both women and men, must share the responsibility of centering queer, trans, and feminist epistemologies in their teaching and advising practices. Heteropatriarchy is a structural force not reducible to the body, in which people of all gendered identities (un)consciously invest. Far from holding the hands of women of color, queer, and gender-nonconforming researchers, we advocate a critical feminist ethos and politics at the most formative stage in the development of anthropologists. The tools needed to survive in the field cannot necessarily be found within traditional feminist anthropological approaches that hinge on uniformly horizontalizing the power of the researcher in the communities where she works. Instead, our training must entail grounded discussions of the particular challenges nonmale, non-white, nonhetero, and noncisgender bodies face in order to be better prepared as researchers.

To call for increased visibility of the particular struggles that anthropologists endure in the field as racially marked/gendered/sexualized bodies is, necessarily, to call for accountability from our colleagues who practice activist research. If we are invested in the project of decolonizing anthropology, we must encourage this critical feminist ethos in everyday interactions throughout the process of becoming anthropologists. In addition to bringing embodiment to the practice of activist anthropology, we must continue to search for new ways to incorporate forms of praxis that come from outside the academy. Spirituality offers one pathway to reimagine our methodological tools while providing affective redress; grounding politically engaged anthropology in black and indigenous feminist teachings at the level of both ethnographic process and product offers yet another. In each of our cases, working with decentralized, diffuse feminist political networks as well as more localized feminist organizations strengthened our politics of fugitivity and allowed us to devise alternative strategies that honored our embodied experiences. These pathways emerged through the practice of collaboration with other women in the field, through which we were able to cultivate bonds of caring that extend beyond our bodies (of work). In these nurturing bonds and praxis we identify the core of a feminist ethos, whose continuation in the academy is politically vital and spiritually necessary. Acknowledging our embodied experiences grounds us to research and write from places of positioned truth. Drawing on Donna Haraway's notion of positioned objectivity as the basis for activist research, Charles Hale (2008, 11–12) has urged that such a project can only take place through this critical acknowledgement. And, since the field travels within our bodies, a new language is also needed to articulate these analytical possibilities.

Decolonization is indeed a project worth fighting for. Recognizing how patriarchy is folded into the methods of activist anthropology and calling for the dismantling of such violence is, after all, a call for the end of the world. While working in pairs as researchers, for example, or forming emotional support networks may partially counter the dangers of lone fieldwork, reformist solutions mute the structural antagonisms we highlight. We recognize, in doing so, a central contradiction: our collective analysis shows blood, yet seeks, in some ways, protection. Our continued investment in the project of decolonizing anthropology suggests that justice, in some sense, exists. Our written words betray our screams, which are neither audible nor appropriate in the academy. Confronting violence not just as individual survivors, but as knowledge producers enhances our collective struggle. Yet at the same time, we realize that these provocations may damage our careers in the academy and our relationships to local struggles that we have worked to cultivate. How, then, can we imagine a way of doing activist research that does not reproduce violence against ourselves, as racialized, sexualized, women anthropologists speaking from places of intimate connection with those with whom we align our work?

This question and others like it haunt us, yet simultaneously propel us, not toward prescriptive solutions but toward a future that is indiscernible. Recognizing its inherent contradictions, yet refusing a duality that understands spaces outside the academy as more privileged sites of social change, we call for a *fugitive anthropology*. A fugitive anthropology is an anthropology that, grounded in black feminist analysis and praxis and inspired by indigenous decolonial thinking, centers an embodied feminist analytics while working within the contested space of the academy. A fugitive anthropology engages those “demonic grounds” (McKittrick 2006) or alternative geographies of the spiritual and ineffable. A fugitive anthropology is one through which we, as feminist activist-scholars, seek to contribute to radical collectives and to build liberatory spaces of feminist ethos as sites of *marronage* (James 2013). Rather than solely grapple within masculinist projects of the political (the party, or the nation-state) that push women’s agency, our bodies, and our sexualities to the margins of revolutionary change, fugitive anthropology directs attention to undervalued local feminist praxis. A fugitive anthropology thus cannot be tethered to preordained courses or predictable paths; it moves forward with an understanding that the path to reach spaces unknown is necessarily unpredictable (Vimalassery 2016). The outline of this fugitive anthropology is, in essence, one that seeks to advance a decolonized discipline, yet at the same time takes flight from that contested space we claim as our intellectual home.

**ABSTRACT**

*In this essay, we point to the ways in which activist research methodologies have been complicit with the dominant logics of traditional research methods, including notions of fieldwork as a masculinist rite of passage. Paradoxically, while activist research narrates the experiences of violence enacted on racialized, gendered (queer and gender-nonconforming) bodies, the complexities of doing anthropology with those same bodies have tended to be erased in the politics of the research. Thus, our analysis is twofold: we reaffirm activist anthropology's critiques against the putatively objective character of the discipline, which effaces questions of race, gender, and class in the research process and asserts a neutral stance that replicates colonial and extractivist forms of knowledge production. At the same time, we critically examine how activist research replicates that which it critiques by not addressing the racialized, gendered researcher's embodied experience and by presuming that rapport or intimacy with those with whom we are aligned necessarily results in more horizontal power relations. Drawing on fieldwork in El Salvador, Cuba, Palestine, Mexico, and Guyana, we examine how our gendered racial positionalities inflect the research process and consider how we can push activist methods to be accountable to the embodied aspects of conducting research in conflict zones, colonial contexts, and/or conditions of gendered and racialized terror. Ultimately, we call for a fugitive anthropology, a methodological praxis that centers an embodied feminist ethos, advancing the path toward decolonizing anthropology. [activist research; fieldwork; gender and sexual violence; violence against women; embodiment; decolonial epistemologies]*

**NOTES**

*Acknowledgments* We dedicate this article to the women with and alongside whom we have worked for their continuous support. The birth of this article stems from a feminist collective that the authors formed while graduate students at the University of Texas at Austin, in order to establish a support network for each other while in the field and during the dissertation writing process. While listed in alphabetical order for the sake of the publishing process, this article was a truly collaborative process at every stage, where each author participated as an equal contributor. Its completion would not have been possible without the unrelenting encouragement, guidance, and critical feedback of Charles R. Hale, Edmund T. Gordon, Dána-Ain Davis, and Shannon Speed. Joy James, Aída Hernández, Kamala Visweswaran, and Bianca Williams also gave important feedback that sharpened the analysis, guiding our future analytical directions. We presented an earlier version at the 2016 Abriendo Brecha Activist Scholarship Conference, with the support of the Social Justice Institute at the University of Texas at Austin. The intergenerational and international network of scholars that coalesced during the conference to engage with the core ideas of the piece continue to fuel and inspire us. The preliminary ideas that formed the basis of the article were first presented at the 2015 New Directions in Anthropology Graduate Student Conference in the Department of Anthropology at University of Texas at Austin. We thank the student organizers of those conferences and our ever-dedicated and passionate colleagues from the Diaspora and Activist Tracks in the Department of Anthropology, who are in but not of the academy. Although these programs have ceased to exist within the department as they once did, their struggles continue. We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the editors of *Cultural Anthropology*, particularly Cymene Howe, for their thoughtful attention to the manuscript and for pushing us to clarify key ideas and concepts. The article unmistakably benefited from this care and commitment. For anyone else who was influential throughout the writing process,

but who we have failed to mention by name here, please know that we are not any less appreciative. Any errors are our own. Finally, at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in 2016, we organized a panel chaired by Dana-Ain Davis and with Cheryl Rodriguez as discussant, at which point we called for others to join us as we expand our project. We encourage other scholars, researchers, and activists who would like to engage further to contact us.

1. In invoking *activist research*, we refer to a general framework of politically engaged, feminist, decolonial anthropology, which is associated with the Austin School Manifesto (Gordon 2007): a methodological approach to studying the African diaspora that has been employed by researchers affiliated with the Activist Anthropology Track in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Texas at Austin. Activist research praxis has been developed and debated in Gordon 1991; James and Gordon 2008; Hale 2001, 2006, 2008; and Speed 2008a, 2008b.
2. Other scholars have theorized the necessary flight from the academic institution for radical intervention (James and Gordon 2008).
3. We use the term *women* specifically to highlight hegemonic constructions of gender as binary, while also considering transgender women and gender-nonconforming persons. Violence also occurs against men (transgender and cisgender), yet we recognize the disproportionate patriarchal violence enacted against cis and trans women.
4. We borrow this formulation from Waheed 2014.
5. We recognize and have been in dialogue with other decolonial politically engaged methodologies, such as action, coparticipatory, and collaborative research. See Hernández Castillo 2016 for a feminist discussion of these genealogies.
6. The FMLN political party, as opposed to the FMLN guerrilla movement from which the party was born, made gender equality an official part of its ideological mission.
7. We understand *gender violence* to include nonphysical forms of actions, such as threats and harassment.
8. *Yumas*, or foreigners in Cuban slang, belong to what L. Kaifa Roland (2013, 408) calls the “monied ‘race.’” *Yumas* are, in a sense, socially whitened within the racial hierarchy, presumed innocent, and granted increased social access and protection. In contrast, Afro-Cubans are more frequently racially profiled by police and detained for *acoso de un turista* (harassment of a tourist) or under the rubric of *peligrosidad* (dangerousness).
9. *Chilango/a* is a derogatory term for those born and/or raised in Mexico City.
10. *Indigenous* and *Amerindian* are terms used interchangeably in the local context to refer to distinct indigenous nations in Guyana, such as Lokono, Wapishani, Patamona, Carib, and Wai Wai.
11. *Gyaffing* is a local creole term for discussing and speculating on topics like village events, politics, marriages, and disagreements.
12. See Domínguez 2000 for another feminist critique of the assumed authority of the insider and/or minoritized scholars within overdetermined formulations of contemporary identity politics.

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