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A walk in the park

Political emotions and ethnographic vacillation in activist research

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Abstract: Critically engaged activist research blends a theoretical approach towards power and resistance with a practical methodology for ethnographies of social movements. However, when undertaking this sort of research it can be easy to lose sight of critical analysis because of the political emotions that researchers share with activist participants. I was reminded of the need for critical reflection by a particularly jarring ethnographic moment: during a quiet, early morning walk through Brisbane's Musgrave Park I became a witness in a murder investigation. This moment, and the aftermath of it, led me to critically analyse my own political emotions and those of my research participants. This paper examines the role of activist researchers through the lens of my moment in the park. I argue that, while it is important to share political emotions with research participants, activist researchers must remain reflexive and critical of those emotions.

It was a beautiful, sunny spring morning in Brisbane where I had travelled to attend a rally in support of Lex Wotton, on trial for inciting riot on Palm Island following an Aboriginal death in custody in 2004 (see Hooper, 2008; Waters, 2008). I was to meet Gracelyn, my key research participant, in Brisbane's Musgrave Park at 10am, where she expected people to gather before the 1pm rally. So on Saturday morning I got ready for a full day of demonstrations, with my Palm Island tee-shirt on and some food and water in my bag. As I walked across Musgrave Park, I pulled out my mobile and noticed the time—9.26, a little early—and rang Gracelyn to see where she was. I noticed someone sleeping near the path, but my attention was mostly on my phone as I dialled Gracelyn. We met for coffee, and returned to the park at around midday, when we discovered that a murder had taken place in the park that morning, and that I was unknowingly a witness.

As the day progressed, I was forced to recall the details from a moment I had barely taken note of as it passed. The events which developed from this moment proved to be a defining part of my field work, which I conducted as a 'critically engaged activist researcher'[i]. In this paper, I discuss the effects of this moment and its aftermath on my engagement with my fieldwork, particularly critiquing the effects the moment had on my 'political emotions'. Though there were many times throughout my fieldwork when I shared emotions with my participants, this paper discusses one particular moment in which I did not – and this difference in political emotions

highlighted, to me, the importance of remaining critical while being engaged. I argue, based on my experience in Musgrave Park, that activist researchers must pay close attention to political emotions and must be deliberate about what Ghassan Hage (2009) calls 'ethnographic vacillation'.

Political Emotions in Activist Research

In May 2007 I began field work on Aboriginal activism in Townsville, a small city in North Queensland. My research examined the relationship between the social movement in Townsville and the Australian state, highlighting the ways that they rely on one another despite discourses of simple opposition (Petray, 2010c). A significant focus of my research was the activism surrounding the 2004 death in custody of an Aboriginal man on Palm Island, 50 kilometres north of Townsville. A former Aboriginal reserve, Palm Island is now an Aboriginal community but is still policed by the state of Queensland. When a community member died in the police station 45 minutes after his arrest, with internal injuries similar to those caused by high-speed motorbike accidents, the police and the state became the target of a long-running campaign for justice (Anthony, 2009; Petray, 2010a). Before I started researching, I decided to approach my field work as an activist, in order to show my commitment to the cause and to gain the deepest possible understanding of the movement[ii]. Shannon Speed (2006) discusses this methodology in depth, based on her research on human

rights activism in Chiapas, Mexico. She argues that 'critically engaged activist research provides an important approach to addressing the practical and ethical dilemmas of research and knowledge production' (70). The combination of critical engagement with activist research allows cultural critique to be merged with political action and results in knowledge which contributes not only to academia, but also to the struggle for social justice (Speed, 2006: 75). Traditionally, social movement theorists have attempted to incite change through their writing but have avoided becoming involved in the activism itself, feeling that this will bias their results (Edelman, 2001). On the other hand, simply doing activism does not contribute new knowledge to the movement (Bevington and Dixon, 2005). The results of activist research should, ideally, help activists strengthen their movements through a better understanding of movement dynamics and the relationship between the movement and those they oppose[iii].

When researchers become heavily involved in the social setting of activist groups, the boundaries between research, advocacy, and everyday life are blurred (Davis, 2003: 153; Lederman, 2005: 323). Although anthropology students learn to avoid 'going native', many anthropologists have engaged with their research setting in a way that is far from detached (cf. Nader, 1972; Tresch, 2001; Turner, 1991). When solidarity is stated at the outset of research, notions of objectivity and distance are discarded; getting to be 'inside' the social setting is the point. Hage's (2009) depiction of ethnographic vacillation is a useful metaphor, describing ethnographic researchers as

ping-pong balls floating in the surf, tossed between three worlds. The beach represents the culture under study, which Hage calls the political realm; the ocean represents the discipline of anthropology, or the analytic realm; and the waves represent emotions, particularly political emotions, which develop through close connections with a field site. Activist researchers are likely to develop a collectively shared, but individually constituted set of political emotions through shared physical experiences. The people we work with outwardly struggle against some kind of oppression and injustice. Becoming a part of this community requires us to empathise with the injustice, which often entails identifying the 'oppressor' and developing negative emotions towards them (cf. Gould, 2010; Novak, 2006; Ost, 2004). Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta (2001: 16) suggest that 'activists work hard to create moral outrage and anger and to provide a target against which these can be vented'. The extent to which this is a conscious process is questionable, though, and Gould (2010: 24) suggests that this logical and rational understanding 'masks the way that feelings—political and otherwise—frequently diverge from our reasoning selves'. Anger generates both shared emotions, often outwardly directed, and reciprocal emotions, which activists feel towards one another as a result of their shared emotions (Goodwin et al., 2001: 20). This is one way that social movements create collective identities.

Ghassan Hage (2009: 69) defines political emotions as 'those emotions related to our sense of power over ourselves and our environment as we pursue those goals,

ideals and activities that give our life a meaning'. These political emotions will of course be different for everyone, given the fluidity of identity. Political emotions are informed by, and contribute to, the identifications and categorisations[iv] of individuals and collectives. Berezin (2001: 83) suggests that the range of identities we 'experience' can be thought of as 'hierarchies' ranging from the public to the private, with some more important than others; where an identity fits in the hierarchy is shaped by the emotions – political and otherwise – one experiences. Importantly, emotions are socially constructed, linked to class and domination (Lutz and White, 1986: 407), expressed according to social rules (Goodwin et al., 2001: 12), and meaningful because of their 'location and performance in the public realm of discourse' (Abu-Lughod and Lutz, 1990: 7).

Social movement research has long ignored the role of emotion amongst protesters themselves[v], and has yet to be theorised in terms of researchers working with activists. However, emotions are important in a number of social movement processes. As Goodwin et al. (2001: 10) argue, 'emotions are part of the "stuff" connecting human beings to each other and the world around them'. Protest demonstrations are sites of embodied political emotion—adrenalin rushes, chills and gut feelings are all common physical responses in protest settings. These 'immediate and intuitive' emotional responses (Goodwin et al., 2001: 13), or 'affect' (Gould, 2010) often form the basis of the more carefully thought out positioning of 'us versus them' necessary for the

formation of collective identity. When engaged researchers share embodied political emotions with research participants, Herzfeld (2009: 143) argues that the ability to 'achieve an intimate rapport with informants' increases. It creates a strong bond between researcher and participants. Thus, experiencing the physical and emotional responses of a protest demonstration brings researchers further into the milieu of the research setting—but it does not guarantee that the researcher will produce good research. For that, we need to be more deliberate, as I learned after my emotionally and politically charged day in Brisbane.

Sharing political emotions with research participants embeds activist researchers in their research setting. Although our culture, race, gender and/or ethnicity may be very different from those of our research participants, we share the identity of 'activist'. The importance of this shared identity will depend where it sits in the 'hierarchy' (Berezin, 2001: 83) of identities for both researcher and participants. In many of the sites where we conduct activist research, there are other 'conscience constituents' (McCarthy and Zald, 1977: 1222; Petray, 2010a, 2010b) who will not benefit directly from movement successes but who are nevertheless interested in working in solidarity with or in support of the social movement. Activist researchers may be seen as just another conscience constituent, their role as researcher forgotten. In other words, while I will never be an Aboriginal person, I can be an activist in the Aboriginal movement. It is unsurprising to see non-Indigenous academics and

professionals at Aboriginal protests (Petray, 2010a), so the presence of the researcher is not always strongly felt as out of place.

Thus, during my research on Aboriginal activism in Townsville, I was never a true insider, but I shared political emotions and the activist identity with participants, which allowed me to conduct my research in a way that was never fully outside. I conducted research 'at home', to some extent; although I had only recently moved to Australia, I conducted research in the place where I lived, worked, and participated in the community. I would not 'leave the field' at the end of my fieldwork, or even at the end of my degree. I ran into research participants while grocery shopping, going to work, and relaxing. Lejla Voloder (2008: 30) says that this intersection of sites in the home/field dichotomy 'suggests an increased sense of connectedness between researcher and researched, often considered to exist prior to the commencement of the research endeavour'. So while I was by no means a 'native' to the Aboriginal movement in Townsville, and was actually quite unfamiliar with the local specificities, the social distance between me and my research participants was much smaller due to our shared home, and our shared activist identity.

While occupying a shared home base of Townsville helped close social distance, I was also helped by the 'outsider-ness' that I still possessed as an American. This justified my unfamiliarity with the research setting and made it acceptable and even expected to ask for clarifications and explanations of even simple issues. Having too

much in common with research participants can sometimes be a barrier to research. Zaman (2008) found, while researching a hospital in Bangladesh, that his medical background precluded him from asking doctors about procedures because they expected him to know. Likewise, Voloder's (2008) shared cultural background with her Bosnian research participants led them to assume shared knowledge and opinions. Because I was still far enough outside, though, I was able to ask basic questions without this interfering in my attempt to get as far inside the movement as I could.

After spending a few months 'in the field', at home in Townsville, I was taken on, in the eyes of Gracelyn, as 'her researcher', but also as her 'personal assistant', or her 'secretary'. This was not a formal relationship, but one which she verbalised widely, and I found myself taking on 'secretarial' tasks throughout the course of my research. Our relationship is best described as 'mutually exploitative', which sounds harsh but I mean that, in addition to friendship, we were both getting something out of the relationship. Gracelyn got an unpaid worker to check her emails, keep her diary in order and bring along to meetings. I gained access to the research field because, despite my genuine commitment to the movement and my good intentions, I still initiated the relationship based on my desire to earn a degree. This mutually exploitative relationship was also mutually beneficial, particularly in ensuring my engagement in the research site. Gracelyn was as concerned as I was that I should be accepted as an 'insider' and she went out of her way to make that happen – having an American researcher claimed

as her own added to the legitimacy she required as a movement leader. Being introduced by Gracelyn gave me legitimacy in the eyes of other activists, Aboriginal people and politicians and bureaucrats throughout my field work, and this day in Brisbane was no different. I was introduced to a number of people who Gracelyn knew, and others she did not, but she always made sure to include me and make my role as 'her researcher' known widely. However, the relationship between Gracelyn and me was based as much on reciprocal emotions as it was on strategic interests, and these reciprocal emotions were closely bound up with the shared political emotions that we experienced. Our mutual experiences of these emotions were based in very different life experiences, but bound us closely together.

Unlike race, ethnicity or gender, which are inscribed on the body, the activist identity does not come with any distinguishing features which signify an activist's identity to the outside world. When we become embedded in our research sites, this is not a problem—we are recognised in our communities, and our shared political emotions are well known. But, when we leave our immediate research setting, we have to find ways of expressing our activist identity. One way for activists to do this is through protest clothes. In Brisbane for Lex Wotton's rally, I wore a Palm Island tee-shirt; the red, black and yellow shirt and the overtly political messages on it provided me with a sense of legitimacy that I would not have otherwise had. Protest clothing indicates to fellow protesters that we are likely to share the political emotions of the

social movements and encourages positive reciprocal emotions, even between strangers. So in this setting I was an activist insider, while remaining an outsider to Aboriginal contexts, which was a complex but fulfilling role to be in.

Reliving the Moment

After meeting several people throughout the morning, we returned to the park at midday to see if anyone needed a ride into the city for the rally. When we arrived, we could see more activity in the park than there had been all morning. We expected a gathering crowd for the demonstration but instead saw dozens of police officers taping off a crime scene in the park. Gracelyn immediately suspected a conspiracy, suggesting that the police were trying to disrupt the rally, which was organised to protest deaths in police custody and, thus, to protest the police. Gracelyn's conspiracy-driven response is a clear example of developing distinct boundaries between 'us' and 'them' in activism; social movements need someone to oppose, and they need to develop a sense of anger and moral outrage towards those 'enemies' (see above). It also demonstrates the 'immediate and intuitive' emotional responses (Goodwin et al., 2001: 13) that are felt bodily as affect (Gould, 2010) and not necessarily analysed on a cognitive level. My initial response was more sceptical, but I did not express my doubts – in activist settings, shared emotions are important to maintain strong reciprocal emotions (Goodwin et al., 2001: 20) - until I saw a white sheet on the grass of the park,

presumably covering a dead body. I got a sick feeling in my stomach as I realised that I had walked past the same spot early in the morning and saw what I had assumed was someone sleeping. I told Gracelyn, who dragged me over to a detective, Paul, who told me that 'we may be looking at a murder case here, and you could be the last person to see her alive, or the first person to see the body'. I went, in a shocked state, to the police station to give a statement, missing the rally.

Paul indicated that I should sit in the back of his police car, and then we drove to pick up two other witnesses. Leaving me in the car for a moment, Paul came back and opened my door and asked me to move around to the front. As I sat in my new seat, he walked over with two Aboriginal men who would join us for the ride. One was a young man with a toddler, but the other was middle-aged, probably around 50 years old—I had met him earlier in the morning, while he drank beers in the park. I sat in the front seat wondering why a man who is my father's age had been squeezed into the back seat when I had already been sitting there. Surely, I thought, it would have been easier for everyone if I had just stayed where I was, and the larger and older person was given the more comfortable seat in the front. My first reaction was that this was the sort of everyday racism that Aboriginal people deal with on a regular basis. In this instance, I shared the political emotion that Gracelyn had felt upon seeing the police – mistrust, anger, moral outrage, and clear distinctions between 'we' and 'they'. My political-emotional response was anger at the police, at this particular detective, and at racism

generally for what I perceived as this display of injustice. Moreover, my interpretation of this event is indicative of where I was located in the research site at that stage, and how tied up my political emotions were with my research participants'. I had largely internalised the important dichotomy in activist settings, identifying those who are 'with us' in contrast to those who are 'against us'. I had seen, in earlier research, that there is very little space for those who fall outside of that dichotomy. That is, if someone is ambiguous and not clearly 'with us', they immediately fall into the 'against us' camp.

By the time I had finished at the police station, so had the demonstration, but Gracelyn told me that everyone had gathered back at the park. As I waited for the train, I tried to think through some of my emotions. I had visceral responses – nausea at the sight of the white sheet on the grass, numbness at the abrupt shift from adrenalin-filled rally preparations to subdued participation in a murder investigation, and something else, guilt, maybe, at the realisation that I had witnessed this scene early in the morning and done nothing about it. I had political emotions which were immediate, and not clearly thought out – anger at the police for perpetuating injustice, moral outrage at society for the systemic inequalities that make us not look twice when we see a body in a park. As an activist, these political emotions are the most important – they tie social movements together as a collective, giving participants a shared sense of self and a common goal. As an activist researcher, my political emotions are tied up with those of my research participants, and my anger was directed at the police as a visible and

historically significant institution of state control over Aboriginal lives. The police fulfilled the important role, in social movement activity, of 'someone to blame' (Goodwin et al. 2001: 17).

As we stood around at the edge of the park that afternoon, watching forensic police working in plastic suits, the details finally emerged about what had happened that morning. The woman in the park, who I had assumed was asleep, had been stabbed with a screwdriver by a white man who was arrested within 24 hours. Just before midday the police and ambulances were called, but the woman had died at least several hours earlier—probably before I walked past. By this time in the afternoon, they had been collecting evidence for more than three hours and the activists from the rally were getting impatient. Some were disgusted with the police presence at all: 'Look at all of them down there; how many does it take; why do we need all of these police'. Others felt the police were not dealing with the body in a culturally appropriate manner, and some left the park because they felt unsettled with the body there. The response towards the police was primarily influenced by the political emotions of this group of activists, particularly enhanced by their just-completed rally which expressed anger at the police. The dichotomy of activist versus police was stronger than usual as a result of the event they had just attended.

Gracelyn was so angry with the police that she had not ruled out a conspiracy, voicing her concern that the white man arrested may have been set up. This anger was

not hers alone, however, as political emotions often belong collectively to social movement participants of oppressed groups. For instance, Indigenous peoples often feel a collective anger at colonial empires in response to histories of violence, oppression and assimilation (Lane West-Newman, 2004). Lyman (2004) argues that anger is a useful tool which opens up possibilities for substantive dialogue about injustices. However, anger is so often disregarded and not taken seriously that it turns into rage, directed at the continued lack of justice (Lyman, 2004: 140). The political emotions raised by the anti-police demonstration that afternoon seemed to be blanket rage towards the police because of the consistent perceptions of injustice by Aboriginal people, despite the fact that in this situation the police were helping to investigate the murder of a homeless Aboriginal woman. While my research participants were collectively expressing their general anger towards police, I had been in the police station, providing a statement which, ideally, would help the police to solve the murder and 'enforce justice'. Although I shared political emotions with my research participants, hearing these activists simplify the situation to a mere dichotomy between us and them annoyed me. I thought if there is a time for police presence, it is during a murder investigation. My annoyance and my exclusion from that shared emotion led me to remember the importance of the critical focus which is necessary for productive research. I realised just how embedded I had become in the movement—something which I had purposely set out for—and decided that I needed to extract my political

emotions from those of my research participants, at least temporarily, to see the bigger picture. Although political emotions are important, and unavoidable, they cannot be the only thing we experience – researchers need critical analysis as well as emotional responses. Rather than simply 'blaming' the police for perpetuating racism, as was my immediate reaction in the car ride to the police station, I needed to look more closely at where those political emotions came from. Although this might mean a reduction in the shared political emotions between me and my research participants, it did not affect the reciprocal emotions we had towards one another. I could remain an engaged researcher, embedded in the cause and an advocate for my research participants, while not experiencing things in the same way.

In conclusion, I return to the scenario presented by Hage (2009) to depict ethnographic vacillation. I argue that researchers have more agency than the ball in Hage's scenario; we are more like small intertidal animals such as a crab. We can walk on the sand, swim in the ocean, and most importantly, we have the ability to move freely between the two realms. When we attempt to occupy the space in between, we may be pushed around by the waves of emotion, but if we try hard enough we can have some control over how much time we spend on the beach or in the water. Activist researchers make a point to spend time on the beach by purposefully embedding themselves within the movement they study—after all, it is hard to work in solidarity with people when you are floating in the distance. When this happens, we get a really

close-up look at what is happening around us. We share political emotions with participants and have embodied similarities with them. The trouble is, without scurrying back off of the sand, we will not know where that localised bit of beach fits within broader contexts. At 9.26 that morning, a moment passed which would influence not only the course of my day, but also the course of my research more broadly. I realised I was too far on the shore of my research setting. So to avoid getting stuck there, I had to consciously step back and look critically at my emotions and the emotions of the others. I swam back out to the open water, so to speak, to re-hydrate and critically analyse the current of political emotions swirling through my research site.

This ability to step back is really what makes a successful activist researcher—immersing oneself in a social setting so much that we share political emotions with our research participants, but then moving back out to a distant position from which we can look at things from another perspective. As Hage (2009) argues, this vacillation between political, emotional and analytical states is not simply moving between various identities, but 'it is a state of being in itself'. This is not an easy state of being to occupy, but it is important if activist researchers are to maintain the critical focus which makes our work worthwhile. And it was this ethnographic moment, regrettable as it was, when I stepped back out off of the beach and realised that no matter how enticing it is to stay on the shore when doing activist research, it is not enough. Without a deep ethnographic analysis, we are just another supporter of the social movement.

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[i] Though I worked as an 'activist researcher', the dynamics I speak about in this paper are not limited to work with activists. The challenge of becoming 'embedded' in a research site faces researchers from many discipline and methodological background. However, 'activist research' represents something of an ideal type, so I will use the term 'activist research' throughout this paper, rather than resorting to more general terminology.

[ii] Following the tradition of engaged anthropology that has been used outside of activist settings as well, exemplified by Clifford (1988), Clifford & Marcus (1986), Marcus & Fischer (1986), and Tsing (2005).

[iii] For more examples of this type of research, see Graeber (2009), Juris (2008), Speed (2007), Durrenberger & Erem (2005).

[iv] Following the discussion of 'identity' in Brubaker and Cooper (2000).

[v] See Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta (2001), and Gould (2010) for a genealogical explanation of the focus on 'rationality' in social movement studies.

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