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Engaging-Up: Compromised Spaces and Potential Partners

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Engaging-Up: Compromised Spaces and Potential Partners

by

Jennifer Necole Webb

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of Anthropology
College of Arts and Sciences
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Dedication

In memory of my family members who have passed away while I was in graduate school:

Allison Grace Honeycutt, Ella Kempton Plaisance, Julius Wiley Webb, Felix Austin Miller, Robert Fulton Odom, Jr., Beatrice Kempton Dunn, Paul Frederick Dunn, and Jay Altazan. You each have influenced how I live, think, and love.

To my parents – Blayne and Valerie Honeycutt; my siblings and sister-in-law – Hannah Elayne Honeycutt, Brannan Keith Webb, Jr., and Carrie Nunez Webb, and my nephews – Brannan Keith, Briggs Wiley, and Grayson Joseph, my life – much less my academic interests and professional ambitions – would be empty without your love and presence.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Chapter I: Introduction.....	1
Chapter II: Historical Context and Project Commencement	9
Positioning Players and Project Inception	9
My Passions, Professional Past and Positionality.....	9
Coming Together: Project Request.....	12
Community Development Corporations.....	14
Negotiating the Final Project	26
Chapter III: Critically Engaged Research Design.....	32
Anthropology for Whom?.....	39
Reciprocity, Building Relationships, and Rose Colored Glasses	45
Making Our Work Useful and Useable	50
Conclusion	54
Chapter IV: Studying Up	56
Access	61
Ethics.....	65
Power, Authenticity, and Representation when Universities and Communities Collide	68
Conclusion	75
Chapter V: Engaging-Up Conclusion	77
The Promises of Engaging-Up.....	78
Clarifying Concepts by Bringing Key Terms into Questions.....	82
Contradictions and Pitfalls.....	85
Contradictory Consciousness and Complicity	86
Defining Shared Ideals and Goals.....	89
Betraying our Allies: Misused Methods and Products	95
Final Thoughts: Reconsidering the Promises and Pitfalls of Engaging-Up	100
Works Cited	105

Abstract

The anthropology of public policy critically examines policy and its processes and the myriad ways in which power is exercised. To explore these power dynamics, anthropologists studying policy often study up, or study through a particular policy field. This entails the risky work of studying powerful people, whose ability to retaliate against the researcher and others create methodological and ethical dilemmas and contradictions, as well as potentially harmful consequences. Politicians, bureaucrats, employees of powerful non-profits, and, in the public-private neoliberal reality, even the head decision makers within corporations are all prospective research participants—an intimidating prospect for most anthropologists. In contrast, engaged ethnography, with its presupposition that researchers will be aligned with politically marginalized groups, encourages the researcher to engage on a more transparent, reflexive, and expressly positioned level that attempts to make the researcher more exposed, thus equalizing the power differentials between the researcher and the researched.

The inherent contradictions between engaged ethnography and studying up create a situation ripe for methodological and ethical dilemmas, but also for breaking new theoretical ground. This paper will critically examine my experiences with a dominant community development corporation involved in housing and urban development. The purpose of this thesis is twofold. First, I aim to explore the theoretical contradictions, ethical dilemmas, and methodological quandaries that arise from pairing engaged anthropology with the studying up required by the anthropology of public policy. The aim of this query is to show how the difficulties that arose during my thesis research project expose gaps within each body of

literature. Second, I hope to present engaging-up as a promising (not just problematic) method that can be employed to better understand a myriad of topical interests of anthropology. Because of its promise, it is important to document this failed attempt so that others may be better prepared. As such, my hope is that my consideration of the contradictions that were unable to be overcome will be described with enough ethnographic clarity and framed in broad enough methodological terms as to be helpful to other engaged ethnographers.

Chapter I: Introduction

On the morning of January 30, 2012, I nervously scanned the office that had been my home base at a housing, urban development, and poverty programming agency. From this corner at the Gayle Evans Enterprise Center – the building which housed the executive offices of the North Portside Community Development Corporation (NPCDC), I had worked long days so that I could balance the time commitment involved in collaboratively composing this agency’s history with the observant participation and research necessary for laying the foundation for an engaged ethnography of public policy. These dual objectives had become part of the topography of this spacious office. D-ring binders, extra-large manila folders and stacks of papers formed the mountain ranges spanning the credenza and hills rising from the floor that evidenced the progress of my work on the history of the NPCDC. Per the instructions of the founder and first-CEO, who had brought me on board, I had explored the board packets, agendas, meeting minutes, presidential reports, copies of articles, budgets, and other archival documents that comprised this chronologically-organized clutter. On the other side of the office, books, articles, resume writing material, client files, notes and other information from the observant participation and thesis-centered portion of my work formed plateaus along the wall and atop the file cabinet. I had made sure to keep clear the entry way and the floor space between the door and the small conference table. This was an important, well-worn path between my workspace and the rest of the agency. I was constantly moving into and out of this office as I attended after-work and weekend agency and community events and task force meetings, helped clients compose their resumes, observed trainings, and trouble shot with the staff and managers on different agency-related issues. Yet on

this morning, I sat frozen in my chair at the table as my gaze settled back onto the interim-CEO and one of my allies at the agency, Kenneth.

Although we were not even three minutes into our meeting, Kenneth had quickly, quietly and effectively pulled the rug out from under me. He would not bring my research proposal before the board. I felt completely unmoored – unsure if I was free-falling or floating and too shocked to grasp onto anything but the expectations with which I had come. I thought the purpose of meeting “first thing” was so that we’d have enough time to jointly review and amend the list of topical areas that I had emailed to him the previous Friday. I thought that he would then present the list to the board at their meeting later that morning so that the members could choose the topics with which they felt most comfortable. Yes. The preceding week had been tense between Kenneth and me – punctuated with pointed discussions aimed at figuring out the scope and focus of research and the language that would be positively received by the board, while not compromising the integrity of the research. But passionate discussions are expected when performing engaged research. I was ready for a conversation that might get slightly contentious, but that would ultimately evolve into deeper understanding of each other and our positions and a research project that was interesting to both of us. I was not ready for Kenneth to slip into a divestment soliloquy.

In an effort to reconnect to this present reality, I took a deep breath and asked for clarification, “Okay, just to be clear, you’re not going to complete this letter of affiliation?! You are not going to bring this project before the board?!” In the classic fashion of the powerful and the politically-minded – a stance with which Kenneth was clearly uncomfortable, he shook his head “no” while relaying a view that did not reflect our shared reality: “[This agency] is not now nor were we ever interested in participating in any type of research.” His words and body

language smacked of finality and indicated a desire to get on the record more than to work out a joint solution. I persisted in my attempts to sway him back into a collaborative stance. But, all of my efforts to assuage his fears and appeal to the different aspects of Kenneth's character, professional aims, commitment to and vision for the agency and the legacy of its founder were each met in turn by a cool disengagement. I even employed the more desperate moves of directly countering his erroneous claim and of attempting to parlay the agency's history for agreement for any type of research project. He remained uninterested. His demeanor, resoluteness, and well-rehearsed language were not his own. Only his reluctance to make eye contact revealed the disconnect between his present disengaged stance and the collaborative nature of our relationship up to this point. But, when he finally looked me squarely in the eyes and flatly repeated his line, I knew my efforts were in vain. I could not rhetorically bridge his nihilistic detachment any more than my past actions in the service to this agency could ensure the continuation of this project. So, I surrendered. Turning my back to the clutter of the archive, I fumbled to gather my books, notes, and binders. As I prodded myself to move faster – to hasten my retreat – I murmured to Kenneth something about needing to contact my advisor and committee for advice. Like the power company cutting the lights, this engaged ethnographic endeavor was off.

I knew that some important methodological lessons could be learned by untangling and describing the strands which comprised the ethical dilemmas, methodological quandaries, and theoretical contradictions that had just been brought beyond their breaking point. These issues had been present since the project's inception and would have likely persisted had the project not been forcibly terminated. These conundrums weren't particular to this specific experience, or even exclusive to my project. I understood that this experience and other tense interactions were illustrations of the broad problems that emerge when pairing engaged ethnography with the

studying up required of anthropology of public policy. Although these insights are now the topics of this methodological inquiry, at the time they were just words – abstract knowledge that provided no comfort for a graduate student whose thesis research project was just canned.

Four months later, I am sitting in my parents' backyard in South Louisiana during the Annual Crawfish Boil for the 21st Judicial District Court. My hands are dirtied and busied by the familiar task of peeling crawfish while my conversation with Lila Hogan, an attorney who practices family law and is about to begin her campaign for Family Court Judge, shifts to my interest in engaged ethnography and the anthropology of public policy, my failed thesis, and the contradictions inherent in activist research. She shares how her previous work on environmental and development class actions was completely derailed by changes to public policy and tax codes and the many ethical dilemmas that she grappled with during this change. Lila shifts her reflections to the contradictions inherent in subjecting judgeships to electoral politics and economics and concludes with a surprising invitation.

“What about joining my campaign?! My campaign could be your ethnographic site and you could show how judicial elections have to be run – the politics and money of it – if you really want to win, and the implications of this,” Lila is excited by the possibilities. I want to join in her enthusiasm, but my recent research failure has caused me to be wary,

Are you sure you'd want someone critiquing the election process? That would include you and your team. I couldn't ensure confidentiality or anonymity to you for obvious reasons and it would be difficult to guarantee your people anonymity and the same for confidentiality.

She considers my warning, while we get absorbed into another conversation. Fifteen minutes later she catches my eye and pulls me back into our conversation,

Well, after briefly considering your warnings, I'm still interested. I can work with that and we can work out the logistics. I think it's an important project. The only thing is that you couldn't publish anything until after the election.

“Lila,” my anxiety turns my response into a rapid-paced monologue punctuated by abnormally long pauses,

<pause> I want you to know that I *am* interested. I think that there could be a really interesting research project here. *And*, before I attempt any more engaged ethnographies of public policy, I must reflect more intentionally – because I need more clarity about my recent failure. *And*, it was a *failure*. I mean, they threatened to sue me if I didn’t ‘comply’ [with their request to sign a post-disengagement contract meant to protect them from all risk by confiscating all research materials and controlling what I published about my experience with this project]. <pause> You seem like a really wonderful person who I would vote for for Family Court Judge if I was still registered here. *And*, I already really like you and am looking forward to meeting your daughter and her partner. I’m just not confident that pairing engaged ethnography with the anthropology of public policy works so well. <pause> The methods and theories of each may just create too much... create too much tension that <pause> that can’t actually be dealt with in practice – in reality. *And*, <pause> I’m sure there are anthropologists who successfully do both. I just need to find their work. So, I’m not *assuming* it won’t work; I just need more information... Okay, so I will seriously think it over and let you know what my best thinking, reflecting, and reading leads me to and I’ll let you know. How does that sound?

She smiled as she handed me her business card, “Sounds good. Just let me know. I’m eager to find out what you discover.” As I watched her tell the others at the party “good bye,” I excused myself so that I could jot down our conversation and the plan that I proposed. This conversation and the promise of another project (where I could distill this negative experience into some positive knowledge that could be used to benefit someone), shook me from the mental torpor that had plagued me. I actually wanted to work on my thesis. I was eager to determine the parameters necessary for successfully “engaging-up.”

“Engaging-up” is a contraction of engaged ethnography and studying up. As an approach to research, engaged ethnography is collaborative and useful in nature. After “we affirm a political alignment with an organized group of people in struggle” (Hale 2006:97), the anthropologist

collaborates with this group on many (some scholars argue for all) stages of the research project. Moreover, products of such collaborations generally benefit both the movement or group in struggle and the knowledge building efforts of academia. All this emphasis on collaboration – along with an aim to produce engaging scholarly writing – does not mean that the scholar uncritically goes along with the desires of the group with which they are aligned. No.

Collaborative research is often punctuated by difficult conversations and a degree of conflict.

Collaborative ethnography, then, does not require that we flatten, homogenize, or even “whitewash” differences . . . [Participants] must be willing . . . to open themselves up to a dynamic knowledge exchange, to stick it out, and to discover in their work together emergent counderstandings, cointerpretations, and coinscriptions (which will always include points of disagreement). (Lassiter 2008:76)

This arises from critical engagement and from differently positioned actors committed to the same movement or political ideals negotiating across these differences.

Studying up is the other side of the engaging-up contraction. Like engaged ethnography, the studying up conceived by Laura Nader aims to create scholarship that is useful to a broad public. Yet, this usefulness is not garnered through collaboration but in exposing powerful actors and processes at play in shaping the lives of the everyday people (Nader 1972). Although the power dynamics are inverted in comparison to traditional ethnography, the idea that the anthropologist is there to gather data from subjects and report back to their peers mirrors that of traditional ethnography. Yet, because the power dynamics are inverted in comparison to traditional ethnography, the research methods generally used by those studying up are interviews and small groups (Nader 1972). These may occur within one setting, such as Forsythe’s study of a particular research lab (1999) and Holmes’s study of the European Parliament (2000). Or, these studies may be multi-sited, as is typical for anthropology of public policy scholars who study actors both involved in creating or implementing, and impacted by a particular policy (Karkazis

2008; Morgen and Maskovsky 2003; O'Connor 2001; Shore and Wright 1997). While the subjects may be powerful, the anthropologist's constituents are the poor, the marginalized or the subaltern. Yet, in traditional studying up the marginalized group is not examined directly.

As different as studying up is to engaged ethnography, they both appeared first within a compilation of essays edited by Dell Hymes, *Reinventing Anthropology* (1974). Yet since the 1970s, these two approaches have remained separate endeavors, each having their own bodies of literature and associated scholars. In this thesis, these two methods are brought back together. This time, they are smushed into a seemingly contradictory contraction, engaging-up.

I did not coin this term to be semantically clever. I coined this term because as an approach to ethnography it is reflected in neither the engaged ethnography nor the studying up or anthropology of public policy bodies of literature. While I'm certain I'm not the first anthropologist to engage with participants who are superordinate, this is not reflected by published scholarship in these fields. Indeed, there is a huge gap in the literature where I expected a healthy conversation. Thus, the second reason for coining this term was to draw attention to this silence. It is important because it shows a missed opportunity for exploring assumptions inherent in the engaged ethnography and studying up endeavors. Moreover, holding these approaches uncomfortably together with a hyphen off-centers each and thus highlights their assumptions, some of which, we'll see, contribute to the reason why engaging-up, itself, seems like a contradiction. Indeed, a quick probe of this seeming contradiction reveals an appreciation for the assumptions about the power dynamics of the research relationship that are subsumed within collaborative or engaged ethnography. And, this is just the tip of the iceberg.

The purpose of this thesis is twofold. First, I aim to explore this iceberg – the theoretical contradictions, ethical dilemmas, and methodological quandaries that arise from pairing engaged

anthropology with the studying up required by the anthropology of public policy. The aim of this query is to show how the difficulties that arose during my thesis research project expose gaps within each body of literature. Second, I hope to present engaging-up as a promising (not just problematic) method that can be employed to better understand a myriad of topical interests of anthropology. Because of its promise, it is important to document this failed attempt so that others may be better prepared. As such, my hope is that my consideration of the contradictions that were unable to be overcome will be described with enough ethnographic clarity and framed in broad enough methodological terms as to be helpful to other engaged ethnographers.

Toward these aims, the body of the thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter 2 lays the foundation for the rest of the thesis. In the first section of Chapter 2, I position myself and the NPCDC. The second section briefly sets up the conundrum that I encountered in working with NPCDC, articulates the final project that we agreed upon, and explains why I decided to stick with it and actively engage this organization. Chapter 3 looks at my failed project in light of the problems that have arisen for other engaged scholars. In Chapter 4, I again look at my project, but in relation to the obstacles present within the studying up endeavor. The discussions in both of these chapters shed light on assumptions that exist in each body of literature. In Chapter 5, the concluding chapter, I present both the promises and pitfalls involved in engaging-up, arguing ultimately for continued experimentation in this approach.

Chapter II: Historical Context and Project Commencement

The purpose of this chapter is to present the story of my work with the North Portside community Development Corporation (NPCDC) – from the apprehension before our first meeting, through the growing ethical conundrums I faced, to my ultimate decision to stick with this project and fully engage with the organization. I do this in two sections. In the first, which is the bulk of the chapter, I position myself, as well as the North Portside CDC. Thus, I will provide my background and interest in CDCs and describe how I got involved in this project. I will also provide an introduction to CDCs and a brief history of the NPCDC. Having laid this foundation, the second section briefly sets up the conundrum that I encountered in working with NPCDC, articulates the final project that we agreed upon, and explains why I decided to stick with it and actively engage this organization.

Positioning Players and Project Inception

My Passions, Professional Past and Positionality

My interest in community development corporations (CDCs) was non-existent prior to my thesis project. It's not that I was not interested. It's that I didn't know what they were, what they did, or that such a type of organizational model for nonprofits existed prior to this project. This said, I had long been a passionate activist for social and economic justice. So, working with an urban revitalization and community empowerment agency seemed like an interesting evolution of this personal commitment. Moreover, the employees do pride themselves on being an African American CDC situated within a predominantly African American community, although

NPCDC does not formally advertise itself as such. Racial equity – not just economic justice – has long been a focus of my activism.

In regards to my positionality, I identify as a queer woman of mixed ethnicity from South Louisiana (Spanish Creole, and German-Irish), whose family can trace its roots back to the Canary Islands and the Senegambia region of Africa. However, because of my phenotype and personal style, I tend to pass as both straight and white in social situations (as have many in my family for the past two generations). Thus, unlike other people of color or queer individuals, I get to choose whether I out myself or pass. As such, I have not suffered personal discrimination or racism as a queer female or Spanish Creole, although other members of my family have. Outside of South Louisiana, where this positionality makes most sense, my ethnicity is a complexity that I do not tend to get into when first meeting folks. In regards to my sexuality and fieldwork, I do not offer personal information, but neither do I change the pronoun of my partner. While I did not observe any obvious discomfort regarding my sexual orientation, some employees did go out of their way to show their openness – generally, by sharing stories about people in their lives whom they cared about who were part of the LGBTQ+ community. I appreciated such overtures.

Thus, to the NPCDC, my positionality was read as that of a white woman. Specifically, because of my previous profession, I was viewed as a white, social service professional – along with the unflattering stereotypical attributes that often accompany the identity of white women who work in social services. Although I know how to complicate this stereotype quite quickly (which was made even easier by my educational aspirations), I did not have access to the gatekeeper – Mrs. Evans, the founder and former CEO – often enough (or for long enough) to have the types of conversations that would allow her to get to know me separate from this stereotype. Thus, when my project was on the precipice of falling apart, and a professor told me

it was because I was white that the NPCDC – in particular, Mrs. Evans – did not want me writing the agency’s history, I thought that this could very likely be true. And, with minimal access to Mrs. Evans, there was little that I could do to shift her perspective of me. I only wish that if race was that important to her, she would have turned me away from the get-go. Yet, the others at the agency did begin to distinguish me from the stereotype. Indeed, by simply talking about my past work and my personal and professional experiences and strongly held views on economic and workforce development, I quickly became valued for my perspective. This professional perspective equally impacted how I chose to engage with NPCDC and the assumptions that I brought with me to our initial meeting.

Before deciding to pursue post-graduate work in applied anthropology, I had a rapidly evolving career in the social service sector. I began in direct service, working as a youth counselor for teens phasing out of the foster care system. Then, I worked as a programmatic director at an adult educational and vocational school, where students could receive multiple services. At this school, students could get food, clothes, housing, bus tokens, daycare vouchers, basic education, GED, vocational training, and job coaching. Plus, there was an elementary, middle, and high school at the facility – and a daycare across the street, so students would not need to go far to pick up their children or grandchildren. I was skilled in designing vocational training programs and assisting “hard to employ” populations in securing jobs with living wages. Soon other agencies enlisted my help in designing vocational and employment programs for their students. These agencies and other groups began hiring me to determine which industries were currently booming in the area and which vocational training programs would lead to greater employment. I consulted with municipalities, nonprofits, and local corporations on workforce development. I sat on regional employment boards and economic development councils. In

addition to the organizational best practices and industry standards that I would help create, I began researching employment issues from an anthropological lens and presenting my findings to various employment collaboratives and mayoral councils with the goal of pressuring businesses and municipalities for various changes.

By the time I sat down with Gayle Evans in the board room of the North Portside Community Development Corporation, a primarily African-American development corporation in the predominantly African-American section of Portside, this professional experience and my passion for the good work done in social and youth-serving agencies was complemented by two years of graduate school in applied anthropology. I had decided to return to graduate school in 2009 because I longed for colleagues who valued both critique and action, and the theoretical and praxis-based insights that critical dialogue can spark.

Coming Together: Project Request

In February 2011, during my final semester of coursework, Gayle Evans sent a request to one of my mentors for an intern to work on a history project of the agency that she had founded. The email was forwarded to me as an interesting project for my internship and thesis research. I agreed to find out more information. So, I was introduced to Mrs. Gayle Evans, the founder and former CEO of NPCDC. This dominant housing, urban development and poverty programming agency identifies as a “social entrepreneurial organization” whose current mission is to “transform economically distressed areas of Portside into viable, thriving and sustainable neighborhoods.” With NPCDC now in its twentieth year, Mrs. Evans and other stakeholders wanted to bring me into the agency to “record the facts,” “set the record straight,” “make sure that people remember,” “honor those who’ve passed,” “preserve their legacy,” and “tell *our*

story” by composing the agency’s history, recording oral histories, and compiling all media and news coverage of this community development corporation.

While I was fine helping to write a nonprofit’s history, I was concerned by the elite status of this nonprofit. The founder was a well-connected, powerful, local leader, and this agency was an elite agency among the nonprofits in Portside. I was anxious about “studying up,” and I feared that the problems I anticipated encountering would make it too difficult to compose a history by which I could stand. Initially, I feared that this endeavor not only would entail privatizing the past for public consumption (Yelvington, et al 2002), but also would attempt to control the current context by silencing or delegitimizing other possible narratives (Trouillot 1995). At the beginning of my research, these fears were academic. Undergirding my work was an understanding of how the past is used in the present for a myriad of purposes – the politics of historical production. This understanding was matched by a wariness of the harm that could happen when the different narratives that existed were mapped onto a stratified field – where those with relatively more power advocated for their narrative to be composed as the official history in a way that silences, delegitimizes, or appropriates the role or perceptions of folks from the broader community who have relatively less power.

During the meeting, Mrs. Evans assuaged these fears by agreeing to a polyvocal historical narrative in which we would include the voices of various levels of stakeholders and an engaged approach to the construction of the agency’s history. I did not anticipate that a polyvocal history would be a panacea to the politics of representation or silencing that would happen during this project. Nor do I view polyvocal histories as automatically more collaborative than composing a single account of historical events. Mrs. Evans’ agreement to a polyvocal historical product was important because this was an active acknowledgement that points-of-views,

historical emphases, and evaluation of different events in the organization's past existed and would be included. This type of history also justified the inclusion of a broader swath of stakeholders, a move which I viewed as important to the composition of the agency's history not just the history of the agency according to Mrs. Evans. I decided to take on this work as part my thesis project. We agreed that the applied products of my thesis research project would be the history of the North Portside CDC that would meet the expectations of the corporation's founder and other key stakeholders; a collection of oral histories of NPCDC stakeholders, and a bibliography of works (or copied/printed collection of written work) that refers to NPCDC.¹ We defined stakeholders as those people who are invested in the continuation of the mission of this agency and the production of the history of this community development corporation.

Community Development Corporations

Community development corporations (CDCs) are third sector organizations that bring together “government (acting as a funder, adviser and agent of empowerment), private business (acting as funder, technical assistant, venture partner, board member and trainer), and the impoverished community (acting as innovator, manager, developer and source of direction)” in order to physically rebuild and empower communities devastated by capital disinvestment (Robinson 1996:1652). Originally conceived by investors, politicians and philanthropists seeking to mollify the increasingly violent collective outrage of inner city residents beleaguered by harsh and disruptive urban renewal policies, CDCs were considered a more responsive and community-based approach to urban redevelopment. This model was adopted by some activists who were committed to popular, grassroots movements to reinvest and redevelop the inner city and to develop an affordable housing model (Dreier 2003). These movements were opposed to unjust

¹ These expectations turned out to be ever-evolving and, at times, even contradictory.

development and housing initiatives and to policies that resulted in and maintained economic and social/racial inequality. The original aim of CDCs were to correct three market failures: “(1) the inability of potential investors to see opportunities in the neighborhood, (2) profit maximization that prevented socially conscious investing, (3) and social/legal restrictions on investment such as zoning laws” (Stoecker 1997a:4). In a sense, CDCs were attempting to act as conscientious, community-based capitalists.

The CDC model held a great deal of promise for many community reinvestment and redevelopment activists across the United States. Yet the potential that the CDC model held for activists became increasingly difficult to achieve, was unarticulated altogether, or was realized but only through questionable compromises (Domhoff 2006; Taub 1990). The community-engaged approach to redevelopment represented by CDCs was situated within an emerging neoliberal framework that wedded the public and private sectors in the development of the urban core and embraced a social entrepreneurial ethos which encouraged nonprofits to become financially driven institutions. In the end, CDCs were pitted against community activists and CBOs that employed oppositional strategies for funding and support from local legislatures and public officials. As sociologist Peter Dreier articulates, “Protest groups shook the money tree and CDCs collected the rewards” (2003:197). Today, CDCs tend to devalue the community empowerment aspect of the model and to focus almost exclusively on brick-and-mortar development (Robinson 1996). Some scholars claim that CDCs have not done enough to create affordable housing, as they choose to use their limited resources on the development of more lucrative commercial properties instead (Stoecker 1997b; Dreier 2003; Domhoff 2006; Taub 1990). This unrealized potential is actually an internal contradiction embedded within the CDC-model itself, according to Stoecker (1997a; 1997b; 2003). The CDC model, within the current

political economy of the United States, results in CDCs being politically constrained and economically insecure – society’s equivalent to middle managers

I, of course, was largely unaware of the complicated political history of CDCs or these contradictions within the model when I sought in 2011 to conduct research on/with the North Portside CDC. Actually, it took me the first four months to cobble together an outline of the history of the agency and to situate it within the current political-economic and social context of Portside.² Through this research, the particularities of the history of Portside and the story of this CDC emerged in contrast to, and in similarity with, the broader national story.³ I found that many of the early years of NPCDC mirrored the historical trajectory that was playing out in urban centers across the United States (Domhoff 2006). Yet, its history had a surprising twist.

NPCDC was not instituted during the first generation of CDCs – which focused primarily on job creation – in the 1960s. Nor was it created during the second-wave of CDCs in 1970s, which responded to redlining and displacement-based urban renewal by shifting focus from economic development to housing (Vidal 1992). The North Portside CDC wasn’t even a part of the explosion of CDCs in the 1980s as federal, state, and local governments withdrew from the pressing problems of urban poverty (Vidal 1992). The North Portside CDC was not established until 1992.

Despite the delay, the investment in CDCs in Portside arose out of the same social anxiety that prompted Senator Robert F. Kennedy to promote Bedford–Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation in the 1960s – namely urban unrest articulated through outbursts of violence and

² To uphold the anonymity of NPCDC, I have had to withhold citations from the following section that would give away the city’s location or the agency’s identity.

³ To ensure the anonymity of this agency, I will not provide a history of the city or agency. Nor will I detail the city’s demographics. Instead of providing these usual details what I have done is to include information about the city/agency as it becomes relevant to the different sections of this thesis.

destruction of property. While the collective outrage in the late 1980s in North Portside, a section of Portside that was overwhelmingly comprised of African-American households,⁴ was sparked by the death of African-American men during their arrests, the rising economic and political inequalities faced by African-Americans at the times of these men's deaths – plus mounting tension between residents and police – had been smoldering. Black families in the neighborhoods in North Portside earned incomes that were almost \$10,000 less than the city's average and faced unemployment rates that were triple the city's approximately seven percent unemployment rate. Even though African-American residents comprised less than one-quarter of the city's population and fewer than 10% of the city's police force, they made up almost 50% of the arrests (a percentage which had jumped by 10% in in just two years). The larger of the riots during this time period lasted for three nights, involved about 400 residents, spanned approximately a dozen city blocks, and caused relatively limited amount of property damage.⁵ This collective reaction served to highlight the expanding unrest of the urban poor caused by continual police harassment, racism and divisions within the African American community. Concern for local, working-class residents, instead of the business sector, was needed to guide the decisions of community leaders and politicians in order to re-establish social order. This included ameliorating relations between police and poor residents who had long been the target of excess abuse and racism. Similar to the approach of other cities in the 1960s and 1970s, Portside received an increase in funding earmarked for North Portside and began to implement a mode of urban (re)development and community control to better the living and business

⁴ North Portside was over 80% "African-American/Black." The population of African-American/Black residents in the total city is approximately 25%.

⁵ According to accounts, rioters burned and looted one grocery store, torched trash bins and one automobile. Seven people were injured.

conditions of North Portside residents that would incorporate, at least in name, community members.

North Portside Community Development Corporation was established within this influx of funds. The NPCDC initially went by the name Harold Parker Neighborhood Development Corporation (HPNDC), in recognition of its ties to the Harold Parker Neighborhood Service Center, a beloved and well-established, community-based organization, which employed many of the founding board members of NPCDC, and has long served (and continues to serve) the needs of North Portside's most vulnerable residents. Indeed, in determining the scope of the agency, the founding board members decided not to replicate the social, health, and basic human services that the neighborhood service center currently provided the poorest of the neighborhood's poor. NPCDC's inaugural mission statement claimed that "HPNDC is a not-for-profit, community-based organization which brings together residents, neighborhood groups, donors, agencies and funders to create and expand opportunities for the residents of North Portside to improve the physical, economic, educational, cultural and social quality of their lives." The agency sought to offer a holistic approach to righting economic inequality and bringing about a more just and equitable society through a mixture of development and service programs.

To this end, NPCDC first decided to pick their priorities based upon the community's desires. These were determined by asking community members what they would want from a new agency dedicated to improving the community. To do this, the newly formed agency paid and trained local community members to survey other neighborhood residents. Thus, NPCDC enacted the community empowerment ideal of the CDC-model for urban development. The results of this community survey showed that residents most wanted to own their own homes,

clean up the streets, push out the criminals, reduce the amount of drugs in their neighborhoods, gain access to the capital necessary to open up their own businesses, and patronize businesses owned by their own neighbors.

The NPCDC achieved these priorities through a number of programs – some seemingly more empowering than others. They enacted the concerns of the community by organizing anti-drug marches, competing for programmatic funding that would require tougher penalties for loitering and drug charges, and demanding that the county enforce building codes and penalize offenders. At the same time they used the programmatic funds for youth programming and homeowner project assistance so that poor homeowners could secure funds to spruce up their properties. They also offered peer-to-peer lending and small business development classes. In terms of their brick-and-mortar development, their impact is seen on the built environment. They have developed five commercial projects and four housing projects.

Today, the NPCDC continues to expand, and the diversity of its programs persists. It provides first time home buyers classes, and foreclosure and financial literacy workshops; offers extensive youth programming at multiple sites; and assists residents who are attempting to start up small businesses or find work. NPCDC counts among its most recent accomplishments a new Walmart, which it attracted to an abandoned shopping center in North Portside. NPCDC sees this as continuing its legacy of attracting both private and public funding to Portside's poorest area. Moreover, as is the strategy of other agencies with the CDC-model, this agency has recently enlarged its mission to include neighboring communities. Thus, NPCDC now serves all communities in Portside and has expanded its programming to job training and placement for men and women with limited employment options due to records that appear when their backgrounds are checked. The agency has also used its political clout and elite nonprofit status

to attract and expand green industry jobs and to advocate for light rail and greening public transportation.

Four aspects of NPCDC's more activist history gave me hope for our burgeoning partnership. First, the agency was built upon the suggestions of the broader community and enacted by a board that was filled with community activists and leaders. Importantly, this history and the values reflected in reaching out to the community had been carried forward by what I refer to as, "the old guard" of the board – the board members who were teachers, social workers, pastors and community activists. These board members continued to be committed to economic or urban revitalization. They articulated an understanding of systemic and institutional inequality as the driving force of divestment, at the same time that they sought to ameliorate the effects of this inequality on individual families and burgeoning business owners. In a city where the vast majority of nonprofit programming appear to work from a change model that presupposes that people living in poverty are culturally, morally, or cognitively deficient, finding an agency that holds tight to structural and institutional understandings of inequality – even if it does so quietly, as has become the *modus operandi* of NPCDC – is no small feat.

Second, in an environment in which most CDCs had completely dropped the community empowerment ideal of the CDC-model, the NPCDC stood out among their contemporaries. The board members, with whom I worked most closely, primarily those in the old guard, espoused a narrative which placed value on community empowerment. Mrs. Evans' face never lit up when discussing brick-and-mortar development, or even the successes in various social and youth programming, the way it did when discussing the community marches organized at the community's request:

We would turn out over a hundred people for each march. "Up with hope. Down with dope," we'd chant. "We got a ways to go. But we're going together. Hand in

hand and block by block,” I’d say to the cheering crowds over the PA...Bands and school children. Families and university students. We all marched. We all rallied. We worked together.

Similarly, Mrs. Jean Jones recollected with great pride one of the lasting legacies of NPCDC – the parent-teacher-student event that has taken place within North Portside at the commencement of each school year since 1992. This event was established to assuage tensions and ameliorate relations between the public school system and the primarily black community of North Portside.

Mrs. Jones:

Some of the same teachers and principals have been coming since the beginning. Although, at the beginning it was difficult to convince teachers to come to North Portside, they were so biased against this neighborhood. But, now they -- well some of them...especially the ones who have shown up each year -- see the community as a resource and an asset. Not a barrier. And, the community can better represent itself to the principals and teachers. We love our students and we want and are willing to do whatever we need to do to ensure that they graduate. That’s the message we send. We also do workshops so parents know how to better work with the schools.

Even some of the newer board members, like the then-president and banker, Nicholas Carter III, took time to speak with me about how important community empowerment is to NPCDC’s mission,

We need a strong community who can advocate for itself with NPCDC to bring about the kind of change that isn’t just good for North Portside, but will benefit all of Portside. It is my understanding that our youth programs – regardless of the type of program – all seek to empower our youth and teach them the importance of civic engagement and giving back to their community. We hope these lessons will stick with them and even spread through them to their families.

Even when board and staff members seemed to conflate the personal or individual empowerment found in most of their programming with collective or community empowerment, as Mr. Carter does above, they would almost always tie personal empowerment to the collective good or to giving back to the community. Thus, even in the more conservative sectors of this agency,

individual prosperity was never the final aim; the good of the entire community was eventually articulated as the ultimate goal.

Third, unlike the one dimensional approach to economic development employed by many CDCs both in Portside and nation-wide, NPCDC has always taken a multi-pronged approach. Like other CDCs, they attempt to enhance the community's value by building commercial properties and to assist lower-income residents by creating affordable residential properties. Yet, to this mix, NPCDC has long assisted individuals in securing economic security through creative development projects that are tied to a promise to hire an agreed-upon number of local residents and programming aimed at assisting individuals in becoming economically secure. These programs have included small business development programs, job training projects, and peer-to-peer lending. At certain periods throughout their history, NPCDC was involved in all of the development projects and economic programs mentioned above. At the minimum, NPCDC has staffed programs that focused on assisting people in securing employment and affordable housing for first time home buyers.

Fourth, there did seem to be *an NPCDC* that would carry the agency through current contextual complications that I will describe in the next section. Thus, I interpreted the tensions between the old and new guard on the board, the distance between the new guard on the board and the staff, and the complicated relation NPCDC had to the community as transitory events that were created, in part, by local and statewide political and economic realities that temporarily threatened the existence of NPCDC. Moreover, daily observations and conversations led me to believe that NPCDC was "the community." The old guard and many of the longstanding board members viewed the NPCDC staff members as family. Indeed, during a conversation with Mrs.

Jones, she reflected upon the intimacy between the board and the staff and the strength of the organization's identity,

When a staff member had a baby, we would throw them a baby shower -- clients, staff, and the board would all show up. We were tight like that. Those babies were CDC-babies. They were all of our babies. We even called them CDC-babies. We were one big family. We had our differences but there was real love.

Although she was comparing the current, more contentious environment, to the recent past, this type of fictive-kinship and organizational family was still evident in the daily operations of NPCDC. Moreover, this fictive-kinship was strengthened by the crossover between board, staff, and clients. Mrs. Necole Boudreux-Black, a longtime board member and social worker, sought assistance from NPCDC when the roof of her house was damaged by a storm. Additionally, her nephew, Clarence Black, worked NPCDC's front desk, and her grandson participated in the youth programming. Similarly, the administrative assistant, Yvonne Austin, participated as a client in the first time home buyers program, and her children engaged in the youth programs. All of the above points are important because, together, they outline a CDC that is pretty unique in its serious commitment to a community that is peopled by families and individuals – some of whom work for NPCDC or are related to board members – striving not only to find employment and affordable housing, but also to build enough wealth to ensure economic security. This is quite a different community than the disembodied, abstracted “community” that will eventually be aided by the many CDCs who take a field-of-dreams approach to urban re-development – “if you build it, they will [eventually] come” – and probably bring jobs. Furthermore, the seeming strength of the agency and the connection of NPCDC to the community throughout its existence over the past twenty years, led me to hypothesize that democratic decision making and inclusion of a broad swath of stakeholders for this polyvocal history could still be enacted, despite the currently complicated context.

Yet, for the past twenty years, NPCDC has been imperfectly working and expanding its influence within seriously flawed systems and continues to be compromised by its implication in the very webs of oppression and inequality that its founding board of directors and CEO (had) hope(d) to change. Indeed, over time, even the initial impetus for action –economic equality and divestment in North Portside – seems to have been forgotten. The old guard on the board – full of activists, educators, social workers, and church leaders – is in the process of being supplanted by a new flank of bankers, financiers, lawyers, and real-estate professionals. And to the old guard, this feels like usurpation of a beloved organization by friendly foes who do not possess a shared understanding of the importance of this organization for the community. On a couple of occasions, this schism was lightly intimated by careful board members with comments by the old guard, such as “they don’t know our history,” “the newer members don’t show up for the community,” and “they don’t get all that we’ve achieved and what our vision was.”

It is important to note that from a current perspective; however, early funding and board decisions, led by Mrs. Evans, seem to have paved the way for threats to the agency’s links to the broader community. Following the liberal definition of community used by CDCs across the country, no slots on the board, which runs the organization, have ever been specifically allocated for community members (or staff members other than the ED). Indeed, NPCDC even appealed to the state board that oversees community housing development organizations (CHDOs) for special consideration since one-third of its board are not representatives of the low income community, a federal stipulation for being considered a CHDO and being eligible for this funding. In a move that placed NPCDC and Mrs. Evans, herself, in opposition to more radical activists in Portside, Mrs. Evans collaborated with the police department to secure a Department of Justice grant which increased the severity of charges for crimes such as minor drug possession

and loitering, which resulted in criminalizing a larger portion of the population. So, when presented with the opportunity for broad-based representation and community involvement, the NPCDC made conservative and exclusive moves early on and under the guidance of their founding director.

Similarly, without ever having articulated a mission statement that is explicit about the NPCDC's commitment to economic justice and reinvestment in North Portside, or a commitment to community empowerment and personal economic security, NPCDC is at risk of becoming just another CDC. This looks like a one dimensional approach to urban development that does not seek to empower the community or provide any social and youth programming within a broader social or economic justice framework.

In 2011, during my work with NPCDC, the struggles of pulling together two contradictory missions – community empowerment and urban development – was then, more than ever, at risk of being abandoned. I began my project at NPCDC during the nadir of the foreclosure crisis and stock market plummet. The impact that the economic downturn had on the organization was substantial. The programming aspect of the agency seemed to be operating on a bare-bones budget and was completely separate from the urban redevelopment projects and the board of directors. The everyday hum of work at NPCDC was punctuated by the anxiety of uncertainty and maxed-out workday agendas. Staff routinely blamed the economic depression and housing downturn for increased workloads due to reduced staffing and hours. They also worried about their jobs since the board of directors, which formally runs NPCDC, had distanced itself even more from everyday operations. Moreover, the executive director position was vacant, and filling this vacancy had created quite a kerfuffle within the board of directors. While these

tensions eventually exposed rifts within the agency, and community development efforts superseded community empowerment, this rift and precedence took time to ascertain.

Within this power vacuum, Mrs. Evans asserted herself with a natural and effortless approach that was received with appreciation and sighs of relief by stressed-out staff members. I noticed that anytime she made a request when she was at the site, the staff seemed to gladly carry out her wish. With the staff members still quite responsive to her requests, and as she easily stepped onto the well-worn path of spokesperson for NPCDC – a path she trod for 16 years – Mrs. Evans spoke and acted with an authority that was authentic but which she no longer officially possessed. The power of her presence was so palpable, and the staff’s deference to her was so clear to me, that I did not assume her opinions or agenda were shared by all of the staff...even though concurrence was readily available and quickly articulated by agreeable staff. Despite my healthy skepticism, I failed to question who was requesting the history. I assumed that the request for the agency’s history was a request from NPCDC. I failed to differentiate this individual from the organization when considering the request. Yet, I did go to great lengths to ensure that the agency’s history, as seen by a broad collective of differently positioned stakeholders, would be the history composed, rather than a history according to Mrs. Evans.

Negotiating the Final Project

All of these contradictions and complicities, along with the distance between the organization and the community, created quite a conundrum for me. Vague theoretical concerns, for which I had no evidence when beginning my work with the NPCDC, had intensified and solidified six months in, as I deepened my understanding of CDCs generally and of NPCDC’s history specifically. The history and experience that I gathered caused me to consider whether I could

remain committed to a project with an organization about which I was highly skeptical. What were the risks of engaging an agency that was urban development's equivalent to mid-level managers? Would I be helping those who were actually bringing about economic equality for African Americans in North Portside or assisting those simply interested in reproducing their own labor and expanding their own influence? These are the questions that kept me in limbo with this project as I worked through the preparation for the public history and oral history portion of the thesis project and finalized my research plan.

I decided to stick with the project because I believed there were ways to make it mutually beneficial for NPCDC and for me. In thinking through the above questions, I first considered the dynamic of local actors working within broader systems in this particular (Portside) context. From the activist anthropologist literature, I had learned that we all enter into collaborations compromised and complicit in larger systems (Hale 2006a; Speed 2008; Checker 2005). Thus, I interpreted the above context and the indeterminate positioning of this agency – both of and above the community – as a probable strategy. While one that I personally would not have chosen to employ, it seemed a common enough survival strategy when working within seriously compromised contexts. Driving this point home was a mentor's admonishment of my research in Massachusetts years prior resounding in my ear: "Don't make the common mistake of academics and blame the neighborhood agencies doing the truly subversive work of trying to bring about positive change in black neighborhoods or for poor people. Follow the money *all the way up*."⁶ Contextualizing these broader lessons was one of my professors, who had longstanding relations with the founder and explicitly told me, "This is the best Portside has to offer." Through this exploration, I came to accept as valid – both ethically and contextually – the presupposition that

⁶ Because I have chosen to attempt to uphold this agency's anonymity, I cannot situate this agency and its funding within larger contexts. To follow the advice of my mentor in Massachusetts would cause me to risk exposing the agency.

NPCDC was the best that Portside – with its regressive institutions, oppressive systems and lack of social justice movement – had to offer.

Yet, I knew that I could not just give the agency the history the founder initially requested and then simply subject it to criticism as if I hadn't actually been an author – and thus possessed a great deal of influence in the creation – of such a document. Working in such a way seemed both ethically questionable and methodologically invalid. So, what could I do?

The answer to this question depended upon what was not only possible for CDCs but what had actually been done by communities using the CDC model. Stoecker (2003) and Nembhard (2008) informed my thinking here. Within their writings were specific examples of CDCs that utilized democratic processes, employed horizontal dialogue, were inclusive of actual residents, and really strove to enact the ideals of the CDC model. In my thinking, the NPCDC's history and the uniqueness of its dedication to social service and employment services positioned NPCDC perfectly for such an endeavor. Plus, the tension within the board between the old guard of community activists, social workers and school teachers, and the new guard of bankers, real-estate professionals, and attorneys seemed as though it could be reconciled by opening the board up to local residents. Indeed, one way to ensure an agency is responsive to a community is to give the community a voice, something that hadn't happened organizationally since the first years of this organization.

The desire for an agency that was responsive to the community on the one hand, yet a fear of losing control on the other, kept the more progressive faction of the board from considering reintegrating the community's voice into the agency in a meaningful way. This is what I finally identified as an important tension and issue that my thesis research project could address. As I mentioned in the previous section, NPCDC's organizational identity and

connection to the community seemed strong enough so that the current context would not seriously undermine our work together. But to do this type of project would require me to fully align with this organization.

I turned to the critically engaged approach to research (Hale 2001; Hemment 2007; Lyon-Callo 2004; Speed 2008; Osterweil 2013). I appreciated the value of programming that this agency did to assist individuals with attaining economic security, so much so that I had jumped in and began working with their clients on resume writing and teaching employability workshops. I joined in on hallway conversations about programming challenges and resource allocation. I provided data from my research to the grant writer to facilitate his work. In short, I was a participant in the daily operations of this organization. Once the bigger questions were more or less settled, this active daily positioning made it easy for me to decide to politically align and fully engage with this organization. I saw the good work that they did and the many ways in which “the community,” “the agency,” and even “the clients” and “the board” overlapped causing the boundaries to be beautifully murky, subversive, and ready for being used for the greatest positive impact for this community. Indeed, it was after the community, the agency, and the clients came together to address the deaths of local teens from daily shootings in 2012 that I saw just how responsive to and aligned with the community this agency could be. This experience was powerful. I needed a project that reflected this shift.

I decided to dedicate my resources to really understanding and representing the happenings at this agency in relation to the funders and more powerful players in urban development and in relation to the community.⁷ I began to see these tensions playing out within

⁷ As with all CDCs, NPCDC works to secure both public and private grants. NPCDC also relies on money-generating efforts through real-estate development projects, fundraising events, the requirement of a minimum donation for board members, and charging clients for services rendered. I cannot discuss a history of NPCDC’s specific funding sources without potentially risking their anonymity. Likewise, I cannot go into detail regarding who

the agency itself and hoped to examine them more fully. I would do this by looking at the uses of the past in the present.⁸

Indeed, I hoped that reviewing the historical outline that I had put together would serve to assuage any agency rifts by having them come together around a critically engaged discussion of the past among stakeholders at a variety of levels – board member, employee, client, community member, and youth. Like Hale (2006b), I hoped this process would lay groundwork for the organization to further democratize its processes and give voices and power to community members. Finally, in turning this into a (semi-)public history project, I could re-engage community stakeholders in a process centered on this agency. My hope was that this would turn out so well that those on the board interested in being more responsive to the community could use it as evidence for the benefits of re-engaging the community. Methodologically, I hoped that engaging a broad swath of stakeholders would ensure the scholarly integrity of the history by establishing myself as an independent but engaged actor, not merely Mrs. Evan’s scholarbot. This seemed especially important since the agency would likely rest the authority of this history on my credibility as a scholar.

In short, I decided to stick with this project because I thought that I had found a focus and a scope that would be mutually beneficial and interesting. I could maintain my integrity and they could get a document from which they could pull any pieces for whatever purposes they saw fit, at the same time that we would be democratizing the organization and giving voice to the broader community. I was excited about the project and ready to proceed. The nine months of

the more powerful urban development players were in North Portside. Yet, the stratification of development in Portside mirrored other cities in the country. Both private developers, with their capital and ability to flexibly and quickly respond to opportunities, and large city housing departments, with their institutional power and ties to government, tend to be the more powerful players within urban development projects.

⁸ To uphold the anonymity of this agency, I have refrained from sharing this research.

preparations for reaching out to the agency's stakeholders were nearing completion. I was ready to start!

Chapter III: Critically Engaged Research Design

This chapter explores engaged research issues that arose during this project, many of which I encountered because I was pairing engaged ethnography with studying up. This exploration will occur in dialogue with other scholars practicing engaged ethnography, who have written about their own challenges or similar topics. These dilemmas relate to, and problematize, three aspects dear to the engaged ethnographic endeavor. The first relates to the question that engaged researchers keep in the forefront of their mind, “anthropology for whom?” The second dilemma draws attention to issues of reciprocity. The third issue examines the notion that we must make our work useful to and useable by our collaborators. By engaging in this conversation, my hope is that the points that are problematized will lead to greater refinement of this anthropological approach. But first, I will describe critically engaged research and position my project within this endeavor.

Engaged ethnography is a descriptive category for anthropological praxes that challenge anthropologists to reconsider traditional approaches to research processes and products; knowledge claims; ethics, and the relationship between scholars and research participants.⁹ The roots of engaged ethnography are varied. They can be traced back to the action-oriented research methods of Sol Tax during the 1950s (Tax 1952); the pedagogy of liberation taught and examined by Freire (1970) and the more militant and radical version of participatory action research developed by South American scholars in La Rosco, which included Fals Borda (1979),

⁹ Today, engaged ethnography includes the Hale-style activist anthropology that brought me back to anthropology, Lassiter-inspired collaborative anthropology, militant anthropology à la Sherper Hughes, militant ethnography as coined by David Juris, critically-engaged anthropology (Lyon-Callo; Speed), and humanistic anthropology (Heyman), to name just a few.

Bonilla, Castillo (1987), and Libereros. The roots of engaged ethnography include the feminist scholars who were among the first to brave the professional ramifications of explicitly identifying and allying with the women in their studies (Enslin 1994; Stacey 1988). The roots of engaged ethnography extend to Marxist scholars who employ *kritik* and an understanding of structural violence (Farmer 1999, 2003; Mintz 1986; Singer and Baer 1995; Wallerstein 1974; Wolf 1982), and to scholars – many outside of anthropology – who pen cultural critiques or employ critical race theory (Chávez 2008; hooks 1989, 1990). Despite the divergent root system of engaged ethnography, most anthropologists writing today highlight the importance of the “critical turn” that characterized anthropology in the 1970s and the inability of fully addressing these concerns through reflexive, textual and epistemological means alone (Fabian 1983).

Although Harrison saw critical reflection as important for mapping “a path or paths to an anthropology designed to promote equality and justice-inducing social transformation” (Harrison 1991:2), political struggle that challenged exploitative social practices and social formations would be needed to decolonize anthropology (Hale 2007; Harrison 1991; Speed 2008; Smith 1999), or create an anthropology that is committed to human liberation and social justice (Gordon 1991; Harrison 1991; Kelley 2002; Scherper-Hughes 1995). Some scholars focused on the importance of creating equitable research relationships where anthropologists would engage in horizontal dialogue and interactions as co-researchers with community members to collaboratively define the research questions and goals (Jiménez and Willerslev 2007). Others emphasized the importance of the continual interrogation of the relations of power inherent in research relationships (Hale 2006). As Harrison notes: “activist anthropologists are committed to and engaged in struggles against racist oppression, gender inequality, class disparities, and international patterns of exploitation and 'difference' rooted largely in capitalist world

development” (Harrison 1991:2). Others note the necessity of coming together in solidarity across differences (Speed 2008) or the need to challenge ethnographic authority and theories based solely on western precepts and assumptions (Jordan 1991). These are the ethical underpinnings of the engaged ethnographic endeavor and thus inform the methods employed, products created, and field relations forged.

Traditionally, the engaged ethnographic approach to the research process and products is one in which the anthropologist has explicitly politically aligned with a marginalized group in struggle and seeks to involve members of this group as participants at every step of the research process. At the same time that the anthropologist is bringing the participants into the research process, she aims to offer her own labor and time to those tasks that are important to the group with which she is aligned. Complicating this effort is the call for the ethnographer to not shy away from critique (Hale 2006). Instead, the engaged ethnographer critically engages with her partners, even if this means critiquing the organization or movement with which she is aligned (Breunlin and Regis 2009; Stuesse In press). Although the ideal for collaborative anthropology is to co-create research products, at the minimum, anthropologists seek input from their collaborators on that which they pen themselves. Additionally, they seek to make their scholarship useful to their collaborators, and some also seek to make it more engaging and accessible to broader publics.

Within this collaboration, engaged ethnography seeks to answer the question “anthropology for whom?” At its broadest, this question stems from a desire to democratize knowledge production by the off-centering of the university that happens when collaborators also become co-producers of knowledge – theorists in their own right (Rappaport 2005). This coproduction of knowledge is the product of actors who are situated in dialogue, each possessing

partial, fluid perspectives (Stuesse In press; Hemment 2007; Hale 2008). Truthful accounts of knowledge of the world therefore emerge from particular bodies located in a specific time and space, both literally and relationally, who are engaged in dialogue with one another, often, across differences (Haraway 1988).

As such, validity cannot solely rest in the academy. Results must also be validated by those in the organized group in struggle. This double-validation – by other anthropologists and by other movement participants or community members – ensures that the work is more thorough, less biased, less influenced by personal feelings or opinions in considering and representing facts – in short, more objective – than that which is generated by lone scientists operating under the unchallenged mantle of objectivity. Through this process, engaged ethnographers find themselves reclaiming and then championing objectivity (Hale 2008; Stuesse In press).

The ethics of engaged ethnography are imbedded within its methods. Engaged scholars seek to establish a mutually beneficial, mutually transformative relationship with participants (Lassiter 2008; Pierre 2008; Rappaport 2005) and tend to share a commitment to social justice that is “attentive to inequalities of race, gender, class, and sexuality and aligned with struggles to confront and eliminate them” (Hale 2008:6). In order to enact these principles, scholars enact methods that include “horizontal dialogue and broad-based participation in each phase of the research; critical scrutiny of the analytical frame; and thorough critical self-reflection” (Hale 2008:8). Commitment to such an approach and the resulting conversations and conflicts among research participants seeking to intentionally and collaboratively advance a struggle is activism itself.

Based on the above description, I considered my thesis project to be part of the critically engaged ethnographic endeavor. The original aim of this project was to wed my internship deliverable with my community engaged and activist research sensibilities. I sought to do this by writing a history of North Portside CDC that would be collaboratively produced and inclusive of the voices of multiple layers of stakeholders invested in the continuation of the mission of the agency and the economic revitalization of a community beleaguered by disinvestment and oppressive or neglectful development policies.¹⁰ Had this project come off as planned, the target beneficiary that I had in mind was NPCDC, as a representative of the economic revitalization effort in and broader community of North Portside. In negotiating this collaborative history, I aimed to enact the ethical principles of engaged ethnography by decolonizing the research process and democratizing the process for deciding who had a right to be included in telling this story.

Public history meets many of the tenets of engaged research design (Rappaport 2005). In my case, the history was designed to be collaborative and polyvocal, one in which a broad range of stakeholders would be consulted. To be clear, I am not promoting an idea that polyvocality is

¹⁰ My original thesis questions were born from the conversations and questions that arose during the compilation of the preliminary working draft of this agency's history. According to my research proposal: "The first set of questions seek to evoke the relationship between identity and the past and is dedicated to showing how the consumers of history make sense of past historical documents in their quest to produce an organizational history for future use (Trouillot 1995; Yelvington 2002). Because I am part of the creation of this history, the reactions of the stakeholders of NPCDC to that which I compose should yield important insights into the dominant views of the agency. What is important about the past and who should be included in a history about the NPCDC, as well as evaluative responses by NPCDC stakeholders regarding what is considered appropriate discourses into which the NPCDC's history fits, will be elicited through my participation in this process and my facilitation of this process among stakeholders. Also included will be an exposure of (some of the) silences created in the production of history and the implications of these silences (Trouillot 1995).

The second set of questions aim to examine the relationship between the dominant discourses of neoliberalism, (especially those found within legislation and funders' requests for proposals) that guide common sense notions of morality, community, progress, and development, and efforts (like that by the NPCDC) to gain local control over these discursive notions. What are the processes whereby certain historical discourses become dominant over others, and what are the implications of these discourses for the creation of organizational identity and imagined community in the present? How does the intersection of certain funding streams and programs with particular discourses of development, poverty and community impact the process of (re)creating an organizational identity and imagined community? What are the ways in which notions of an imagined moral community are undermined by neoliberal conceptions of flexible citizenship and middle class morality?

inherently more engaged or collaborative than a history that presents a single perspective. I tend to agree with the critiques of polyvocality, especially in projects which are not collaborative.¹¹ However, by including stakeholder participation even in the editing stages of the historical production (which I had planned to do), I could ensure that I was not one of those academics who uses polyvocality to make their history appear as if it comes from the community when really they have had the final say-so. Requesting that the history be polyvocal – which is to say, that the history include multiple perspectives of the past where there was diverging perspectives, was my attempt (1) to set the stage for off-centering Mrs. Evans' perspective in order to write the agency's history – not the history of the agency according to Mrs. Evans, and (2) to ensure that the public's past was not privatized for the promotion of the agency, alone. In keeping with the engaged ethos, I originally negotiated for a democratized decision making process that would employ horizontal communication. Although I did not have an opportunity to employ the engaged research design that I crafted within my research protocol, my approach to the preparatory historical work was collaborative.

The methods I employed were as follows. I began the compilation of the historical bullet points according to Mrs. Evan's request. I color-coded various topics about which she was interested and added a few more areas that were of interest to other members of the working group and myself – funding in green; development projects in red; direct service projects in blue; board and staff members in black; community empowerment in purple, guest speakers in black, and partnership projects in orange. Mrs. Evan's asked that I begin the archival work by using the board of directors meeting minute packets. Since the contents found within these packets were agreed upon as an accurate representation of the organization by a vote each month from the

¹¹ For a solid critique of polyvocal ethnographies (which my ethnography would not be), see Mascia-Lees, et. al. 1989.

board. This seemed like a solid way to get to know the organization and those who might be invested in this history from the perspective of the formal agency. As I went through I made a list of people who may be interested in participating in the collaborative history. I went through year by year first. Questions, people of interest, and commonly used abbreviations in one notebook. Color-coded historical bullet points in another. Then I went through the years following specific projects – the narrative of the development of a program or the construction of a building. Sometimes I worked alone on these tasks. Other times I worked with the working group or an individual from the working group. The working group comprised people with whom Mrs. Evans was comfortable working closely. Mrs. Boudreaux-Black, Mrs. Jones, Kenneth, and other executive and direct service staff of NPCDC.

What was collaborative about this? Once the basic terms of the history were negotiated – polyvocal history collaboratively produced that seeks input from a broad range of stakeholders, who was included in the working group; where and when I performed the archival work; the threads being followed through history; how and where various projects were included in the historical timeline, and the research timeline (including when we would open it up to a broader array of stakeholders) were all collaboratively decided. In order to facilitate collaboration, I chose to literally situate myself within the agency while compiling historical bullet points for discussion. I situated myself not only in the agency’s physical space, but also, relationally, as a colleague. As a former workforce development and poverty programming professional, I was tagged by staff on a regular basis to help with the agency’s operations.

When composing history in collaboration with others, critical questions that might go unasked, or may be left until the end, weave themselves into the creative process explicitly and early on. These questions require that scholars recognize the politics of historical composition

and question how the past is being used in the present (Trouillot 1995). What's being included? What's being left out? Who's being left out? What records are we using? What tone will we use? From where will this history draw its authority? Where do we begin the story? How do we situate the history? For whom is this history being written? During my thesis project, many of my conversations with collaborators focused on "what is history;" who gets to be involved in this history writing process (and at what point), and what constitutes legitimate historical evidence. Like many those of the conversations described by other engaged scholars, these questions comprise the critical conversations into which one delves when co-producing history with a community group. And, like other scholars, I view critically engaged research as a reliable route to producing scholarship that is both critical and sensitive.

Anthropology for Whom?

Just as "anthropology for whom?" in its broadest sense challenges traditional politics of knowledge production and ties this to validity and re-visioning of objectivity, this question, at its most direct, urges anthropologists to think through just who is benefiting from the knowledge, processes and products in which they are engaged. This phrase serves as a heuristic that urges engaged ethnographers to enact their "mutuality" (Heyman 1998) or "explicit political alignment" (Hale 2006a) in each phase of the research process. For whom are we designing the research? For whom are we employing our time, effort, resources, intellectual and logistical/tactical work? Who does our analysis benefit? Lassiter (2008) responds to these questions by emphasizing "the community," while Hale (2006a) stresses "the organized group in struggle." Regardless, the two main actors in an engaged research design tend to be

conceptualized as academia, represented by the scholar, and the movement/community/organized group in struggle, represented by our collaborators.

Yet for some engaged scholars, like myself, experience reveals “anthropology for whom?” to be more far more problematic during fieldwork than is generally presented ethnographically. Although the common response to this question with the name of a group or organization does fall in line with anthropological understanding of an organization as a “system of political action” (Pettigrew 1985:26), in the field we often encounter a situation that is far more multifaceted. For example, some scholars felt that there was no clear movement/community/organized group (Osterweil 2013; Pierre 2008; Gow 2008). For others, the relationship between the organization and the community/movement it represented proved to be ambiguous (Stuesse In press; Hemment 2007; and Halperin 1998). Still others brought analytic attention to the heterogeneity of their collaborators (Osterweil 2013; Stoecker 2003) or to the alignment (or lack thereof) of the ethics of collaboration with the ethics of the organization (Pierre 2008; Osterweil 2013; Pulido 2008). A consideration of these complexities, which I will present below, exposes the assumptions undergirding the common practice of responding to “anthropology for whom?” by simply naming one’s organized, marginalized group in struggle.

The unexamined expectation that a researcher will align with a movement rests on a presumption that the politics of marginalized groups are progressive or liberatory (Pierre 2008; Gow 2008). According to this assumed political stance, the ethics of collaboration and the ethics of the organization/movement should jibe together easily. It is assumed that the researcher and the community in struggle can have a “mutually beneficial, mutually transformative, egalitarian relationship” (Pierre 2008:117). But this isn’t always possible. Thus, when Pierre did not align with an actual Ghanaian organization, and when Gow’s Colombian co-researchers refused or

limited their engagement with the dominant indigenous movement with which he was enamored, their claims to doing activist research were met with skepticism and personalized critiques. Gow and his co-researchers' contradictory views of La María also expose another assumption--that the ethics/politics of a group are readily knowable. For me, it was impossible to empirically determine my collaborators' political sensibilities at the outset.¹²

Osterweil and Pierre note that the call to align with an organized group in struggle rests upon an unhelpful assumption that movements (and universities for that matter) are clearly delimited entities (Osterweil 2013). For example, Gow puts forth La María as a movement, albeit one that is a “series of happenings” that (2008:227), according to members, has “spanned 500 years” (2008:202) Members of the Italian Movimento di Movimenti (MoM), which Osterweil studies, claim that MoM is a “real thing” at the same time that they question the very definition of movement (2013). Like Osterweil, Pierre, and Gow, I was not aligned with a clearly delineated movement. The group with which I was aligned had been connected to and was a bi-product of multiple movements, all of which had more or less gone silent since the group's inception 20 years prior.

Both Pierre (2008) and Osterweil (2013) point out that, within engaged research, once movements are delineated as sites of struggle and activism (or action), academia is implicitly evoked as its binary opposite and is posited as a site of thinking, critique, reflexivity. Presenting movements as “heterogeneous, recursive, and networked structures that traverse supposed boundaries between object reality and ideational potential” (2013:615), Osterweil presents a compelling case for engaged ethnography and movements as an “interactive, self-informing process that is both activism and critique” (2013:616). Pierre also sees activist anthropology as an integrated process that breaks down the academe/activist binary (2008). For her, the

¹² I will discuss this in greater detail in chapter five.

integration occurs by “combining positionality/experience and politics” (2008:132). Pierre argues, drawing as many activist scholars do, from Collins (2000) and Lorde (1984), “what is most powerful and crucial – and therefore ‘activist’ – for our research is our conscious deployment of our unique individual and collective positionality toward truly liberatory politics” (2008:118). Understanding that the personal and political are also academic, she realized that “consciously positioned, politically engaged ethnographic practice has the potential to provoke uncommon conversations, the exploration of unpopular sociocultural issues, the discussion of seemingly ‘nonsubjects,’ disagreements, debates, and active participation in local constructions of identity” (2008:128). The commitment to such an approach and the resulting conversations is activism in itself. Like Pierre, I brought this stance with me each day when interacting with my collaborators.

With whom is one allying when the “ethnographic field... [looks] more like a barely assembled puzzle than a unified whole?” (Osterweil 2013:603). Similar to the critique of the idea of engaging a clearly delineated movement, anthropologists have noticed that often – in traditional writings about engaged and collaborative ethnography – the institution, individuals, and political ideals are contracted into one bounded, concrete, homogenous, organized entity working in harmony toward their liberatory goals. Field experience, however, reveals that, like Osterweil’s description of movements, those organized groups in struggle with whom we align, as anthropologists such as Stuesse (In press), Gow (2008), Hemment (2007), and Halperin (1998) observe, “are much more amorphous and transitional, at times even metaphorical or imagined” (Stuesse In press:3). NPCDC’s relation to the community was ambiguous. On the one hand, as discussed in the previous chapter, there were beautifully murky boundaries between who was a board member and a client, and families spanning all possible positions in relation to

NPCDC – board member, resident of surrounding neighborhood, employee, and client. Yet on the other hand, one of Mrs. Evans’ first comments to me regarding the relation between the community and the agency was, “we are in the community, not of the community.” Likewise, the old guard board members and employees were both seemingly dismissive, yet defensive, about the distance between the organization and the community. When I asked the staff about NPCDC’s relation to the neighborhood in which the organization was situated, they matter-of-factly stated that the community has “no idea who we are or what we do.” When I probed a little deeper, the staff member indicated that such outreach was a waste of time. Similarly, when asking about resident representation on the board of directors, Mrs. Jean Jones indicated that no board members lived inside of the bounds of North Portside, although some had business interests within the area. Immediately after this segment of our conversation, Mrs. Jones easily slid into talking about the agency’s connection to the community and celebrated the porous boundaries between NPCDC and the community.¹³

Halperin takes her understanding of community a step further and argues for community to be rethought and redefined, “not as a set of roads, rivers, dwellings, and geological features, not even as a network of defined and linked relationships. Rather, community is a dynamic, contentious, and changing process that plays out as a series of everyday practices by people who have or have had some link to [a particular place]” (1998:2, emphasis mine). Osterweil (2013) and Hemment (2007) tie these different threads to similarities between the researcher and our collaborators, who also are engaged in projects that require the messy business of collaboratively

¹³ During this conversation, Mrs. Jones indicated that insistence of representation by residents was a way to repress people who were trying to bring about positive impacts in an often ignored section of town. Of course, in my work in Springfield, I had seen exactly what Mrs. Jones was describing used to delegitimize groups and people who were skilled and attentive to marginalized neighborhoods. While definitely more complex than the responses of the others, her response to the distance between the agency and the community does show an ambiguity that tended to be deflected.

questioning, analyzing and figuring out what action to take next. I will discuss the ways in which I practiced community (or reciprocity) in the next chapter. This said, in addition to the murky boundaries and porous borders, the most salient experiences of NPCDC as a community organization were those in which the agency seemingly set aside its priorities to come together with neighbors and other agencies to address the horrendous gun violence that tolled in the new year in 2012, with shootings almost daily and the deaths of children mounting. Indeed, during the community meeting held at NPCDC's executive office building, the institution, the community, the individuals and the politics all aligned to rail against gun violence and press for community-based solutions. This experience was so powerful that my skepticism regarding how representative of the community this agency was softened.

I sought to address the question, "anthropology for whom?" by composing a collaborative history. As described earlier, in order to ensure that my efforts were contributing to the agency and the broader community in struggle and movement for economic equality, we agreed from the outset on a polyvocal history. Therefore, we would be acknowledging the heterogeneity of this organization and movement by recording multiple perspectives of stakeholders as a narrative model. This strategy has been used successfully to enliven conversation and encourage diverse readings of groups' and organizations' histories by collaborators (Combahee River Collective 1982; Rappaport 2005). I was confident that the methods involved in this collaborative history production, based on liberatory principles and democratic ethics, would move the organization back into alignment with the ideals upon which the CDC-model of urban development was based. I thought this project could demonstrate the benefits and ease of employing these methods. And, by successfully completing this collaborative history, I hoped to embolden the stakeholders who were interested in activism and

demonstrate to the more conservative stakeholders the merit of aligning with, and seeking input from, the community of North Portside. I believed this could have a lasting influence on this organization and the community.

Reciprocity, Building Relationships and Rose Colored Glasses

The purpose of this section is to look at a phase of research that is often glossed over by scholars writing about engaged ethnography – the beginning stages of research, in which we are most focused on the relationship building aspect of our projects. I am interested in looking more closely at the complications involved in building rapport and demonstrating reciprocity. I will discuss my own experience in conversation with the work of other engaged researchers.

The engaged ethnographic research agreement tends to be based on reciprocity.¹⁴ Scholars have long articulated the various goals of reciprocal relations. Within the literature that discusses anthropological methods, reciprocity has been seen as a tool for producing valid scholarship by gaining more accurate information.¹⁵ In more recent discussion of anthropological methods, the ethical (sometimes articulated as moral) aspect of reciprocity is emphasized. Thus, reciprocity is articulated as one way of ensuring the ethical ethnographer gives back to the community. In engaged ethnographic settings, scholars have defined reciprocity as “an ongoing process of exchange with the aim of establishing and maintaining equality between parties” (Maiter et al 2008: 305). This is evident in Checker’s letter to the environmental justice group with whom she hoped to research:

From what you explained to me yesterday, I think that your group would be an excellent place for me to learn about environmental justice organizing. I intend to

¹⁴ Within economic anthropology, reciprocity is defined broadly as “nonmarket exchange” (Sahlins 1988). To this Gell added that this exchange is characterized by mutuality, or participation, by both parties (1998).

¹⁵ See Firth for an example of the importance of reciprocity and sharing to field research.

participate in your group's activities as a volunteer; lending whatever assistance I can...I am committed to the cause of environmental justice and want to emphasize my intention to participate as an activist as well as to conduct research as an anthropologist... (Checker 2005:191).

As Checker's approach demonstrates, the engaged ethnographic ethos and terms of collaboration demonstrate her desire to seek an equitable exchange, which would maintain equality between parties. But it also illuminates another purpose for reciprocity in engaged ethnography, one that Maiter et al (2008) do not discuss, but is the impetus for seeking to establish reciprocal relations in the first place. Many engaged ethnographers, Checker (2005) included, talk about their desire to establish reciprocal relations not because these relationships are one way of enacting our code of ethics as researchers, but because it is an outgrowth of the political commitment we share with our sites as activists (see also Hemment 2007; Stuesse In press). The reciprocal relations resulting from this initial push are maintained both by the desire to "maintain equality between parties," and as a way to demonstrate our sincere commitment to a "cause" or a larger community. In other words, reciprocity is conceptualized within the scholarship of engaged researchers as the maintenance of something that both generates and subsumes these individual reciprocal relationships. This type of reciprocity serves to bring the actors within a specific sphere – the movement, the community – that they both work to maintain. Reciprocity toward both ends – maintaining equitable relationships and upholding the community/movement vis-à-vis demonstrating commitment – is important.

Within this mutually maintained space, actors share their time, talent, other individual resources, successes and, even, failures.¹⁶ This sharing and explicitly political aligning is what characterizes the practice of community/spirit of collaboration and firmly situates the

¹⁶ I do think that this sharing is somewhat akin to the economic anthropology concept of "sharing." But because this term has not been appropriated by our methods, like reciprocity has, and is contextually limited to pre-capitalist societies, the work needed to bring "sharing" into a methodological conversations is beyond the scope of this section.

anthropologist within the organization or movement. It establishes a “we,” a positioning that helps anthropologists overcome obstacles to engaged ethnography or dilemmas which can arise when working on sensitive topics. Halperin refers to these interactions as “the everyday practices of community” and claims that the only way to even get into the community with whom she collaborates is to give over to these types of experiences – the human side of research (1998:2). I helped the secretary’s daughter with her homework and covered a workshop she was scheduled to give. I brought back thoughtful gifts from my holiday travels; shared recipes and coupons, and picked up children and grandchildren who needed rides home from school. I grappled with the questions, creative solutions, and concerns of staff over pizza, and they entertained my lamentations about the commodification of basic human needs – like shelter and food. We joked, picked on each other, and sang songs during the slower periods of the week.

These mundane ways in which I tended to my research relationships were matched by connecting to NPCDC around major life events and tragedies. These were my strongest ties. I sat with Mrs. Jean Jones and Mrs. Necole Boudreaux-Black – two board members – as they mourned the loss of a sister and mentor, respectively. They stood by my side as my mom held the phone up to my grandmother, the woman who raised me, so I could tell her goodbye before she died. The founder called me the morning of my grandfather’s funeral, despite getting ready for their annual banquet which was later that day. She prayed for my grandfather, my family, and me over the phone, while I wept.

I contributed to the organization by performing other tasks as a way to demonstrate loyalty and express my commitment to the organization, which I thought would also solidify my burgeoning relationship with NPCDC. I helped clients with their resumes, taught workshops, cleaned out storage closets and organized storage units. I worked diligently on the history,

beginning with the board of directors meeting minutes as the founder had requested. I subsumed my own methodological preference to that of the founder's as a way to show respect for her and her knowledge of the agency.

Yet tying these practices of reciprocity into the maintenance of equitable relations, or my commitment to the broader community or even to the agency was difficult at NPCDC. First, the factions within the agency, leadership gap, and poor communication between stakeholders seemed both to undermine the creation of a "we" and to disrupt any larger meaning that could be constructed out of the sum or trajectory of my actions. For example, I taught classes, wrote resumes, provided information for grant narratives, and typed up notices. I framed these activities as contributing my labor toward the fulfillment of the mission of the agency (or, as contributing my labor to supporting economic equality and urban reinvestment through my work with NPCDC). Yet, because of the organizational challenges at NPCDC, my actions were not placed within a larger framework by key agency stakeholders. Without this broader framework for understanding my actions, they were simply a series of unrelated actions, disparate and individuated: I helped one employee by teaching a workshop; I helped a different employee's clients with their resumes; I provided the grant writer with some facts, and I assisted the administrative assistant with the language for some notices. Of course these actions fed my relationships with these individual employees, but they did not feed my relationship with the organization as a whole because they did not get back to the board of directors.

Second and relatedly, people must be present in order to establish a relationship with them. The board members who most needed to be brought into this arrangement were the ones who were most difficult to connect with and the least (and last) involved. Indeed, the situation at NPCDC at that time was one in which the people who had the most power – in terms of formal

decision-making powers – were the same individuals who were least present at the organization. This also tended to be the group that was most disconnected from the community and who least shared in an understanding of the development and reinvestment that the agency did as righting economic injustice. This is important because even if folks are not present on a day to day basis if they hold onto a shared narrative and see their participation – even if it is remote participation – as giving to a particular movement or community, then the shared space is maintained/the community is upheld (albeit in more of an imagined sense) and the efforts of those new to the scene (like me) are readily interpretable.

Absent a more organic way of establishing relationships with key stakeholders, I did attempt to strategically implement reciprocity and organizational contributions in order to further ensure the viability of my overall relations. The necessity of operating in such a calculating fashion felt inauthentic and insincere to me. Then I read Jackson's ethnography, *Real Black*, in which he fashions an entire alter-ego, anthroman, in order to facilitate the creation of relationships and advance his research agenda (2005). He notes that he anticipated what people would need in order to feel comfortable and provided that to them. Deferring to Mrs. Evans's instruction was one way I attempted to make her feel comfortable. Although she had no formal power within the organization, I hoped this would be passed on to those who did. Also, I would anticipate what would make Mrs. Jones, Mrs. Boudreaux-Black and Kenneth feel comfortable and more at ease with me when building these relationships.

Had the relationships I was developing at my ethnographic site—with the organization's founder and staff—been with members of the board—individuals who had formal, decision-making power within the organization, my practice of sharing and reciprocity would have translated into a stronger relationship with the organization. Instead these practices only

translated into stronger relationships with individual stakeholders who were not, ultimately, calling the shots.

Making Our Work Useful and Useable

Making our work useful and usable by our collaborators is another tenet of engaged ethnography. Anthropologists are called to create products to the specification of their sites to use as they see fit (Hale 2008). This tenet clearly acknowledges the community in struggle as collaborators who are most knowledgeable about their own needs and understanding of the strategies to ensure their own success. Yet, creating useful products can be quite problematic (Checker 2005; Pulido 2008; Dyrness 2008; Osterweil 2013; Pierre 2008; Hale 2001, 2006a, 2006b, 2008). The purpose of this section is to discuss the assumptions exposed when the researcher encounters problems with generating useable products.

The imperative to create products that are useful seems to rest on the assumption that the products can be both valuable and valid. And if this can't be achieved, then the desire to produce sound scholarship will take precedent. Hale explains that our collaborators who have been invested in developing the research questions will be dedicated to producing the most solid and valid scholarship possible (2006b). Yet, this is not always the case. In some instances, researchers may experience a contradiction between validity and utility.

While Mrs. Evans and I agreed at our initial meeting to a collaborative project that would result in a polyvocal history including a broad array of agency stakeholders—indeed, my participation was contingent upon these terms—I slowly came to realize that Mrs. Evans' understanding of what constitutes history and mine diverged sharply. During various conversations over time, she requested a history that:

- could be used for promotional and fundraising efforts and submitted to the university's archive as the agency's official history
- could be used as part of a walking tour and as part of NPCDC's 20th anniversary celebration
- only utilized the board of director's meeting minute packets as the archive
- only sought input from a few stakeholders whom she hand selected
- was not tied to any broader narratives or context and contained minimal narrative
- employed a disinterested, academic tone and relied on my role as a scholar for its authority

While these bullet points are concerning enough in themselves, it was the combinations in which they were often posited that were most disconcerting to me. Mrs. Evans, Nicholas Carter, the then-president of the board of NPCDC, and other stakeholders shared an interest in a history that would speak to potential funders, yet at the same time they wanted to place this history's authority in my identity as a scholar and have me submit the history to the archive as the official history. As I explain in greater detail below, I could not fathom how such a document could be written. Nor did I feel comfortable with this seeming disregard for the difference between promotional materials and scholarship.

In the past, I have written mythico-histories for nonprofits wanting to update their websites or better articulate their successes for grant applications. These renditions of the past were characterized by celebratory tones and teleological narratives. The point was clearly to use the past as part of a persuasive argument aimed at attracting potential funders. In my estimation, the contexts in which this type of history did appear – grant applications and the agencies' websites – were appropriate to the type of history being requested.

I have also worked on ethno-history projects for dying and soon-to-be-dislocated communities. In these projects, teams of graduate, undergraduate, and faculty interviewed scores

of current and former residents, piecing together and validating scads of oral histories with extensive archival work. Maps and newspaper articles, birth and death records and census information, and pictures and genealogical maps all contributed to the material that went into telling these communities' stories. The tone was measured and the history was complex. Unlike mythico-histories and promotional histories where only the glorious moments are represented, historical scholarship seeks to represent a complex and nuanced reality that can shed light onto the present. Thus, our collaborators' political needs may not always support the composition of the best scholarship possible.¹⁷

The tensions between products to be used toward particular strategic ends and those produced in the name of research elicit interesting ethical consideration, as well. For example, Pulido questions:

To what extent should one accommodate the needs and desires of one's research subjects? What are the political and ethical implications of privileging particular narratives? Where does my responsibility to the informant end and my role as researcher take precedence? (2008:362).

Pulido's questions acknowledge the relationship between reciprocity and product creation, as well as the difficulty that arises when the product being created could be scholarship itself, as can be the case with histories. These questions definitely arose during my research. Although I would not agree to amend the product to meet Mrs. Evan's changing specifications, I did negotiate through these differences to realign us with our original agreement and maintain the collaboration. I did this by integrating some of her methods into my approach to our project. To prepare for working with the groups of stakeholders, I compiled a preparatory history from the

¹⁷ Now, of course, I am not claiming that this is always – or, even, often – the situation in which engaged researchers find themselves. On the contrary, there are quite a few activist or engaged ethnographers who claim that striving to reconcile the utility of the product created with valid scholarship has brought about better scholarship that is valid in both the academic and activist realms. A solid example of this is the map Hale and his team produced for the Garifuna (2006a).

board of directors' meeting minutes that contained minimal narrative or context and in the early stages of this process I only reached out to those with whom she was comfortable. Although I shifted my approach somewhat, the sum of Mrs. Evans requests made me more insistent that the final steps of the production of the history adhere to our initial agreement.

Like anthropology for whom, the notion that engaged ethnographers should create useful products is most palatable when the researcher and site share political ideals and similar strategies for bringing about social change. When the useful products we are called to create are not commensurate with the political sensibilities of the engaged scholar, the collaborative researcher can end up back in the same situation from which she was seeking refuge – welcome scholars, please check your politics at the door (Hale 2008). It is against this retreat that some engaged scholars rally. Moving away from an emphasis on products, Dyrness (2008), Pierre (2008) and Osterweil (2013), in particular, call attention to the liberatory potential of collaborative production and engaged ethnographic methods themselves. They argue that scholars should not have to let go of our belief in liberatory political engagement in order to engage in more traditional approaches to social change just because this is where one is likely to find the most number of organized groups in struggle. Similarly, they question the disconnect between our best thinking about social change represented in our literature and our decisions to ally with groups who work within the status quo routes for change. They argue that too often we forgo our politics in favor of generating products that speak to legislators, school boards, and bankers.

In Dyrness's research, she could have either gone with the more organized faction of parents lobbying for their children's education via the traditional, liberal political route, or she could have allied with the loose affiliation of parents whose politics aligned more closely with

her own and who pushed back against the unhelpful, dominant discourses about “bad parents.” Like Pierre (2008) and Osterweil (2013), with this decision, the processes she employed took precedent over any products they created together. Indeed, even Pulido, the most traditional of these scholars, conveyed choosing collective actions over situating herself as the scholar expert (2008).

Conclusion

By pairing an engaged research design with studying up, various aspects of collaborative anthropology are demonstrated as more complex than originally presented, and are thus deserving of further analysis. These examinations reveal various assumptions and gaps that pepper the engaged ethnographic literature. By examining reciprocity and relationship building during the early stages of research, it is clear that the engaged ethnographic literature needs better analytic categories when discussing the human relations side of research. The lack of attention to problematizing the early stages of research in scholars’ published work indicates an area that is ripe for additional attention – possibly contributing to scholarship on reciprocity in research. By prodding the question, “anthropology for whom,” we can appreciate the distance that often exists between the movement, organization, and political ideas and the heterogeneity that tends to be encapsulated in most groups in struggle. Appreciation for these complexities can help guide our engagement and the type of knowledge we produce.

Within these heterogeneous multi-layered relations, it is easy to see why collaboration takes a while to fully develop and the practice of reciprocity – a key component to engaged ethnography – can be difficult to enact. Finally, by examining the practice of making our work useful and useable for our collaborators, I hope to have shown that comfortably enacting this

tenet relies on certain assumptions being met – no contradictions between validity and utility; political ideals and strategies of site and scholar matching up – all of which supports my argument for the importance of keeping our primary focus on the ethics of engaged methodology. Having considered the engaged research design with the literature of other collaborative scholars, I will now look at the complications involved in studying up.

Chapter IV: Studying Up

“Studying up” – a concept first presented by Laura Nader – was an approach of a reinvented anthropology concerned with contributing to an “understanding of the processes whereby power and responsibility are exercised in the United States,” by examining “power” (1972:284). By “power” Nader was referring to those major institutions, bureaucracies and organizations that affect everyday lives (Nader 1972). Nader exhorted anthropologists to move their research sites from the periphery to the center, to stand traditionally posed questions on their heads, and to prioritize these questions, even if it meant sacrificing participant observation, a method that many consider synonymous with anthropology. She urged us to shift our descriptions from that of human suffering stemming from injustice and inequitable distribution of resources to that of the systems, agencies, and practices that maintain such inequality and to temporarily trade dancing with the underdog for being spun around the floor by game-masters. The game-masters – those powerful social actors, systems, and organizations that anthropologists have chosen to study in the subsequent decades – are diverse.¹⁸ Nader hoped that by studying up we would not only demystify the sector of our society that has the most power and influence, but we could also present these findings in such a way that our scholarship would directly benefit those in subordinate positions. Thus, she envisioned studying up as arising from a democratic framework, one in which citizens should have access to decision-makers, governmental bodies, “and those people, institutions, and organizations which most affect their lives” (Nader 1972:294).

¹⁸ Indeed, unlike the engaged ethnographers who tend to paint their endeavor in rose colored hues, scholars studying up have done the exact opposite. Some scholars claim that other anthropologists are reluctant to spend time researching people in power because academics are not interested in, or are disdainful of, elites (Anderson-Levy 2010).

Although her famous essay, “Up the Anthropologist – Perspectives Gained from Studying Up,” focuses solely on studying-up, Nader has subsequently stated that she was not advocating for studying up alone, but for studying up, down, and sideways (1972). In short, she was advocating for studying through an issue so that we could understand the pathways and processes impacting the lives of the most vulnerable in our society. In light of this clarification, then, Nader was not the first to study through a topic. Indeed, the notion of studying through an issue that impacts the daily lives of the working class had been the *modus operandi* of Marxist anthropologists and other academics with structuralist bents throughout the history of anthropology, arguably going back to Friedrich Engels’ ethnography, *The Conditions of the Working Class in England* (1845), which included a chapter on the attitudes of the bourgeois and elites toward the proletariat. If we then situate (however, uncomfortably) Nader’s essay within this body of literature, her work – along with those other scholars who study up – does stand out because it still privileges looking up and describing people in positions of power within their own spheres as a topic of interest. As such, she may not have been the first to study through a topic, but her call to study up did galvanize anthropologists to take as serious research subjects elite institutions and individuals.

Yet, unlike other anthropologists who study through a topic, Nader does not offer clear direction on *how* we should go about studying local elites within broader political-economic structures. Therefore, and as Marcus points out, studying up is (at best) “only a partial theory,” which must be “necessarily linked with broader issues and complementary concepts concerning institutions and classes” (1983:18) or broader political-economic structures.¹⁹

¹⁹ So why use studying up? Perhaps it is precisely these methodological and theoretical limitations of studying up that allow enough room for me to pair it with engaged ethnography in a way that facilitates exposing gaps within the engaged ethnographic literature. Additionally, ethnographies and articles regarding the difficulties of studying elites – of which my incomplete project fits – coalesce into the studying up body of literature. Thus I will be able to reach

Despite the above critiques, some anthropologists credit Nader's emphasis on studying elites as an important step toward unraveling anthropological discourse, which had tended to present two monolithic groups: the relatively unexamined "powerful," and "the powerless," the traditional subject of anthropological inquiry. As Goode remembers, debates about studying up "moved ethnography towards incorporating both theories of power relations as well as ethnographies of encounters between ordinary people and institutions of power" (Goode 2009:10). References to studying up can be seen within contemporary anthropological projects that examine broader theoretical inquiries into the state, governance and governmentality, development and public policy.

Within the anthropology of public policy, ethnographers examine policy, which some scholars view as being as instrumental to social organization as community or family (Shore and Wright 1997) – with the dual focus of understanding how state policies and government processes are experienced and interpreted by people at the local level, as well as understanding the cultures and worldviews of policy professionals, decision makers, and other social actors who shape policy decisions and implementation. While Shore and Wright coined the term "studying through" to refer to the multi-level, multi-sited methodological approach necessary for such complex inquiry, at different stages of "studying through" a scholar will likely also be studying up. Studying up could involve examination of bureaucracies, or of police departments charged with enforcing policy; the legislators who and special interest groups which support the

other anthropologists attempting to study elite institutions, organizations, families, etc. Moreover, my project ended before I had a chance to ethnographically study through in an engaged way the topic of economic justice and urban revitalization, and my ability to situate this elite nonprofit within local political-economic context is limited because of my lack of IRB approval, which resulted in sticking solely to the studying up literature. While other bodies of literature may be more theoretically robust and satisfying, the studying up literature allows me to stay focused on the methodological difficulties that I experienced during this project and how these eventually intersected with the engaged endeavor.

implementation or passage of policies, as well as professionals who frame the terms of the policies and debates.

My research qualified as studying up for two reasons. First, in the tradition of anthropology of public policy, I was studying poverty programming and developmental policy, as well as narratives and practices associated with securing federal and state funding. I chose to look at this from the place at which the state – as a discursively constructed ensemble, produced and reproduced through everyday practices and public performance, especially through micro-level practices of governance (Sharma and Gupta 2006) – comes into contact with individuals seeking assistance from various governmental programs, instead of from the consumer’s perspective alone. Second, and relatedly, the NPCDC fits within Nader’s definition of “power.” Within the city of Portside and even within statewide urban redevelopment, the NPCDC is a major institution and organization that affects the everyday lives of local residents and the viability of several other nonprofits. As such, it is easily conceptualized as an “elite nonprofit.” In its relation to other nonprofits, the NPCDC is often used by the state as a local gatekeeper for, and distributor of, funds for social programming. Thus, other nonprofits apply to the NPCDC for grants, and the NPCDC is expected to provide technical assistance to these agencies. As an organization that holds true to the CDC-model for urban redevelopment, the NPCDC has also taken on the role of landlord and rent collector of the residents whom it is charged with helping. Moreover, some of the other programming it has chosen to develop in the past – various lending and small business development programs – has placed the NPCDC in the role of the disgruntled lender when borrowers fail to repay their loans or to pay rent on their incubation space. Finally, in relation to me, the executive staff and members of the board of directors of this agency had

greater power, a higher degree of education, and a longer affiliation with the local universities and colleges than I did.

Despite their elite nonprofit status and my situating them as a powerful organization within the local context, I must off-center their positioning somewhat. While they are an elite agency in the non-profit realm, they are far from elite in the urban redevelopment arena. In this area, they are more like society's mid-level management. Moreover, the boundaries between the agency and the community are porous. For example, a few staff members started as clients of the agency, and multiple staff members introduced me to cousins, nieces, or uncles who were participating in the job readiness workshops or other programs offered by the NPCDC. Other staff members had benefited from first time home buyers programs managed by the NPCDC and, in at least one instance, a board member qualified for, and received assistance from, one of the housing rehabilitation programs. These blurred boundaries do not change the elite status of the NPCDC. However, they do help to complicate the notion of power at the local level.

In the remainder of this chapter, I have articulated my difficulties in studying up in dialogue with those barriers or complications to this endeavor that are well-documented in the literature. In the decades since Nader first articulated the barriers to studying up as “access, attitudes, ethics, and methodology” (1972), scholars have elaborated at length upon these themes and expanded this list to include still more.²⁰ I have organized my experiences into two long-discussed barriers to studying up – ethics and access – and one complication that has more

²⁰ Actually, studying up is a term that has been employed by researchers studying an array of questions which emerge when the balance of power during the ethnographic process shifts, creating obstacles to participant observation (Anderson-Levy 2010); delay or obstruction of publications (Mosse 2006); silencing or censoring of anthropologists in the field (Low), or situations rife with ethical dilemmas (Edwards 2007). Indeed, “studying up” has become somewhat of a catch-all for problematic ethnographic experiences that stem from including – or attempting to include – those who are not only ambivalent or hostile to being researched and represented, but also who have “the power to object” (Mosse 206:951). Yet, when first presented by Laura Nader, this concept was more than a label for inverted power dynamics. Although my research was subject to the obstacles mentioned here, I consider it to fall in line with Nader's more narrowly defined approach to studying up.

recently been noted in the literature – false dichotomy between university and community (Goode 2009).

Access

Access, despite Nader's dismissal of such complaints as overblown, is still the main difficulty espoused by anthropologists who study up. It seems as though powerful people who do not want to be studied are, in fact, difficult to interview – much less to form the rapport necessary to do participant observation. For instance, even though Edwards, a cultural anthropologist studying in Japan, had succeeded in securing a letter of affiliation from Nikko, the corporate owner of the women's soccer team she had planned to study as a participant observer, her research was canceled. She attributes this sudden disengagement to the "cult of secrecy" that surrounds corporate culture, practices, knowledge, etc. that is enforced more rigidly in times of scandal (2007). As one of her friends at Nikko's home office explained, "you need to understand that companies like ours tighten our ranks and turn inward when scandals...happen...you're an outsider, and at times like these, the fewer outsiders the better" (Edwards 2007:46). Yet, a different friend who worked at the home office said that Edwards' fatal mistake had been contacting members of the team before she had received official approval from team officials, even though these meetings were based on prior friendships and were scheduled during the players' personal time. Her friend stood firm in her position that Edwards had overstepped important boundaries of "team privacy and, apparently, corporate sovereignty" (2007:46). Similarly, Anderson-Levy avers that, as a Jamaican-born black woman casting her ethnographic gaze upon white Jamaicans – who constitute the social, political, and business elites of Jamaica – her access was limited to individual interviews in the home or office (2010). She posited that

performing fieldwork with this group was far different from that of researchers who spend their time hanging out in the town square chatting with villagers. Primarily relying on interviews of people who had more power relative to her, the spaces in which Anderson-Levy could encounter her subjects were more restricted and her interactions were more limited and carefully scripted (Anderson-Levy 2010). Moreover, anthropologists cannot rely on traditional means for ingratiating ourselves to our powerful subjects. “They do not need our trinkets, money, or promises of goodwill” maintains Anderson-Levy (2010:182). Nor do they need us to write on their behalf or to empower them through our scholarship.

Most anthropologists would maintain that, in general, the ideal form of access is that of participant observation. Yet, since the 1970s, scholars have come quite a long way from defining themselves as anthropologists based upon their ability to participant observe. Indeed, a number of anthropologists are developing research plans which are multi-sited and multi-leveled. In these and other studies, interviews, direct observation, archival and textual research, electronic communication and other alternative methods all help to supplement or serve to supplant participant observation, especially when the goal is critiquing or shining a light on power. Some of these anthropologists surely question, as did Nader, the sagacity of participation in the activities of the group that they are studying. Yet other researchers who study up are working in field sites or under conditions where this proposition is not nearly as problematic (Marcus 1983; Forsythe 1999).

As with those scholars who bemoan the difficulty of gaining access when studying up, my main frustration during my research was gaining access to the people and materials that I needed most to compose the agency’s history and to move my research through the IRB process. The individuals who were most invested in this project – two board members, the founder, and

the interim director – kept busy schedules which made it incredibly difficult to coordinate face-to-face meetings. While some of the board members were the most accessible of the core working group, personal tragedies and commitments to other boards and other community initiatives and projects kept them from the NPCDC. Mrs. Evans, the founder of the organization whose email to the university began my involvement in this project, no longer worked at the agency, and was very busy in her new position. She only took the time to work through the questions that I had regarding the history on a handful of occasions during the nine months I was at the NPCDC. Moreover, I was never certain that she read my proposals or drafts of the history being prepared for group discussion because she never responded to these emails.²¹ Similarly, as the interim director of a board-run organization whose daily work in the office was an ongoing audition for position as the permanent executive director, Kenneth was careful, conservative, and consistently unavailable – his door closed, an administrative assistant posted outside of his office. This said, he did take time to have lunch with me on occasion and to stop in and check on me casually from time to time. But, during these exchanges I was much more interested in building rapport and letting him get to know me since it was the founder and not he who brought me in, and thus I felt my presence had to be justified and proven to be helpful to the overall operations of the organization.

Because of this lack of access to those who held institutional knowledge and their disinterest in delineating the organizational structure of the agency, my knowledge of the agency's current organization was gleaned by reading through bylaws and the amendments to these bylaws through the 20 years of its existence while I was writing the NPCDC's history. This took some time. When I finally did realize that all projects needed to be cleared through the

²¹ Mrs. Evans acted not only as the project's gatekeeper, but also as the gatekeeper to the agency as a whole, as I would later find out.

board of directors due to the void in leadership and asked Kenneth to include me on the Board of Director's agenda for the next meeting, he hedged. He was reluctant to give me access to the board. It was because I had such limited access to him that it took me a month, and multiple requests, to understand what his failure to respond to my initial request to approach the board meant. I finally realized his inattentiveness was actually avoidance – not overly busy or absentminded behavior. This is when I began to understand just how conflicted the organization really was. Instead of allowing me to go before the board to pitch the research project or pitching the research to the board for me, Kenneth chose to terminate the project altogether. With conservatism that often characterizes business, he was certain that the board would decide that any exposure was an unnecessary risk.

Within a hierarchical organization such as the NPCDC, there are a limited number of ways in which to gain access to additional participants without alienating oneself from the organization and risking the cancelation of one's research. Having asked Mrs. Evans that we include clients, residents, community members and additional staff and board members in the creation of the semi-public history of the organization, I could not then go around her if she refused. She agreed to this method. However, she asked me to first talk to specific stakeholders that she had chosen. Out of respect for her, and in an effort to show collegiality and to build rapport, I decided to begin the history by talking to those with whom the founder was comfortable. And, although I made this decision, I was conscious of the fact that I may have been compromising my efforts to be seen as an honest broker and facilitator for all factions on this joint history project. To deflect any negative perceptions that my deference to Mrs. Evans's requests brought about, I explained that my strategy was to begin with a few participants in order to get a good idea of the history and in order to clarify the information found in the board of

directors meeting minutes, but as soon as I had typed up a working historical document, I was planning on collaboratively working through the history. This approach was appreciated by all on the initial working group and within the office.

What was more difficult for my collaborators to appreciate was that, despite their willingness to be interviewed, I could not formally interview them until I had IRB approval—which had to first be placed on the board of director’s meeting agenda because I needed a letter of support from the agency, which I learned had to come from the board. Thus, I had access to members, but I could not “start” formal research without first getting board approval.²²

Ethics

Anthropologists who study up do not have the same recourses as those traditional scholars studying far-away, subaltern groups who may possess perspectives that differ from their own. Often when these traditional scholars find a practice or perspective of the group that they are studying to be abhorrent or uncomfortable to them, they can retreat into anthropology’s long (and defining) tradition of relativism by merely “capturing the native’s perspective” or objectively and carefully describing the difference. This comfortable avenue is not so comfortable for those scholars who study up, especially those studying up in their own backyard.²³ Without the ability to represent reality from a detached, neutral, relativistic perspective, many anthropologists look to critique or expose.

²² I never began formal research. My research protocol allowed for a lengthy introduction to the city, the organization and its history, followed by formal research. Kenneth’s refusal to bring my research request before the board of directors coincided with the ending of the introductory period. Therefore, instead of beginning formal research, I packed up my bags, went back to the university, and eventually wrote this thesis, which is very different from that which I initially envisioned writing.

²³ While this tends to be the norm, there are scholars who simply depict elite, Western arenas. Kahn depicts rich teens at boarding school (Kahn 2011), and Ho (2009) recently spent an entire ethnography describing the lives of those who work on Wall Street. These were traditional ethnographies set in the playgrounds of the powerful.

Studying up implies critique, which moves these anthropologists further from the traditional anthropological convention of relativist descriptions.²⁴ Surely anthropologists may feel justified in, and relieved by, writing critically after leaving the elite and oppressive environments described by some scholars who study up.²⁵ Yet, there are times when the activities of our field sites are not so personally oppressive or their positioning and activities not as blatantly egregious as, say, military elites working in the nuclear arms industry (Gusterson 1996). What should one do in such an instance? Approaching this question from one end of the ethical spectrum, Gusterson, who is concerned primarily with relations within the research site, argues that anthropologists must give careful consideration to writing critically about consenting participants. From the other end, Edwards, who is interested in exposé, argues that our ethical concerns should question just how far can we go when writing against – not for or about – those we study (2007).²⁶ These difficult decisions and dilemmas that individual anthropologists face in research are mirrored in the ethical conflicts that characterize the entire studying up research focus.

Beginning with Nader, anthropologists who study up—convinced of the merit of this activity—have been concerned with amending the ethical guidelines of our discipline. As our code of ethics is currently written, we have multiple ethical obligations to the people with whom we work and study that are potentially problematic or, simply, do not make sense within research

²⁴ This is not to say that other anthropological research foci are not discussed critically. Of course they are/can be.

²⁵ For example, the picture of studying up that Gellestad portrays is a dangerous, anxiety provoking environment in which anthropologists are ever-aware that the powerful who they study may at any time “block access, jeopardize funding, and sue for libel, while also damaging the academic’s central resource: scholarly reputation” (2006:928). In short, he seems to illustrate the (perfect) inverse of the ideal ethnographic situation in which scholars presume they will be researching within an environment of mutual respect and goodwill (Edwards 2007), shared values, viewpoints, and perspectives.

²⁶ In other words, Gusterson’s ethical concern is focused upon the participants of the study (1996). Edwards is concerned with promoting the good of a broader public (2007).

situations encountered when studying up. Anthropologists studying up may be able to rhetorically cobble together a defense that would show how they do have a “goal of establishing a working relationship that can be beneficial to all parties involved,” but would not necessarily be able to enact this ethic. Similarly, the imperative when conducting and publishing research to not “harm the safety, dignity, or privacy of the people with whom they work, conduct research, or perform other professional activities, or who might reasonably be thought to be affected by their research” will likely be held in tension or break into full out conflict when studying up (AAA Committee on Ethics 2009:2-3). To ease some of these tensions, Nader argues for a separate ethical code for studying up than for studying down. She justifies this by pointing out the difference of doing research within public, versus private, spheres and studying home, instead of host, societies. In a slightly shifted vein, Wedel and Kideckel center their challenge to our ethical code upon the fact that we should consider the power of our participants to protect their own interests (1994). While they acknowledge that the normative subjects of the anthropological gaze do not possess the power to protect their own interests, other subjects most certainly do (Wedel and Kideckel 1994). Indeed, these powerful entities have, in some cases, entire Public Relations units and legions of attorneys at their disposal. As such, Wedel and Kideckel propose that our primary responsibility, like that of journalists, should be to protect individual informants (1994). Also, rather than protecting the vague notion of culture that is currently part of our ethical code, our responsibility should be “to discover and analyze anthropological truths” (1994: 37). In its present form, our code of ethics, as Wedel and Kideckel maintain, seems to funnel us into value-neutral research that upholds the status quo (1994).

In my research I struggled to find the most ethical way of approaching NPCDC. This struggle was based on my own understanding of what actions would likely minimize harm to the

most vulnerable of the community and my assessment of the degree to which the organization was actually aligned with the community. Would I operate as a “scholar spy” for the community or employ an “exposé ethnographer” persona? Or, would I settle into a more or less neutral description steeped in relativism? When deciding how to approach NPCDC, I thought of one of my Massachusetts mentors’ call to follow the money all the way up—this would ensure that my analyses and critiques didn’t place blame on those who are actually working to positively impact the community. Ultimately, I decided to approach the historical writing collaboratively and to relate to the agency as I had other nonprofits for which I had worked in the past, through critical engagement. Because of the middleman status of this organization, it made most sense to operate with descriptive compassion for the particular people at NPCDC, while indicting the flawed and exploitative system in which they labored.²⁷

Power, Authenticity and Representation when the University and Community Collide

In engaged ethnography, scholars talk about “the university” and “the community” as occupying separate spaces/as being separate.²⁸ More generally, this is framed as the blurry lines between the field and home (i.e., Mosse 2006; Gusterson 1996; Forsythe 1999).²⁹ When studying up, the distance between these two realms shrinks to the point of overlapping. In some instances this overlap is represented most obviously by actors occupying both spaces, as was my experience at

²⁷ This said, my most interesting findings involved the interplay between the historical record and the organization’s present climate. The non-democratic decisions that Mrs. Evan’s made early on had come back to threaten to further conservativize the agency and move them further away from what was good for the community towards what was good for the organization’s bottom line.

²⁸ Indeed, as I’ve shown in the previous chapter, the most compelling arguments contradicting Hale are based in part on acknowledging this dichotomy as false or overly simplistic.

²⁹ This was initially due, in part, to the influence of world’s system theory and other theories which posited that power was located in the West, and thus research about those in power would necessarily be located within the West, in our backyards. Yet, today, due to how connected we all are through global processes and internet connections, etc., those in power are more linked than ever. Thus, these realms can overlap even if continents divide.

my research site. But it can also include an overlapping of interests, work skills, location, what we read and write papers about, and in what our daily work looks like with that of our participants (Forsythe 1999). Regardless of the ways in which the field and home overlap, when studying up, it is likely that our subjects/collaborators will read our work (Forsythe 1999; Gusterson 1996). Often, they read our work with the intention to respond to, and attempt to impact or influence, our representations (e.g.: Forsythe 1999; Gusterson 1996; Mosse 2006). Therefore this section will show how an examination of this overlap illuminates issues related to the politics of representation and touches upon issues of authenticity and epistemology. I will begin first by depicting the overlap between “home”—the university—and “the field”—my collaborators at the NPCDC.

NPCDC held a bit of political clout to which even the university responded. Key collaborators at NPCDC were familiar with the university’s terrain and personnel. Mrs. Evans knew who to contact at the university to send students to work on projects at her beloved organization, and faculty and staff at the university worked hard to locate students for her projects.³⁰ Mrs. Jones, a longtime board member, community leader, and confidante of Mrs. Evans, mentioned on several occasions her skill in matching undergraduate students with organizations in the community. Her participation in partnering students and faculty with community organizations was even recognized by their local university, which commended her with an engagement award. Kenneth, the interim CEO, had recently secured a master’s degree and still maintained relations with faculty in this well-regarded college. Even the chair of the board of directors worked at, and was intimately familiar with, the university and its policies. The result of this cross-over was that NPCDC, unlike many other community organizations,

³⁰Although many students had worked for NPCDC, I am the only graduate student whom I know of who has worked with the NPCDC.

knew how to use the university for its own purposes. NPCDC valued the university for its academic authority and viewed it as a repository of knowledge full of potential partners and rich in resources.

Moreover, NPCDC moved with an ease of familiarity when engaging the university.³¹ This is not rare when studying up. Gunterson (1996), Forsythe (1999), and Goode (2009) also write about research experiences in which their subjects or collaborators – fellow NGO staff, scientists at the same university, and fellow colleagues and collaborators – were also within the university or had strong connections to the university. This ease of familiarity and positioning of the university by NPCDC was best exemplified at the very beginning and the very end of my nine months at NPCDC. During our first meeting, the founder requested that the organizational history on which I would be working be submitted to the university’s archive. She not only knew there was a dearth of history on African Americans, along with development and the city of Portside, but also she knew that this would be valuable to other scholars and to the broader community as long as it was located within – and thus had the authority of – the university. During the period in which NPCDC and I were disengaging from each other, the chair of the board of directors, a woman I had never met, lobbied the other board members to either file a formal complaint with the university or attempt to file suit against me. Although I was not privy to the pathway along which this proposal passed or why it was not pursued, the fact that the agency knew that this was an option and sought to strike at that which is most important for an academic, her scholarly reputation, demonstrates more than rudimentary knowledge or textbook understanding of the university system and academia.

³¹ This is rare for nonprofits in general, in this area. To most nonprofits, the university is not viewed as a resource to be readily tapped but is seen as its own island, educating undergraduates and doing research that will have little impact on the surrounding community.

When studying up, the likelihood that the actors peopling our ethnographies will read, respond to, and attempt to impact or influence our representations of them is a given. This begs the question, who can and should speak for research “subjects?” Some advocate for a more collaborative approach to representation (Marcus 1983; Forsythe 1999; Gusterson 1996), while others argue that this approach is far from a satisfactory solution in the context of studying up (Mosse 2006). Indeed, Mosse argues that scholars who attempt to bypass the uneasiness inherent in representing those whom we know will read our work by collaborating, forging representations in dialogue with our participants, or simply letting them represent themselves, do little to correct power inequalities between the interpreter and the interpreted. Moreover, he believes the analytical cost of such an approach can be great.

As powerful individuals who regularly spoke as the agency on behalf of the community, my key collaborators were aware of the importance of the historical record and conscious of themselves as both narrators of and participants in history; they were aware of the importance of the historical record, and they were powerful enough that a history issued in a public domain by this group would carry the mantle of authority about both the agency and the community. Not only did they insist on representing themselves, they refused to let anyone appropriate their achievements, their hard work – indeed, their lives. To illustrate this point, Mrs. Jones described her retirement party to me:

I wouldn't let anyone throw it for me. Everybody wanted to. Oh Jean, but I want to throw it for you. No, I'll throw it for you. Even the mayor – former mayor – offered to throw me one. I just smiled and politely turned them down. I'm my own woman. I can throw my own party. I also wouldn't let anyone introduce me. I had no introductory speakers. I didn't want anyone to put their own spin on my hard work, my accomplishments. I can speak for myself. I actually wrote a history of my own for this –well actually it was for ... [an award] I received – but I used it for this. I wrote a history of my 18 years of service to this organization.

I respected their political astuteness and their courage to speak against anyone who would dare to contextualize them or make public meaning of their private lives without checking with them first. They knew how to work multiple systems of power and influence to move their tightly held agendas forward. They were politically influential, well connected, and more educated than I was. They knew the power imbued in the written text and where to send a history for it to be seen as definitive. Also, they were comfortable with employing authoritative and objective accounts or facts to support their particular political agenda.

These individuals were accustomed to speaking as representative of the local community of color and as the voice of a variety of organizations throughout their tenure as community leaders. This is important because they – through their hard work and positions of power – were not only given the authority to speak on behalf of but also *as* organizations representing the community. Their voice, their face, their actions were seen synonymous with various community organizations. At least two of the three women with whom I worked most closely had held these privileged positions within NPCDC– a privilege reserved for the acting board of director president and the acting executive director/C.E.O. Mrs. Evans had spoken as the agency for 15 years – from the time she founded the agency until she retired to run for political office.

Within this context, I, like Gusterson, planned on creating a representation of NPCDC that my collaborators and I would forge through dialogue. They weren't the IMF, Monsanto, or military. Yet, as I mentioned above, there is a risk in slipping into the apolitical world of description instead of critique when one collaborates. Unless there is already a process of critique or of honest appraisal in place within the organization, who would readily open oneself up to something that could be damaging to one's organization (if the critique focuses on the

organization) or to one's relationship with funders, for instance (if the critique is directed at a broader system)?

Yet, similar to Mosse's argument regarding development in India, authoritative actors work hardest to defend projects as "systems of representation...against competing ethnographic depictions that exist within the same public space" (2006:942). Where I saw conversation and critique of the broader system, my collaborators saw a potential threat. They viewed any off-centering of the facts found in the Board of Director Meeting minutes as unnecessary conflict and laden with potential for issues of authenticity to arise. By this, I mean that the polyvocal history which NPCDC agreed to could be seen as delegitimizing the preferred facts of the history. Coming from an objectivist epistemology, they feared that questions regarding authenticity – such as which of the multiple accounts are accurate – would undermine their definitive history.

In this way, my collaborators and I were similar to Forsythe and her informants, who possessed different understandings of truth (1999). Forsythe was operating from a relativist perspective where multiple truths can coexist. The scientists whom she studied, however, were positivists, who interpreted representations as either correct or incorrect, and "the difference is a matter of evidence" (1999:8). Like Mosse (2006) and Forsythe (1999), my collaborators did not share my view of knowledge as situated and dialogic or history as a "multiplicity of truth composed from different points-of-views" (Forsythe 1999: 942). Because of the system in which they labored, they were vested in providing a proper agency history, which Mosse defines as a "history of implementation, learning, and improvement, which should reveal a progressive narrowing of the gap between intention, action, and outcomes" (2006:943).

When Mrs. Evans brought me on a tour of North Portside, this is exactly the narrative that she modeled for me during the tour. Progress was at every turn in Mrs. Evan’s development narrative. Yet, the story she was telling and the street scenes through which we were moving were incongruent. Trash lined the streets. Two of their business development projects looked nearly abandoned. The neighborhoods surrounding the youth center and the executive office building were in need of a facelift. Time had not been a friend to NPCDC and the bold visions and clear trajectory of neighborhood improvement of 20 years ago had faded with the facades of the buildings they had constructed. I wondered if she saw what I saw when she looked out through her car windows. Although I offered her a pretty neutral entrance into a conversation of the effects of time on the built environment and a sympathetic ear regarding what a formidable foe the passage of days could be, she would not join me in that conversation. I did notice that she actively avoided some of the more “blighted” parts of the neighborhood during this tour. She even turned her car around midway down a street where the houses became increasingly run down or vacated the further down that street we drove. I thought the effort and energy that it took Mrs. Evans’ to maintain this clearly faulty narrative and the risk of someone simply stating that “the emperor had no clothes” – or, “the neighborhood looked blighted” – would be enough incentive to shift narrative strategies. Therefore, despite her modeling of the progress narrative, what I gave her to review as drafts of agency history was contingent—full of questions and holes, potential links to critiques of broader systems, and opportunities for bringing in additional perspectives.³² The classical dilemmas of studying up intersected with the dilemmas resulting

³² When to be critical in one’s questions/conversations, and when to listen, is an ethnographic skill that engaged researchers must develop. I did not critique Mrs. Evan’s narrative during this tour. Nor did I point out the contradictions between her story and the physical environment through which we were passing. Because this tour occurred during one of my first meetings with Mrs. Evans, I thought that doing so would have come across as adversarial. Instead, I looped back to this critical conversation via the history that I composed and had planned to discuss the discrepancies later in the research. While I did present the history that I described in the text to Mrs. Evans, my research was canceled prior to having these critical conversations.

from the blurred lines between field and home in ways that were interesting and, ultimately, devastating to this project.

Conclusion

While anthropologists who study up will encounter many difficulties, issues regarding access, ethics, and the overlap between the field and home were those which were problematic for me. From the outset, limitation to my access to the people and materials that I needed to perform research and the ethical complications of studying up shaped my research agenda and approach.

Since I was studying up, but not way up, I believed that I could find a more nuanced position between relativist descriptions and heavy handed critique that reflected their positioning.

Examining the overlap of the field and home (or university and community) illuminates issues related to the politics of representation and touches upon issues of authenticity and differences in epistemology. Studying up in this context required acrobatics on my part. While I was more than willing to allow each of the women to represent herself, I was not willing to let them step into that position of sole community representative that they so readily occupy. What did I anticipate at the time was that they were interested in privatizing the public's past for their own political agenda. I sought to thwart this likely inevitability by bringing in community members, program participants and residents. What I failed to anticipate was that in privatizing the public's past they were likely doing so in an effort to legitimize their approach to development when arguing with the new guard, which was full of conservative business types who had little interest for helping people outside of the benefits that may trickle down to residents from development projects.

Mrs. Evans and the old guard were seen as representing the community. They spoke for the community. They were seen as holding the interests of the community within this group. Yet, this positioning of Mrs. Evans and the old guard only made sense within this elite context (or the context of the broader community) because they were not actually residents of the community. Their perspective was likely one that promoted advocating on the community's behalf when in conversation with new guard board members. Had I brought in actual community members, the old guard, whose ties to the community were nebulous, would have been displaced. At the same time it would have created a situation in which critique would be coming from the new guard. Thus they'd have been caught in the middle struggling to articulate what it was they were actually representing/defending.

Failing to understand that my research agenda would have placed the old guard in this position, I was caught off guard when they canned it. In short, my concerns that I voiced in my research proposal regarding the challenges of studying up being too difficult to overcome panned out, maybe even more so because I was studying up but not way up. In the following chapter, I will look more explicitly at the complications that arose from engaging-up.

Chapter V: Engaging-Up Conclusion

In the engaged ethnographic and context chapters, I described my thesis research project, explaining how the (semi-)public history I was helping to compose was part of a broader engaged research design and how the history itself fit within the parameters of the engaged research endeavor. In the studying up chapter, I situated my collaborators and the research within the studying up involved in the anthropology of public policy. In each chapter, I described the dilemmas I experienced and insights garnered from these experiences in dialogue with scholars from each area of inquiry. While I experienced barriers to studying up, and I struggled with dilemmas/contradictions of the engaged ethnographic endeavor, it was pairing them together that created the most important challenges. The bulk of this chapter is an examination of these challenges.

The organization of this chapter will follow the flow of the research design that emerged from my nine months of preparative work on NPCDC's history. I will describe how I envisioned bringing engaged ethnography together with studying up within my own research agenda and why this approach, engaging-up, seemed ethically and politically important. In this section, I discuss my experience with, and the potential for, this methodology in relation to the work of other scholars who have done similar research. Indeed, my decision to engage-up intellectually lay to rest many of the ethical and political concerns that I had initially. In the second section, I consider how this approach brings into question the entire notion of collaboration. And in the third section, I reflect back upon this decision and demonstrate that the potential resolutions found in this approach are far from unproblematic. I have organized these problems or potential

pitfalls with this methodology into three subsections. The first examines notions of contradictory consciousness and complicity. The second section is dedicated to demonstrating the difficulty in defining shared ethics and goals. The third section explores the potential for our methods and findings to be appropriated and misused. Having put forward these concerns, I will conclude by reconsidering the promises of this methodology.

The Promises of Engaging-Up

By the time I had completed compiling the historical bullet points from the board of director's meeting minutes and was waiting for a letter of support so I could gain IRB approval to formalize this ethnographic research, I had come to the decision that the most ethically and politically appropriate stance for me to take was that of engaging-up. By collaborating and explicitly aligning with NPCDC, I hoped to employ the transformative potential of historical production for the good of the agency, as it intersected with the effort to bring about economic justice in North Portside.

I took to heart the importance of this agency's history. In planning the democratization of the production of this history, I hoped not only to ensure that it was truly representative of the agency, but also that it would actually live on and be used after Mrs. Evans's departure. Methodologically, this seemed wise, as well, because it would offset Mrs. Evans's influence over the historical production and increase and expose my role as an engaged facilitator of this history. Indeed, one of the earliest acknowledged difficulties that my advisors anticipated was how I would write the agency's history, as opposed to the history of the agency according to Mrs. Evans. Thus, by increasing my presence and exposing my role as an honest broker in the facilitation of this history, I hoped to bring in an array of stakeholders, not just the hand selected

few Mrs. Evans' was interested in including. Moreover, since histories are political, contested and partial accounts and are employed in the present for various purposes, including shaping the future, I hoped that reviewing the historical outline that I had put together would serve to cohere an agency rife with political conflicts.

I envisioned this happening by showing victories won and difficult times overcome, and by airing grievances. Hale had similar hopes for his project with the ladinos and Maya. When considering the past in dialogue with differently situated actors, Hale notes, "What can be recuperated are the political sensibilities that led people into struggle in the first place, a past no longer subject to shame or suppression, a past that might even serve as a source of inspiration and guidance for the future" (Hale 2006b:88). By including a broad range of stakeholders, I hoped the process would lay the groundwork for this organization to further democratize its processes and give voice and power to community members. In following this plan, the historical production would be nestled within democratic methods and liberatory ideals for which I had already received verbal support.

Approaching this project and proposing my research in the above way ameliorated many of the problems that I had with performing traditionally conceived engaged ethnography or studying up of anthropology of public policy. I neither felt comfortable engaging as if there was no distance between the community and the organization, as some engaged ethnographers do (Gow 2008; Hale 2006b), nor did I feel it was appropriate to operate as a "scholar spy" seeking to "write against" this agency (Edwards 2009). Between these two poles was this approach. If I wrote as if there was no distance between the community and the organization or no heterogeneity within the organization, I would have simply written the history Mrs. Evans requested, checked it with others at the organization and submitted the history to a mild critique,

as a mentor suggested. Had I believed that the CDC solely existed to reproduce its own labor and expand its influence in Portside, I would have also felt fine writing the history and critiquing both the history and the agency. Interestingly, the products of both engaged ethnography and an applied scholar writing against an agency are eerily similar. So, where does the difference lie? The difference would have been in the anticipated consequences of such an action. If I assumed a perfect match between the community and the organization, what was deemed good for the organization would have been good for the community (and vice versa). But since I believed the relation between the two to be more complicated and potentially politically and economically stratified, what was good for the agency could have been established to the detriment of or disregard to the community.

Had I been camped out with those who write cultural critique (Chávez 2008; Foley 2002), I may have written the “history” in order to satisfy my internship requirement and then critiqued this history – believing that this critique would eventually benefit the broader community. In this way, I would have been writing against power like others who study up and I could have expanded poverty knowledge by including the ways in which service providers contribute to maintaining poverty knowledge and neoliberal discourse. The problem with this approach was that I thought that this “history” would have been picked up and consumed by the broader Portside community long before scholarly writing would be. Histories take on lives of their own – especially those written within the types of historical void present in North Portside. So, this increased my wariness of simply providing this agency with a singularly authored history.

Yet, because of the ambiguity and the fact that they are society’s middle managers, I didn’t think writing then critiquing was appropriate. Moreover, as mentioned above, the agency

was heterogeneous and some staff and board members were comfortable employing a critical framework and some operated from a more inclusive and community-minded approach. So, to fail to acknowledge the agency of and potential power that these individuals could have in creating a more responsive and inclusive organization seemed overly pessimistic. Moreover, this explicit political alignment steers the researcher clear of the cynicism that is tied to beginning a project with the assumption that the researcher and those in relative positions of power will not have the same political inclinations.

The middle ground between these poles – described in such depth here – was to explicitly align – which acknowledged the liberatory potential of NPCDC and which did enliven some of the “old guard” – and write with this agency’s stakeholders a polyvocal history of urban development and community revitalization. At times this plan seemed to work. Reintroducing a critical framework, giving space for NPCDC stakeholders to express their hopes for a more responsive and inclusive NPCDC, and voicing my own did invigorate certain board members. In a community meeting one board member stood and questioned the ties of progressive money to the increase of criminalization of youth. A different board member clearly denounced community plans for addressing youth violence that rested solely on attending to individual “high risk” youth. Finally, during a conversation between initial stakeholders one board member bemoaned the relationship of NPCDC to the broader community.

My plan was to tie this history to an examination of the ways in which local grassroots level providers appropriate and eschew dominant discourses for development and poverty programming. By focusing the analysis in this way, I sought to critique the broader system instead of engaging in finger pointing at individual NPCDC participants. This plan would both honor the political sensibilities expressed in engaged anthropological writing and enact the ethics

and ideals with which we are aligned. At the same time, it would honor the social construction of anthropological knowledge (Mosse 2008).

When Mrs. Evans and my other key collaborators agreed to include a broad range of stakeholders, my concerns that it did not have the interest of the broader community or their resident stakeholders' best interest in mind were assuaged. My anxiety over the lack of control that I would have over the history and their use of this product was offset when they agreed to the inclusion of polyvocal, and even contradictory, perspectives within the historical narrative itself. I assumed that the multiple perspectives, plus the changes to the document that would likely happen once conversations began, would be enough to make space for alternative and vying historical narratives. All of these methodological considerations would align this project with the ethics of liberatory politics and the ideals of the broader movement.

Clarifying Concepts by Bringing Key Terms into Question

Engaging-up offsets both engaged ethnography and studying up and provides us with the opportunity to question the assumptions that undergird each. The very aspects of research that engaged scholars take for granted become the assumptions that those of us who engage-up are more reticent to presume.³³ Yet these are the same relational aspects that must be presumed to some extent in order to collaborate successfully.³⁴ Moreover, the entire concept of

³³ Concerns over complicity, which in studying up is articulated within the ethics of relativistic representations of the powerful, and in engaged research is articulated as an almost romantic struggle faced by the hero-anthropologist, open up concerns for cooptation when engaging up. This isn't "I'm complicit in reproducing imperialism in some nebulous indeterminate way," but the powerful positioning of this agency is such that it nearly guarantees that my scholarship, my methods, or my expertise will be used to suppress, oppress, delegitimize the same voices that I hoped to make a space for because this agency is only metaphorically connected to the community.

³⁴ I must presume that you are analytically open until you state you are closed. I must presume that you do indeed labor on behalf of the community/movement. I must presume that you do not wish to act in ways contrary to the

“collaboration,” the glue which holds together the variant strands of the engaged ethnographic enterprise—activist anthropology, collaborative anthropology, critically engaged ethnography, militant ethnography, participatory action research, etc. —is called into question when engaging-up. Although this is one area in which little has been written, from hallway conversations and barroom chats at conferences with anthropologists who do collaborative research, such concerns over the quality of the partnership at any given time seems prevalent. One scholar frustratingly confided in me that her long-term collaboration at the moment of our conversation felt more like a case of “who was exploiting whom.” Another critically engaged ethnographer hypothesized that had her research continued any longer than it did, she may have been in the same boat as me. These acknowledgements caused them to question just what we mean when we say we “collaborate.”

Joanne Rappaport defines collaboration as “a space for coproduction of theory” (Rappaport 2008:2). Despite the tendency of collaborative anthropologists seemingly to begin work at their site as full-fledged collaborators, this space surely takes time to develop. Hemment notes that, had she attempted to begin her research in the role of collaborator, she would have created an experience between her and her research partners that not only would have rung false, but also would have re-inscribed the harmful politics that had long marked attempts at relationship building between western feminists and those in Russia (2007). Instead, she unapologetically admits that during the beginning stages of her engaged ethnographic research project, her relationships and approach to the field was more akin to participant observation (2007). This is important because before potential partners even decide if they want to collaborate – a form of engagement that is far more intimate and risky than just being studied or

wishes of the agency as expressed by the board. I presume that we come from different positions and thus will bring different perspectives to the collaboration.

studying, the researcher is likely to commit a great amount of effort and resources.³⁵ I spent the first few months at NPCDC, positioning the agency within current political economic and social contexts. Although I also interacted in ways that looked collaborative, much of my time was spent in the pre-collaborative questioning I described in chapter two. This inquiry was objectivist in nature. Who was this agency? How committed were they to liberatory ideals? Could I really collaborate with an agency that represented ethics seemingly so different from mine?

Neither these questions nor Rappaport's definition precludes engaging-up or across differences. Indeed, disagreements or silent tensions pepper most collaboration. Lassiter (2008) has written about the necessity and power of employing what he calls "the force of difference" in our engaged endeavors. While working to build consensus and constructing areas of shared goals and values, the force of difference neither puts our different perspectives aside nor turns a blind eye to conflict:

Collaborative ethnography, then, does not require that we flatten, homogenize, or even "whitewash" differences . . . [Participants] must be willing . . . to open themselves up to a dynamic knowledge exchange, to stick it out, and to discover in their work together emergent counderstandings, cointerpretations, and coinscriptions (which will always include points of disagreement) (Lassiter 2008:76).

According to Lassiter, then, collaborations can occur across differences.

While we can talk abstractly about collaborative research with the relatively privileged, my own experience within the context of my work with NPCDC shows the daily variations in and challenges to collaboration that can occur when engaging-up. Sometimes I felt in sync with the organization, as if my relationships with various employees and board members were deepening, and more honest communication was commencing. It seemed as though we had

³⁵ Since collaboration is seen as a more vulnerable stance than being objectified and studied, this observation appears to be an additional argument for collaborations producing greater knowledge than traditional forms of research.

developed a shared space for coproducing knowledge. Thoughtful discussions and brave disagreements characterized these interactions. At other times, I felt used. I wondered if the draft of the history I was compiling was for Mrs. Evans' own personal use and political agenda. During these moments, our conversations were brief and characterized by my questions, concerns, ideas, and requests being met with silences, changes in the conversation, or agreement without conversation. I felt as though I was standing alone in the collaborative space. Finally, there were periods during which I abandoned the effort to uphold a collaborative space altogether. Toward the end of my time at NPCDC, for example, I became so concerned that Mrs. Evans would instruct NPCDC to terminate our collaboration once she received what she wanted—historical bullet points pulled from the board of directors' meeting minutes – that I decided to stop sending updated versions to her until I received the letter of support for IRB approval from NPCDC's board of directors for my research. So carefully protected and tightly held were the divergent aspects/agendas of our partnership that self-interested maneuvering, not collaboration, guided these interactions. As I will discuss in my final remarks, I could not help but surmise that had this critically engaged endeavor been seen through to the writing of this thesis, these complications in collaboration would have gone unacknowledged.

Contradictions and Pitfalls

In reflecting upon my attempt at engaging-up, I identified three main areas that produced great problems for this approach and which are ripe for further analytical examination. In the first section I examine the type of engaging-up that I was doing to see if it opened me up to a contradictory consciousness (Hale 2006b) or to Marcus' notion of complicity. Second, I will describe the problem of identifying the shared ethics and goals when engaging-up. In the third

section, I will discuss the potential harm to our allies through our collaborators' misuse of our methods and products when engaging-up.

Contradictory Consciousness and Complicity

Inevitably, contradictory consciousness and complicity arise when engaging-up. At their most general, these concepts refer to mindsets that facilitate the development of intimate relationships, characterized by empathy. Yet, maintaining such a perspective can be problematic for both our ethnographic relationships and our analyses. In examining his work with ladino intellectuals in Guatemala, Hale surmises that these progressive intellectuals possessed a contradictory consciousness, which he defines as “an odd combination of sharply critical insight into the inequities of the social formation, and a blind eye to the very ideas and practices that keep these inequities in place” (Hale 2006:42). He goes on to posit that “successful immersion among a relatively powerful and dominant social group brings forth a measure of contradictory consciousness in the researcher as well” (Hale 2006:42). For Hale and many others, this is something that one should aim toward correcting. He claims that he was pulled out of contradictory consciousness by his more structuralist groundings and by his Mayan friends and colleagues (2006). His structuralist groundings reminded him that his research was not only about individuals, but also about broader and more powerful social structures and processes. Conversations with Mayan colleagues and friends, in which the continued pain of living in a highly racialized world was repeatedly present, would act as a check to his ethnographic empathy for the ladinos, the group he was studying (2006).

Campbell, another scholar who engages with groups across differences, argues that scholars should situate themselves firmly within ethnographic complicity (2005). Campbell, like

Hale, includes two seemingly opposing groups when he studies up: A family of Texas ranchers, as well as the Latin migrant farming family that has long been employed by these rancheros. Also like Hale, he has longstanding and deep ties with the subaltern group. Yet, he aims to do “serious fieldwork with two or more groups, examining the liminality and border zones that connect and divide them” by practicing what he calls “ethnographic complicity” (Campbell 2005:27). He listens carefully “to members of both ethnic groups, empathizing to a degree with their individual existential dilemmas, in order to construct a more complex picture of local ethnic relations and to support those elements on both sides that seek social justice” (Campbell 2005:41). Employing a similar strategy, Hale contends that this approach generated insights that would not have been possible had he simply stayed with one group (2006b).

This type of border-crossing, however, is a privileged position that can, in itself, threaten one’s research relationships. While Campbell does not articulate a single complication arising from this approach to engaging-up, Hale and Goode were critiqued for holding such spaces. Goode mentions colleagues, allies, and friends feeling betrayed by her critical evaluations of policies and projects upon which they had jointly worked (2009). A Mayan friend and colleague of Hale’s offered a more self-serving interpretation of this research strategy. He quotes her as saying, ““You just want to stay good with everyone”” (Hale 2006b:44). He continues, “She noted how my own privileged position creates the illusion of being above the rough and tumble of racial conflict in Guatemala, of being able to size up everyone with the requisite distance, rationality, and rigor” (Hale 2006b:44).

I sought to undermine any ambiguous positioning and the potential for being (seen as) disingenuous and disengaged by situating my study and myself squarely within NPCDC. I was explicit in my political alignment with this organization and the broader ideals of social justice

and economic equality. I committed to being transparent and sincere in dealing with my collaborators. Engaging-up in this way was challenging.

There were times I was reticent to discuss my own political agenda for fear of alienating myself from my more conservative and powerful collaborators. Low and Merry state precisely that the likelihood of this communication breakdown makes studying up, itself, a barrier to engaged ethnography (2010). Indeed, Low describes how the threat of self-silencing followed her through her fieldwork and into her ethnographic writing as she struggled to write a fair but adequate critique (2010). While I, too, have struggled with sections of this ethnography that offer my lone representation of NPCDC and various individual collaborators, the most salient difficulty occurred while I was still working at NPCDC. As I mentioned in the conclusion of the previous chapter, during my research I was constantly weighing the pros and cons of revealing my own political sensibilities to folks at NPCDC.

But what about a contradictory consciousness, what were my checks, especially within such a seemingly compromised methodological arrangement? My checks were both theoretical and personal. My structuralist leanings and my tendency to subject myself and those agencies with which I am affiliated to *kritik* as a tool of reflexivity served as a check. Yet, I sought to be engaged. Therefore, I looked for those within NPCDC who also saw the sagacity of self-reflection or *auto-kritik*. Personally, I was fiercely ambivalent about my work with NPCDC, which also served as a check. Indeed, the most disconcerting period of my research was when I learned about the stricter loitering and drug enforcement policies that the city agreed to enact in order for NPCDC to receive a Department of Justice Grant. Actually, misdemeanors became classified as felonies within the “service area” of NPCDC. Moreover, my knowledge of the various funding streams and practices of other nonprofits that refuse to go after money which

criminalizes poor fathers or creates felons of drug dependent teens – also served as a check on normalizing as “business as usual” the grants sought and the programs implemented by NPCDC.

In evaluating my own efforts not only to determine their values and ethics, but also to create a space in which we could share about values, ethics, and how their efforts contributed to the broader movement, I would characterize my performance as uneven.³⁶ I did a great job with most staff and board members at the agency, and I could have done a better job with others. This uneven performance played out in the type of conversations that I had as well. For example, with the majority of NPCDC’s stakeholders, I had many more of my conversations about the ethics of the methods we were using – tying them to liberatory politics and valid scholarship, than I did about the importance of the economic equality and urban reinvestment.

Defining Shared Ideals and Goals

The engaged ethnographer is called explicitly to align politically with a group in struggle and with whom ethics and values are shared. Those who engage-up wonder how they can know for certain that they share values and ethics with their collaborators. Mission statements and organizational blurbs are not likely to offer accurate reflections of the values of collaborators. One can inquire into an agency’s commitment to democratic – or even liberatory – ideals. Yet who would respond that they are against equality or social justice? Or, even, that they value expediency over democracy? Scholars who engage-up not only yearn for an indication of their partner’s values and ethics prior to collaborating, but they also want to ensure that this ethical

³⁶ Interestingly, where I was more likely to swallow, or tamp down, my own political sensibilities in the abstract when talking to Mrs. Evans and to some members of the board and executive staff, I could talk about the intersection of politics, economics, and criminalization through sharing my personal and familial past. This was particularly possible because I am far from that drug-addicted, homeless, street kid of ambiguous ethnicity.

expression is sincere. Yet, it takes time, access, and exposure to observe values and ethics in action.

Ultimately, I could not determine whether my collaborators shared my values. My collaborators did not dismiss my desire to implement a research project that embodied the democratic ethics with which I was aligned. However, I did not take this as an indication of shared values and ethics. As scholars have concluded, many movements/organizations exist simply to prop up the “nonprofit industrial complex” and reproduce their own labor (INCITE! 2007). But, other scholars who have depicted the survival strategies of activists working in CDCs and other non-profits (James 2012; Wright 2013), argue the importance of probing below dominant discourse found in organizational rhetoric. In these ethnographic descriptions, the nonprofits appropriate the language of the funders and feed it back to them in grant applications. Those nonprofits that can convincingly do this secure grants. With the resources they have won, these nonprofits do whatever they feel will be best for the most clients (regardless of what the grant application says). They then report some numbers to indicate success and repeat the process. Cleverly, James refers to this strategy as “bureaucraft” (2012). In my previous work in Massachusetts, I worked with many third sector and private nonprofits that did just this. But was this strategy being used by my collaborators? Or was NPCDC just a cog in the wheel of the nonprofit industrial complex? Although I was sympathetic with the ethics of the urban development/economic justice movements, and I was operating under the assumption that NPCDC was, as well, I had great difficulty determining the ethics of NPCDC with any certitude.

My collaborators were far from enthusiastic about the democratic methods I discussed with them. Indeed, my trepidation about how ethically aligned we really were stemmed from what I perceived at the time to be reluctant acceptance of my research methods. As I mentioned

previously, my agreement to compose the history was contingent upon speaking to a broad range of stakeholders and allowing the representation of multiple perspectives in the history, yet Mrs. Evans asked that I speak to her allies within the agency first. In our subsequent meetings, I continued to bring up the importance of broad-based conversations and to ask her to compile a list of stakeholders as a way of keeping the eventuality of opening-up the history in Mrs. Evans's mind. She would often reply with opaque responses or smile and then move on to reviewing bullet points and answering other questions. Between this apparent veiling of intention and my own lack of access to Mrs. Evans, it was nearly impossible to determine if she really was willing to engage in such research.³⁷

Hale states that the ethics of activist anthropology are instantiated in its methods (2006b). Engaged ethnographers' political sensibilities are so embedded in their methods that doing an activist research project of the right would be impossible because the right or the relatively powerful would be averse to our methods. In *Mas Que un Indio*, Hale's engaged project with the ladinos never gets off the ground (2006b). He implies that this is a failure of the methods he employed coupled with the characteristics of the agency that were too far out of alignment with each other (2006b). In the Introduction to *Engaging Contradictions*, Hale notes:

Activist research methods (horizontal dialogue and broad-based participation in each phase of the research; critical scrutiny of the analytical frame; thorough critical self-reflection) would tend to be antithetical to the political goals and vision of the people in question. In short, activist scholarship methods themselves embody a politics, which the authors affirm and critically explore; this affirmation, in turn, far from an admission of "political bias," is a step toward deeper reflection on the entanglement of researcher and subject and, by extension, toward greater methodological rigor. (Hale 2008:8)

³⁷ My other collaborators were more interested in beginning these discussions and conversations. Indeed, they were so interested that Ms. Nicole Boudreaux-Black even asked if I would teach her this method, so she could use it for a different organization for which she was also a board member. Yet, our standing meetings were regularly disrupted by death, illness, a truncated work week (NPCDC was not opened on Friday) and other outside obligations. The executive staff and program staff were only occasionally involved in the preparatory stage of writing the history. I wanted to honor their busy schedules by having as much preparatory work done as possible before taking them away from their duties.

Following this line of reasoning, my research experience seems to offer further evidence of this claim. It certainly seems to follow the same trajectory as Hale's experience in Guatemala. We both envisioned dialoguing across differences within a single organization, yet we began by speaking to only one group of individuals who were similarly positioned within the organization. Although his dialogues were about racial differences, and mine were designed to be conversations about a particular organization's history, once it was time to open up the conversation across differences, our projects unraveled. Specifically, it was at the moment my collaborators and I had agreed we would further democratize decision-making to include a broader swath of stakeholders that the NPCDC terminated our project. The ethics and political sensibilities instantiated in the engaged ethnographic methods seemed to be at odds with the organizations' political sensibilities and they exposed just how distant the agency was from the community it represented.

But just how valid is it to use observations of interactions with our collaborators regarding methodological choices as a way to support Hale's argument that our values are instantiated in our methods? At first blush, this conclusion is very gratifying. Not only does it offer additional evidence for Hale's claims that (1) engaged ethnography of the powerful or of the right will likely end in failure and (2) our ethics are instantiated into our methods, but also it offers an explanation for why my research – like Hale's with the ladinos (2006b:41)– never got off the ground. Before adopting this conclusion, it is important to interrogate its validity. This pathway to proving the political sensibilities of our collaborators and the ethics instantiated in our methods seems far more problematic than currently presented in the engaged ethnographic literature. Although some of these problems are more specific to engaging-up (because of the

many limitations that this entails) than engaged ethnography, the points for consideration that I discuss below can be applied liberally.

Unlike Hale, I was engaging-up, with all of the limitations that this entails. The limited time and access to certain collaborators that comes with engaging-up impacts our ability to make wholesale arguments about the politics embodied in our methods via our relations with our site. We may only interact with certain individual collaborators during working sessions where politically sensitive projects are hashed out. For example, many of my key collaborators did not work at NPCDC. They would come to the site specifically to review the progress of the history preparatory work that I was doing. These meetings, or working sessions, would often include my asking clarifying questions about the archive, conversations about logistics and timelines, and methodological discussions.³⁸ Aside from the working meetings that we convened, I can count on one hand the number of times I saw many of my key stakeholders at NPCDC's offices in the nine months I was there. Thus, I did not have a robust sample of observations and interactions outside of these more-scripted exchanges. I lacked observant participation that would provide a counter-balance to or round out these work sessions.

Because of this lack of daily access to many of the key stakeholders, our assessments of the degree to which our values and ethics overlap with our collaborators' can end up being based almost exclusively on methodological conversations and, specifically, their willingness to see the utility in following the various engaged methods—horizontal dialogue, broad-based participation in each phase of the research; critical scrutiny of the analytical frame; thorough critical self-reflection. In short, the circumstances of engaging-up can lead to our methods becoming value labs and ethical measuring sticks. The question, “Will they see the value in democratic

³⁸ Although we discussed methods, we did not begin these conversations by discussing whether we shared similar ethical stances or values.

discussion, horizontal dialogue, consensus decision making?” can easily be overly interpreted when engaging-up. If the answer is yes, then they are aligned with the political sensibilities Hale claims are embodied in our methods. If the response is no, then they are not.

Even the conflation of methodological willingness to engage in collaborative research from the outset with the democratic politics of liberation can be problematic in an engaging-up context. In order to determine our partners’ ethical stances (or that we share an understanding that if we believe in liberatory politics we will be inclusive, or that enacting democratic ideals entails engaging in horizontal dialogues), we may enter into an objectivist orientation to knowledge where we seek to "know" our collaborators instead of co-produce knowledge with them or develop a shared knowing, etc. This can create a no-win situation for partners who may disagree with the types of collaborative methods we want to use. Even well-intentioned partners may find themselves in situations in which to be seen as wanting to collaborate is to cede control over methods – with some of which they may not agree – to the researcher.

To clarify, I am not arguing against the notion that our various ethics can be instantiated in our methods. I am arguing against working from the wholesale assumption that the pathway between specific methodological choices within the collaborative research model and our ethics is so clear that we need neither to bring our attention to this relation nor engage our partners in in-depth and ongoing methodological conversations. This is especially important in engaging-up research contexts in which (1) the researcher may not have the ability alone to demonstrate research agenda and (2) the ethnographer is likely to have difficulty performing participant observation because of limited access to certain collaborators. If we take these concerns seriously, an engaged ethnographer may begin her research by talking about the importance of not only sharing certain values but also of prioritizing them so much so that we seek to put them

into action via our methodological choices. From here, the conversation might evolve into a discussion of what democracy looks like in terms of methodological choices or how we might together enact our shared value of honoring diversity, for example. These conversations will act as a foundation and point of reference for later conversations should organizational realities, such as a desire for expediency, end up being prioritized over those values we share and had decided to enact.

While ethnographers in traditional collaborations often have ample enough opportunity to discuss these issues with their partners, anthropologists who engage-up experience limitations to accessing their collaborators. Without the ability to triangulate working group observations with other observations of our partners, we should be conservative in the conclusions we draw. While this offers no solution to the question, “What are your politics?” it does at least expose holes in thinking that our ethics and methods are so aligned that we can draw conclusions about our site’s ethics based on their reactions to our methods, which is the proposition Hale seems to be suggesting.

Betraying our Allies: Misused Methods and Products

The desire to promote social justice and ameliorate the suffering of urban abandonment and economic injustice by providing anthropological insights and techniques to governments or development organizations – all while avoiding cooptation and misuse of anthropological expertise – is a dilemma that arises when one attempts to engage-up. Low and Merry list this as one of the three dilemmas of engaged ethnography (2010). Although they primarily discuss collaborative research with the military – our most extreme example of a compromised space in which to engage – the dilemma is the same (2010). On the one hand, allying with these elite

entities offers the promise of transforming the work that they do into projects that are more responsive to, and inclusive of, the community. Yet, on the other, we risk having our methods coopted and our findings employed in ways that could potentially damage the broader community (Low and Merry 2010). Unfortunately, there is no way to ensure that our powerful partners will not cast off the collaboration and misuse our methods and findings.

In the engaged ethnographic literature, scholars talk about the risk of potentially doing harm in an abstract and ambiguous fashion. They fear being complicit in the reproduction of imperialism or neo-colonialism in nebulous, indeterminate and removed ways. But the engaging-up context gives these fears specificity. I worried that the powerful positioning of this agency, along with its ambiguous relation to the broader community, was such that it nearly guaranteed that my scholarship, my methods, or my expertise would be used to suppress or delegitimize the same voices for whom I hoped to make space. I have spent much of this thesis discussing just these concerns. Therefore, I felt it was imperative to show unwavering commitment to the collaborative and inclusive process of writing history and to the activist research methods – horizontal dialogue and broad-based participation in each phase of research; critical scrutiny of the analytical frame and thorough critical self-reflection. By being steadfast to this approach to our project, I sought – maybe naively – to neutralize my concerns. How? I envisioned that the process of abiding by this activist approach in which we would work together in an inclusive, democratic and equitable way would transform the participants.

I was confident that over time the methods that I had planned to employ would move the organization back into alignment with the ideals upon which the CDC-model of urban development was based. I thought this project could demonstrate the benefits and ease of employing these methods, which are based on liberatory principles and democratic ethics, and

are aligned with the ideals of the CDC model, as opposed to some of the practices of this specific CDC. And, by successfully completing this collaborative project, I hoped to embolden the stakeholders who were interested in activism, and to demonstrate to the more conservative stakeholders the merit of aligning with, and seeking input from, the community of North Portside that it purports to represent. I believed this could have a lasting influence on this organization and the community.

While promises of engaging-up in other contexts might not be so great, the idealism encapsulated within the above paragraph is not delusion. Had this organization been a space that was severely compromised—like the military or Monsanto—I would not have risked engaging-up. Yet, in this less compromised, less powerful space, I believed that the potential for bringing about positive change was more likely than the risk of cooptation of my methods and products.³⁹

But as I mentioned above, I had to plan on the work that we did together being coopted. While I was hopeful that, through the collaborative process, the participants would come together around liberatory ideals and democratic principles, I could not be certain of this. Had this plan flopped, I anticipated that at the end of the project, the history would be disassembled and reassembled for numerous self-serving narratives – all implemented with indifference to the concerns of the broader community. Because the NPCDC was not one organization but two,⁴⁰ I could anticipate this history might be usurped by stakeholders of each organization, both eager

³⁹ I also believed that this change was likely because of some political research that I shared with Mrs. Evans and the other key stakeholders. The differences in the number of votes that separated the more conservative candidates who won political office and those candidates whom members of NPCDC, especially Mrs. Evans, supported was less than half of the number of non-felon, non-voters in North Portside. In short, despite the fact that the African American community had never exceeded 25% in Portside, had one-third of those eligible to vote in the broader African American community exercised this right, the candidates favored by some of NPCDC's executive staff and board members would have won. Similarly, I had specific examples of cases in which NPCDC would have gotten further in their educational efforts to the city and County Commission had they shown that they represent a broader constituency.

⁴⁰ If organization is defined anthropologically as “a system of political action” (Pettigrew 1985:26); then, at this time, NPCDC was two distinct organizations.

to promote their own agenda during this time of change and uncertainty. I also assumed that the resulting narratives would privatize the public's past and attempt to extend the influence of NPCDC.

Three years after this project dissolved, I sat in an auditorium in an entirely different neighborhood within Portside – Mid City. This neighborhood was the newest project of the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors. Everyone, it seemed, wanted to give funding to agencies working in this neighborhood. They all wanted to fix Mid-City. Mid-City, although it is located within Portside, has its own unique history, legitimate neighborhood leaders, and longstanding nonprofits and groups serving the community. Yet, this influx of funds has brought new organizations and new community leaders to the Mid-City Community Center. These new community leaders included Mrs. Evans and Mrs. Jones, who were at the front of the room being honored by the police chief and the head of a powerful local branch of an influential national nonprofit. The story of NPCDC was projected onto a large screen; it told the history Mrs. Evans had wanted me to write. It was broad, sweeping, inspiring, and coopting. It alienated the community leaders from Mid-City. Had they not also organized and sacrificed and labored long hours for the betterment of their own community? It was not so much what the video actually projected as how it was used and what it implied. With the expressed hope of Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Evans being “to inspire other communities to want to take on community organizing, community engagement and make their communities a better place to live, work, play, and raise children,” the underlying assumption in this context seemed to be that Mid-City had not had leaders from/in the community. This, of course, was not true. Indeed, some of these women were at this event. However, the coordinators chose, literally, to push these long time community activists to the margins of the Neighborhood Women's Empowerment Celebration, where they

handed out brochures for the neighborhood community groups and long established nonprofits that they represented. These women – so integral to the history of Mid-City - were not even mentioned as community leaders. Instead, at this empowerment celebration, the audience was directed to Mrs. Evans and Mrs. Jones, who were newcomers to the community through the recent grant received by NPCDC to develop housing in the area. Mrs. Timothy, a longstanding neighborhood resident and activist, said she had chosen to “ignore the slight” and took a pragmatic outlook of the event. “If this is what inspires other neighborhood women, fine,” she said. She then continued, “And, if they actually want to find out the history of THIS neighborhood then they can come and visit the heritage museum.” Could a project to realign NPCDC and the broader North Portside have corrected the NPCDC’s desire to embellish their own history at the expense of the broader community? Who knows. What can be ascertained is that this event indicated that shifting their orientation toward the community would have been more difficult than I first anticipated. Maybe the corrective was precisely this – a situation in which they were clearly being celebrated at the expense of another community leader, Mrs. Timothy, whom they were aware of as a long time fellow activist and leader in Mid City.⁴¹

⁴¹ Mrs. Timothy is known throughout the city as a longstanding neighborhood activist in Mid-City. The neighborhood library is named after her and her husband. This would have spoken loudly to Mrs. Evans, who refers to buildings by their formal names (ie, The Timothy Library) and not by the organizations which they house or their function. Although Mrs. Timothy did not actively contest the accounts of the women or organizers, she did show her lack of regard for the event by being uncharacteristically late. She had prioritized meeting with new neighborhood volunteers above the opening remarks of this event, which including viewing the video of Mrs. Evans and Mrs. Jones and listening to speeches by them and the CEO of the nonprofit that had organized the event. Moreover, many of the neighborhood residents took the event off-script by responding to comments about neighborhood leaders or the history of the strength of female leaders that the mistress of ceremonies made by saying, “like Mrs. Timothy” or “like our neighborhood association,” one of the neighborhood organizations run by Mrs. Timothy. Similarly, the neighborhood residents would reference the organization she represented with a swipe of an arm to the back corner of the room where Mrs. Timothy was tabling, attempting to get a few volunteers from this event. During these occurrences, Mrs. Evans and Mrs. Jones looked slightly sheepish, less confident versions of their usual selves. I took their lack of commentary regarding the video as further evidence of their acknowledgement of the ethically uncomfortable situation. In two other community meetings outside of Mid-City, in which the video was either shown or was a topic of discussion, Mrs. Evans and Mrs. Jones offered a great deal of commentary and additional celebratory stories not captured by the film.

Final Thoughts: Reconsidering the Promises and Pitfalls of Engaging-Up

In presenting my final thoughts on this endeavor, I find myself holding fast to the engaging-up experiment. I think it is a worthy project. If we are going to be performing the type of critically engaged ethnography that follows status quo paths for change like policy changes or legal battles, we must identify allies in positions of power relative to the broader communities whom they claim to represent. We must identify those public defenders who do believe that poor folks have a right to a fair trial and can honestly bemoan their office's inability to provide this. This does not have to be a public "mea culpa" on the part of those in power but a conversation among friends and a starting point from which we can create solutions together. We must identify community development corporations who not only believe that reinvestment in a systematically marginalized area is important, but also that listening to community members in order to determine the goals and benchmarks for reinvestment is critical to advancing the entire community. As Portside's history has shown, development for the sake of development is not helpful to communities. Critically engaging judges and other elected officials on issues of campaign finance reform or even the practice of opening up judgeships to popular elections could create important scholarship. Like studying up, this scholarship shines a light on institutions and processes that impact the experiences of everyday people. Like both studying up and critically engaged ethnography, this scholarship will be useful to the discipline of anthropology and to the public at large. Like critically engaged scholarship, however, this public will be more specified and engaged in the process. Thus, the links of change are forged and, hopefully, will stay intact long after we have moved on.

As I articulated above, engaging-up is rife with potential problems that must be seriously considered before attempting to take on such a research agenda. To return to the project that

reinvigorated the completion of this thesis: I will take on Lila's next election for Family Court Judge by documenting and critically exploring the practice of having judgeships decided by popular elections. I will ask critical questions and encourage critique of broader frameworks. I anticipate that I will be quiet when she decides to sidestep an issue that she thinks will cost her the election even if I know she has a well-articulated but unpopular position that she's sitting on. I will also clearly outline our research agenda ahead of time. I will find out who she considers her stakeholders and talk to them ahead of time to ensure they are on board. I will get IRB approval (and a letter of support from her campaign) from the get-go. Before we even begin this project, I will give a workshop to her and her staff regarding the type of research that I do and I will disseminate this thesis and other work on critically engaged ethnography and activist anthropology to them. I will not wait to bring in her constituent stakeholders. This will begin immediately. We will decide where liberatory ideals and democratic processes must happen and where executive staff needs flexibility to make quick decisions. Funding concerns will automatically be considered for group discussion. The experiment is one of documenting the difficulties of playing by the ethics one wishes to see in electoral politics in an election in which she and her opponent are equally favored from the outset. The goals are clearly articulated – Lila for the Ethical Win, where “ethical” will be collaboratively defined by her stakeholders (including those who do provide campaign contributions). This plan is feasible because I have known her for years and we have voiced similar critiques and expressed similar interests and curiosities. Moreover, the aspects of my identity which may have been off-putting to Mrs. Evans are actively embraced by Lila. My whiteness is not an issue nor is my sexuality. Lila was quick to tell me that she has a daughter who is in a relationship with a woman and to express the concerns that she shares with her daughter regarding finding a city that is welcoming to those in

the LGBTQ+ community. In short, our relationship and the research can survive this experience. She knows how important this research is to and for me. I know how important winning a circuit judgeship is to her. We believe that both the research and her victory will positively impact families involved in the judicial system in St. Helena Parish.

It may appear that this new research context is not engaging-up, but simply engaged ethnography. After all, I seem to have more equal relations of power from the outset than I did with NPCDC— Lila came to me and I was able to share my hesitations and then I was able to agree to participate on my own (dialogic) terms. Unlike at the beginning of the NPCDC project, I am now an expert in this type of research rather than a student looking for a project who is volunteered by her professor/mentor. Moreover, I have less at stake and, therefore, more ability to walk away. I will have received my Master's before Lila runs for the bench. Importantly, I anticipate that the freedom and equal footing on which we both will enter the research election experiment will continue into our research project. While I anticipate this more equitable positioning reducing the dilemmas of engaging-up, this project will still be an experiment in engaging-up. I will be studying-up because I will be examining an institution that impacts the daily lives of normal people involved in the family judicial system. Also, I will enact the engaged methodology which I described in this thesis. The difference between this future project and the NPCDC project is that I anticipate that I will not have the same difficulties with access or identification of shared ethics and goals as I did with NPCDC. Also, issues related to representation and authenticity have a valued position within a site that overlaps with electoral politics – a process in which discussions about image and authenticity happen early and often. Noting a situation in which engaging-up is not anticipated to be quite so fraught with methodological dilemmas is important, hopeful, and helps me highlight studying up as an

approach used to illuminate powerful institutions and processes that impact the everyday lives of average citizens. Studying up is not simply about inverted power dynamics, although this may be a characteristic of this approach. In short the project with NPCDC was difficult beyond feasibility because of the context and the specific agency with which I partnered, not necessarily because of the method, itself. This discussion brings me to my favorite promise of the engaging-up experiment.

As I mentioned in earlier in this chapter, I had a hard time determining if NPCDC and I were working toward the same goals and what ethics guided their work. Because of this and the complications that I described in both the studying up and engaged ethnography chapters, I felt that I had to plan on the NPCDC misusing the products we created, a move which would have entailed betraying the broader community. Yet, I persisted with this collaboration. Why? I, like Hale, expected that staying loyal to the liberatory ideals and democratic ethics thought to be instantiated in our various methods would protect the integrity of this project. And, from my estimation, they did just that. The contextual contradictions caused it to implode just at the moment when we were to democratize communication and decision-making. My warning against over-interpreting the information that we get from methodological conversations with a site when studying-up (especially one in which access is an issue) does not negate the likelihood that those who have secret agendas or who approach the collaboration with bad faith will likely pull away from or terminate projects that involve democratic decision making and horizontal conversations because projects employing democratic methods are much more difficult to coopt without pushback from others in the group. For an engaged scholar like me who worries about her work being used to oppress instead of liberate, this automatic self-destruct feature is one of the most promising parts of this methodology.

Even if this next project does unravel, “failures,” such as the case of the NPCDC project, are actually crucial openings in which we can examine our practice more reflexively and critically. Other scholars have also discussed how failures contribute to honing various approaches to ethnography (Hale 2006; Spivak 1990; Visweswaran 1994). Spivak’s notion of failure includes all of those moments when a project is faced with its own impossibility. According to this line of thinking, even successful projects may include momentary failures. However, these moments of impossibility are what a scholar’s attention is drawn to when her project has “failed.” Revisiting these moments are a natural part of the process of making sense of and learning from past “errors.”

This seems to align with Visweswaran’s notion of “success-in-failure.” Like Visweswaran, I too feel that this narrative of personal redemption by learning from past mistakes is not the most interesting or useful mining of the data, but just a first step. I found that the more I examined situations that I first pointed to as mistakes, the more complex the intertwining of the strands making up any of the situations were. Thus, my goal in depicting the various conundrums evolved into a personal commitment to maintain the complexity and to use these salient situations to explore assumptions and methodological gaps or complications that exist within both the studying up and engaged ethnography bodies of literature. I have questioned aspects of the research agenda that I – and many – have taken for granted and have explored some of the assumptions upon which the engaged research endeavor has rested. In so doing, I hope that engaging-up has strengthened the engaged ethnographic research endeavor and reinvigorated studying up.

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