

Notes from the Field: Re-living Tucson - Geographic Fieldwork as an Activist-Academic

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My dissertation research in the Arizona/Sonora borderlands spanned a period of about two and a half years, from January 2013 to May 2015. My project was originally developed while I was living in Kentucky, a distant land in all respects to southern Arizona where my research on racial difference within activist networks in the borderlands was carried out. While I was based in Kentucky, from 2010-2012, amid the busy din of departmental social activities, lectures, classes, and teaching, the visions I had of my fieldwork were based on memories of my life in Tucson from 2005-2010. While I knew things would change during the two years I was away, I could not have known how much, nor how those changes would impact my own place in this city that had been my home. My relationship to activism in Tucson has shifted a great deal through my research, and while some of those shifts have been very positive, others were quite difficult.

The Personal is Political

As they say, distance makes the heart grow fonder and my research plan was developed against the backdrop of homesickness. I really missed Tucson during my years in Kentucky, and many of my ideas of how my research would progress were predicated upon my own positive reflections on activism in Tucson and my sentiments regarding the relationships I held with people there prior to starting my PhD program. I felt very inspired by activists in Tucson, both through my own knowledge of things before I left for Kentucky, as well as through

media reports and social media updates. I imagined my research to be a mode through which I might share some of the things that seemed to me very positive about activism in southern Arizona: people's dedication, attention to issues of social privilege and marginalization, and the general badassness that accompanies meaningful political action.

I was certainly nervous about aspects of my research. I worried about how people would view me upon my return as an activist-academic. Geographic research may not carry with it precisely the same fraught past as anthropology, but geographers definitely have our own baggage born of a history of complicity with colonialism and white supremacy. As a white academic interested in negotiations of race and privilege, I am constantly acutely aware of my own problematic positionality. As far as my activist friends were concerned, my position as any sort of academic was more important than any particular disciplinary training. After years spent hanging out with anarchists and other political radicals, I was well aware of people's views on academia. Within the circles that I had worked with most closely during my time living in Tucson, folks tended to view academia and academics as elitist, insular, and somewhat predatory. I worried that my friends would question my intentions, that they would feel wary around me, or that they would see me as some sort of spy.

Ultimately, I found that I was much more concerned with these things than anyone else. It was more important to people that I participate in actions and projects underway, and that I simply be myself. I had initially envisioned developing a participatory project for my dissertation, through which I would have built my research around the needs of activists in southern Arizona. However, I came to realize that my work as an academic was neither very interesting nor useful to the people I knew, particularly since they were aware that my research would most likely end up in expensive academic journals that they would not be able to access. It was far more important that

I be involved as a friend and activist. My academic writing was not seen as a meaningful contribution, but neither was it seen as much of a problem. It was far more important that I actually came through on my commitments to the activism I was involved in. People were interested in my academic writing because they knew it was something important to me, and to my progress toward my PhD, but I found that it wasn't necessarily something they were invested in beyond their concern for me as a friend and ally.

Predictably, my research did not go as I thought it would. I hadn't anticipated the effect of transience on the community I knew before. When I returned to Tucson, I found the landscape of activism had shifted dramatically. While I had been away, longstanding projects had died and new projects had been born. New activists moved to the area, while many of the folks I knew had left town. Some people who had been very active and dedicated in the past had stepped out of activism, due to burnout, changes in their home-lives, or busier work and school lives. It was very disorienting to return to this altered Tucson and it was difficult for me to figure out how to plug back into the social networks that had felt so familiar before.

A Participant Observer

A critical historical moment that occurred between the time I left for Kentucky and when I returned to Tucson two and a half years later was the aftermath of the passage of SB1070, Arizona's notorious racial profiling legislation. This law went into effect just days before I left for Kentucky and, while I was aware of how traumatizing that law was expected to be and how upset people were that it had passed, I could not have anticipated the ways that it would change the landscape of activism throughout southern Arizona.

Race became a central topic in conversations among activists, both in terms of people's assessment of SB1070 and its

implementation, and in the context of activism itself. I returned to Tucson to find a more heightened awareness of whiteness and the ways that race manifests within circles of activists. In addition, migrant-led activism came to occupy a more central place in the overall landscape of activism in Tucson. For white activists, this meant bringing much more intention to how people choose to engage, often taking deliberately back-seat roles when working in solidarity with the people most affected by border policing and SB1070.

I felt conflicted about how to re-engage in these local activist worlds when I first returned to Tucson. Migrant justice activism has been the focal point for activists in Tucson for the last decade or so, ever since border policing across the entirety of the US/Mexico border region began to funnel migrants through the hottest and most dangerous parts of the border—southern Arizona’s Sonoran Desert. It had always seemed strange to me that people focused so intently on this work. Certainly, humanitarian aid projects like No More Deaths do very important, life-saving work, and most of the activists I interviewed initially came to Tucson to become involved with No More Deaths, providing food, water, and medical assistance to migrants crossing the desert. However, I often wondered why it was that people chose the projects that they did, especially for white activists who often talk about the importance of organizing one’s own community. Presumably, for white activists, this means working with other white people in some capacity or another.

Beyond the sticky racial dynamics within southern Arizona’s activist networks was my knowledge of other, often marginalized, communities who had reached out to activists in Tucson in the past. Specifically, other anarchists and I had been involved in border opposition work with Tohono O’odham activists for many years. I was aware of the ways that emphasis within Tucson’s activist scene on migrant justice often served to further marginalize the problems many Tohono O’odham

face with border policing and surveillance. Further, Tucson's activist emphasis on migrant justice often mobilizes discourses emphasizing the indigeneity of many migrants, but remains problematically silent about the fact that Tucson itself is on O'odham land—an oversight that is hurtful and offensive to many Tohono O'odham. I felt a strong desire to orient myself toward activism in solidarity with Tohono O'odham activists. At the same time, I felt that the conversations about race, privilege, and solidarity happening in migrant justice circles in Tucson were things that I wanted to contribute to and learn from.

Throughout the course of my fieldwork there were three primary projects I was involved in. All were very oriented towards social and racial justice, although each approached those topics from very different angles. The first was a project called O'odham Voice Against the Wall, which is primarily the mission of Rose, a Tohono O'odham elder and activist who works against the border and border patrol and with traditional O'odham communities to preserve their cultural knowledge and ways of life.¹ I originally came to know Rose through Dry River, Tucson's anarchist infoshop and radical venue, a space I was involved with for several years before moving to Kentucky. My work with O'odham Voice Against the Wall is varied and has included everything from participating in actions to helping out with things around Rose's village. Of all the projects I've participated in, working with O'odham Voice Against the Wall has allowed me an understanding of aspects of border security that are often left out of national discourses and academic forums, specifically the profound ways that border security has impacted aspects of traditional O'odham culture and daily life.

The contrast between the situation in Tucson and the situation in Rose's village is striking. In Tucson one can choose to be aware of the border, or to simply carry on and disregard the fact that one resides in a war zone. Yes, in Tucson there

¹ Names are pseudonyms.

is racial profiling of migrant communities. Yes, the effects of border policing are present in certain parts of the city and for particular non-white communities. In Tohono O'odham villages near the border, however, the presence of the border patrol is unavoidable. Rose's village is just a mile or so north of the border and her house is on the southern edge of the village, only about a quarter mile from the border. Border patrol trucks circulate constantly, helicopters are often overhead, surveillance towers are visible in the hills surrounding the village, and the people are constantly subject to the whims of border patrol officers. These things are a constant part of everyday life for people in O'odham villages near the border.

The second project I participated in was called the Tucson Solidarity Organizing Network (TSON) and, unfortunately, this project is an example of an activist endeavor that did not succeed, despite a very energetic beginning. TSON began in 2012 and had a strong presence in Tucson's activist community for its first year. The goal of the group was to be a place where white activists could both (1) develop their understandings and critiques of white supremacy and their socialization as white people, and (2) show up in solidarity for actions and projects led by people of color. Initially, TSON was a great success and contributed meaningfully within southern Arizona's activist networks. The group hosted workshops and other community events for local activists, carried out solidarity actions in the aftermath of Trayvon Martin's murder, and was active in opposition to Dennis DeConcini's role on the University of Arizona board of trustees while he simultaneously served on the board of directors of the Corrections Corporation of America.

Unfortunately, TSON was doomed to failure because of interpersonal problems within the group. It was a relatively small group to begin with and was primarily made up of people who were in romantic relationships with one another. A few of these relationships ended and new ones were formed from within the group's membership. These personal

entanglements ultimately proved fatal to the group, as many core members stepped aside due to the difficult emotions that emerged. By the time I joined TSON in 2013, the group had dwindled to about five or six regular members and despite our attempts to bring energy back into the project, TSON took an indefinite hiatus in the spring of 2014 and did not regroup.

The lessons learned from TSON were profound and I had a number of very productive conversations with members of the group. Perhaps the biggest lesson learned was from the ways the group handled conflict. TSON did not really tackle the relationship issues among its members because some members of the group thought these things external to the project itself. While this was the opinion that ultimately determined the path TSON took in dealing with these concerns, other members expressed dissenting opinions and wished that the group would have been more open about discussing these problems. Many discussed the ways that the personal is, indeed, political, and how they felt it was wrong to demarcate between these two realms. As a number of people expressed to me, the group's inability to work through the interpersonal problems was seen as symptomatic of the same alienating socio-political forces that the group was dedicated to combatting through their social justice work.

The third project I have been involved in is The Protection Network Action Fund (ProNet). The protection networks are a coalition of five migrant-led organizations in Tucson, all of whom function as a network of support for undocumented people. After SB1070 went into effect in 2010, members of the protection networks found themselves and their communities under attack by local law enforcement. Alliances between the border patrol and the Tucson Police Department have meant that even a traffic stop could result in immediate detention and the start of deportation proceedings. Consequently, activists in the protection networks were forced to shift the focus of their work to fundraising, so that their community members could

be bonded out of custody and reunited with their families as quickly as possible.

The goal of ProNet is to fundraise so that there is money available to support undocumented migrant activists in the event that they are detained by law enforcement. It is a group of mostly white activists who are also all involved in racial justice work in other sectors of Tucson's activist community and who mostly work directly with migrant justice projects. The ProNet project has been very successful, both in terms of its fundraising ability and the capacity of its members to form and sustain long-term relationships that bridge barriers of race, class, language, and culture.

Conclusion

As my fieldwork progressed, I became more attentive to activists' personal experiences with race, through their own awareness of white supremacy. Many of the white activists I spoke with described some period of awakening to race and racism, typically in their teens or early twenties. For most, it was a slow process and it was only over time that they became aware of their own complicity in white supremacy and other systems of oppression. Many described a timeline that flowed from an initial awareness of white supremacy in a general sense, to increasing understanding of their own privileges as white people—an understanding that was often accompanied by a lot of guilt, discomfort, and uncertainty as to how to proceed in a positive way. I came to view this as a "becoming" of sorts. The process of coming to terms with one's own whiteness as a racial justice activist who works against white supremacy is always ongoing. Despite the fact that many white activists wish to distance themselves from 'typical' white behaviors and attitudes, one cannot "unwhiten" oneself. The privileges and oppressions carried out by whiteness continue on a large scale, regardless of one's personal relationship to the phenomena

and interaction in small-scale settings.

Ultimately, my fieldwork was full of surprises and certainly did not go as I had anticipated. Some of those surprises were troubling, while others contributed positively to my overall understanding of the dynamics of social difference within activist communities. As I work through my dissertation, I hope to convey the complexity of these interpersonal struggles, while simultaneously highlighting the inspiring commitments to social and racial justice held by many of the activists I have come to know. There are important lessons on power and privilege there that could be instructive for contexts that extend far beyond southern Arizona's activist networks.