

FROM “BAGAY LÁ” TO “MY THING”: MY JOURNEY TO APPLIED ANTHROPOLOGY

By *Melissa Rinehart*

Introduction

It is bewildering how many natural disasters have occurred since the Haiti earthquake of January 12, 2010, appropriately named “bagay lá” or “the thing” by Haitians. Numerous cyclones, tsunamis, hurricanes, floods, landslides, volcanic eruptions, wildfires, droughts, earthquakes, and melting glaciers have created a human diaspora of epic proportions. After bagay lá, over 1,500 camps were created for sheltering 1.5 million internally displaced Haitians in Port-au-Prince and elsewhere, with 147,000 remaining in 271 camps today (Sherwood et al. 2014). Victims of such tragedies face difficult decisions in the aftermath of disaster. Do they move and start anew? Do they salvage and rebuild their lives? And, what about those who want to help? Are some methods better than others? These were some of the questions I asked myself the evening of bagay lá. What I did not recognize at the time was that my work, firmly rooted in the academy, was transforming into a more applied practice.

My work with Native American communities converged that January evening. I had never worked in or been to Haiti, but bagay lá revealed the unique relationship between human suffering and resiliency resultant from colonialism. While Native American and Haitian experiences were or never have been identical, there are similarities in that foreign exploitation wreaked havoc on their respective cultures. In the United States, a tradition of inconsistent federal Indian policies has enabled some of the lowest standards of living of any ethnic group. Consequently, inadequate income, education, and access to health care have resulted in significant socioeconomic and health disparities throughout Indian country.

Similarly, Haitians, noted to experience the highest poverty in the Western hemisphere, have a longstanding history of tenuous political and social infrastructures, low educational attainment, and high illiteracy and unemployment rates. Critical poverty like this leads to food security issues where insufficient water supplies and reliance on imported commodity foods make Haitians especially vulnerable. Continued environmental devastation only compounds these issues hindering large-scale self-sustainability efforts.

Until the earthquake, I did not feel I was working to my potential, having never considered what my praxis meant to me nor to those with whom I worked. Subjective conversations like these were avoided during my training. So, it was not until organizing the relief event that I actually connected to the social meaning of my profession. The relief event unified students and the greater community with a cause, and as a result, many people were fed. It also connected different cultures and brought a piece of mind to Haitian university students. The event also helped me experience the breadth of working as an applied anthropologist. After bagay lá, my methodological framework was rehumanized, requiring me to reassess how I practice anthropology, produce knowledge, and disseminate this knowledge. This reflective essay describes my awakening as an applied anthropologist.¹

Launching an Idea

Immediately after the earthquake, my first inclination was to get anthropology students at Valdosta State University, in Georgia, to collect rice, beans, and bottled water. These items seemed to make the most “cultural sense” and were consequently affordable to university students. The next morning, I naively left a voice-mail message at the local American



Volunteer Angie Sharp

Red Cross chapter asking about *their* response to bagay lá, but what they heard was *my* desire to organize a relief event. Unbeknownst to me, they alerted the news media, and by noon a television reporter was interviewing me at my university office wanting to know more about the event I was planning. In a near panic, I recognized there was no looking back. The event took nine days to plan, and I worked collaboratively with colleagues, administration, and student organizations as well as the American Red Cross and Second Harvest Food Bank. This all-day event was located at the university’s baseball stadium parking lot in which a drive-thru was created to ease donation drop-off. The American Red Cross’s mobile disaster relief team participated by collecting monetary and blood donations, while a crew from the food bank collected and palletted donations. Radio and television news teams broadcasted live, and area restaurants donated food and beverages to volunteers. In all,

35,000 pounds of food and water were collected equivalent to 17 tons. The food bank eventually trucked one-third of the donations to Miami, Florida, and from there the State Department flew the shipment to Port au Prince. Remaining donations were picked up by the Feed the Children organization, flown gratis by FedEx to Haiti, and then trucked to a displaced persons camp sheltering 15,000 Haitians.

Similar to Ethridge's (2006) experiences during post-Hurricane Katrina relief efforts in Mississippi, it was easy for me to exoticize the earthquake and make assumptions about disaster relief. Like Ethridge, I based my work on poorly examined assumptions about beneficiaries and local conditions after the earthquake. Although the food bank director advised collecting financial donations instead, he supported the event, recognizing my commitment notwithstanding the media and public pressures at hand. He also graciously organized a logistical team for transporting donations to Haiti. It was easy to get caught up in the shifting humanitarian compass at the time, but in reality I knew *bagay lá* only exacerbated Haitian food insecurities. Long-term food aid undermines local and regional economies, thereby creating and sustaining economic dependencies (Jackson 2005). Instead of supporting self-sustainability and long-term food security, *bagay lá* revealed the *modus operandi* of an ineffective way to feed a country. The disaster also affirmed that large-scale emergency relief was virtually nonexistent, which made international cries for immediate relief even more critical. Although aid quickly came to the island from the United States and elsewhere, it inadvertently maintained a status quo of historical dependency (Jackson 2005). Similarly, Ethridge (2006) recognized how the American government failed the peoples of the Gulf Coast with inadequate attention to survivors wherein Hurricane Katrina, like *bagay lá*, evidenced a weak infrastructure for disaster relief.

Ethridge also framed the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina as exotic and rife with cultural chaos, but instead, was



Organizer Melissa Rinehart

surprised by the resiliency and sense of agency survivors held. She pondered the significance of what she did as an individual. While every little bit helped, the devastation was “mind numbing” and revealed deep disconnects between relief efforts and local conditions (Ethridge 2006). Although never on the ground in Haiti as Ethridge was in Mississippi, I also questioned and reevaluated my respective motives and assumptions about helping victims. My idea co-committed many others to help those they would never meet, operating under the rationale that I was doing this in the most culturally appropriate manner. Although I knew the event would not resolve longstanding food insecurity in Haiti, I still felt compelled to help. My projected objectivist understandings of the world quickly morphed into something more morally informed and subjectively heart-centered that January.

My Public Role as an Anthropologist

My public role as an anthropologist validated my efforts to others during event planning. Credentials opened doors to the American Red Cross, the food bank, and the media. Furthermore, working with Native American peoples

made it more easily understood by others, especially those who knew me, why I wanted to help. Local media portrayed the effort as if it was a natural fit for someone who already works with communities typically depicted as poverty-stricken deserts living in marginal areas of the country or as casino-wealthy capitalists. Similarly, media descriptions of Haitians have continuously portrayed them as desperate peoples historically aligned with political exploitation, class warfare, and religious disenfranchisement. Such portrayals create and maintain a “dehumanization narrative” of a backward people in need of help from others (Ulysse 2010:38). Admittedly, initial media depictions pushed me from latent observation to active organization, but my inspiration to do something was born more from what I knew about Haitian history—a history of suffering and resilience. Ethridge (2006) marveled at the myriad of survival skills from displaced Katrina victims as I observed through media depictions of displaced Haitians.

In the public's eye, they saw me practicing anthropology while organizing the event. It did not matter, and perhaps some were unaware, that anthropological work/research is guided

by hypotheses; regardless, I was seen as an anthropologist “doing her thing.” Consequently, I began to see my role more broadly in the community and the need to apply my knowledge in alternative ways. Community involvement was overwhelmingly supportive throughout the planning process. Donations came to my office less than 48 hours after bagay lá, and three Haitian students visited my office with one fearing he lost two family members in the earthquake. Applying my skills, unbeknownst to me at the time, was becoming the vehicle for my anthropological voice.

profession is culturally determined and that it may oppose the values of those with whom I work, but by acknowledging this, I am liberated from the cloak of pretending the “self” is not lurking in my work. I have also learned that applied anthropology is a collective experience. Whether working with consultants one-on-one or with community members, practicing anthropology is rarely a singular experience. Unilineally engaged learning is counterproductive to praxis as the co-production of unified knowledge depends upon the creation of “morally charged relationships” bound

their anxieties by accepting the intrinsic value of their emotions throughout the research process, wherein one’s countertransference then becomes a more creative source for cultural analysis that would otherwise be detrimental to the research process. More recently, Davies and Spencer’s (2010) *Emotions in the Field: The Psychology and Anthropology of Fieldwork Experience* demonstrates how emotions actually enhance fieldwork experiences. Separating emotions does not render objective praxis but more of a potentially soulless enterprise. How is this possible in the most humanistic of the sciences? Our work is a human-centered activity, and recognizing the relationship between me, the practicing anthropologist, and the “other” is a social negotiation requiring reflexivity. Reciprocal influences, no matter how much we attempt to downplay our efforts, are important to the larger narrative. There is a place for moral judgment in anthropological work if praxis moves away from dialectical subjunctive and declarative moods to one with moral aesthetics in mind.

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A More Informed Applied Praxis

I now define the social meaning of practicing anthropology as working in, with, and for communities. Johnston (2010:S244), describing herself as a scholar-advocate, asserts “that as global citizens who have historically and currently worked with the world’s vulnerable peoples, anthropologists not only have a special obligation but a disciplinary obligation to consider international laws and norms in the shaping of their praxis.” Of course, the irony with this is that international laws and norms are rarely shaped by the marginalized peoples with whom we work. By organizing the relief effort, I achieved greater clarity in what practicing anthropology means to me—it fulfills my sense of human interest, my compassion for people, and my passion for the field. I understand my sense of place in my

by trust, respect, and beneficence for everyone (Carrithers 2005:437).

My heart ached for displaced Haitians in ways I had not experienced previously. After the relief event, I found myself asking how it was possible to capture the experiences of others when my own experiences were not considered. Post-modernist writings are often scrutinized for such reflexivity, but in reality these works offer greater understandings of the human condition. Discernment of such humanism also silences known biological underpinnings of various emotions.² How does one separate her socioculturally and biologically driven emotions from those with whom she works? Handling emotions in the field, or issues such as transference and countertransference, are typically omitted from methods books (Wolf 2010). Devereux’s (1967) seminal work compels readers to free themselves from

The Future of Public Engagement

Bourdieu (2003:14, 17) called for more social scientists to “intervene in the world of politics” and to reexamine the roles they hold “in various social movements active today.” However, the political activism he called for is only one path for a more morally charged praxis, as is relief event planning. There are multiple ways to engage publicly, and from these engagements we learn how to work and live together more effectively. Public engagement ensures anthropological advancement and is critical for discerning better understandings of the human condition. While such engagement may be viewed as less positivist, positivists also work with limitations no matter how pristine the data. Public engagement is inherently social, and in an increasingly globalized world, the need for disseminating anthropological knowledge is growing.

Current technologies offer creative ways to apply anthropological knowledge. Higher education has resisted

new technology on a large scale, especially when it comes to scholarly innovation. Online publishing opportunities are frowned upon, and blogging is typically devalued, but as Weller, professor of educational technology and active blogger himself, contends, blogging is limitless in its content and in the number of readers/followers it gains. "Institutional reputations are largely created through the faculty's online identity, and many institutions are now making it a priority to develop, recognize, and encourage practices such as blogging" (Weller 2012:para. 13). The American Anthropological Association's launching of a dedicated blog on the *Huffington Post* in 2012 acknowledges the value of applying anthropology to everyday issues; and anthropologist Paul Stoller (2013) has a dedicated blog on the *Huffington Post*, equating anthropologists to narrators of "real-world problems." Our "academic ecosystem is [indeed] a more complex one now" (Weller 2012:para. 5) and further molds "scholarship with commitment" (Bourdieu 2003:24). Bourdieu (2003:24) called for the social sciences to "break out of the academic microcosm and to enter resolutely into sustained exchange with the outside world more"; and social media, while it may not be attractive to all, nurtures such a global exchange.

My desire to exchange outside the academy grew after bagay lá. I began podcasting with Northeast Indiana Public Radio for a series that engaged listenership with unrecognized cultural practices in northeast Indiana. In conjunction with podcasting, I blogged, again, something I had never considered before. As with organizing the relief event, until I began doing it, I did not appreciate its appeal or how much it would push my writing. The global reach of various media has the ability to create fuller understandings of the human story, and as Bainton states, these tools "provide another voice of potential reason to the cacophony of options and biases that one finds in the media today" (Newsgroup message to author, May 5, 2012). While I no longer podcast or blog, I continue to seek different

ways for engaging publicly. I maintain a Facebook page where I post news briefs from the four fields of anthropology, and I write for a local magazine about multiculturalism in northeastern Indiana. These mediums offer a public platform for applying anthropological knowledge in ways I did not experience in the academy.

This essay may sound authoritative or perhaps self-serving in some way, but that is not the intention. What I am calling for is for practicing anthropologists to reflect on what their profession means to them and to reassess this idea often throughout their careers, while considering creative ways to apply their skills. Our holistic perspectives enable a flexible career path, and one I now see as constantly evolving. Organizing a Haitian relief effort taught me many things. First, I presumed I knew what was best for people I had never met in absolute crisis. Extending Robben's (2005:451) call for examining our own assumptions in the context of disaster relief, if we deconstruct public anthropological engagement while deciphering our own assumptions, it opens us to "imagine other cultural realities, to suspend [our] own taken-for-granted world, and learn about other worldviews through empathic fieldwork relations."

I also learned from organizing the relief event the need for greater validity of cultural survival. Historical trauma is a reality for many peoples, and these realities are difficult to convey in writing (Anderson 2011). By assessing historical trauma relative to the community, it forces one to look beyond grim statistics and focus more on cultural resiliency. Recognizing the disconnects between statistics and realities also enabled me to connect emotionally with others more deeply—professionally and otherwise. A renewed sense of emotional engagement "serves to acknowledge the complex, shared emotions of fieldwork and really of every human encounter" (Smith and Kleinman 2010:181). My growing awareness into the depths of human suffering and the resiliency people find therein compelled me to do the same with myself. Like Anderson (2011), who felt unprepared in his

fieldwork with the Western Arapaho, I shudder at how I once conveyed my scientific gaze instead of being a more fully engaged person.

All anthropological work is morally grounded if even at the outset "in the recognition of the worth of others" (Carrithers 2005:437). My practice, now more than ever before, is profoundly rooted in moral obligation and how it serves others. Regardless of the medium, applying anthropology has become the voice in which I mediate my traditionally trained self with a more actively engaged public servant. While I agree with Johnston (2010:S235) that working in the public interest is a privilege, I disagree that it is "an intensely problematic burden that demands explicit attention to the social terms and potential ramifications of engagement." Working with multiple audiences is not a burden but a commitment that bridges my dualistic compassion for people and my profession. I also learned that my public role as a practicing anthropologist was and remains more broadly defined than I had envisioned. In my mind, I was organizing a relief effort because I cared, not because of my profession. The impact of applied work is tremendous, and while there are disciplinary standards for disseminating anthropological knowledge, these traditions require continuous review. We have an increased responsibility to support a growing public intellectualism as well as making more emotive connections to the self and to those with whom we work. As such, the culture of a more applied praxis requires personal and professional reassessment and refinement, no less than the examined cultural practices of the other.

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Without his invaluable experiences in disaster relief and kind patience, this event would not have been as successful. All photos were taken with permission.

Notes

¹Some of the ideas in this essay have been discussed elsewhere (see Rinehart 2010a, 2010b, 2012a, 2012b).

²For a comprehensive review of neuro-genetic research investigating emotions, see Ebstein et al. 2010.

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