

## The Politics of Similitude: Global Sexuality Activism, Ethnography, and the Western Subject

Tom Boellstorff\*

In this essay I theorize relationships between global sexuality activism, ethnography, and the Western subject: how are all three transformed via their mutual imbrication? My use of the singular here is obviously heuristic: there are many global sexuality activisms, many forms of ethnography, and many Western subjects. Furthermore, in this essay as in my writing more generally, I use the terms “West” and “non-West” to refer to “the effects of hegemonic representations of the Western self rather than its subjugated traditions” (Gupta 36). The terms should therefore be read as if always within scare quotes.

Too often, however, mere pluralization stands in for analysis: turning “activism” into “activisms” does not accomplish much in isolation. In this analysis, I seek to move beyond pluralization and sketch out broad patterns that might provide useful lines of inquiry. I am an activist anthropologist, and as an anthropologist I seek to acknowledge how theorization proceeds from a theorist’s engagement with the persons and places that surround them. We all, anthropologists and others alike, think outwards from our social contexts, both the social contexts of our everyday lives and the social contexts we intentionally forge (but never completely control) through research and activism. Even the most abstract philosophers are powerfully shaped by their social contexts, and naming our social contexts adds clarity and incisiveness to our analyses.

---

\* Tom Boellstorff is Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Irvine, and Editor-in-Chief of *American Anthropologist*. His works include *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia* (2005), *A Coincidence of Desires: Anthropology, Queer Studies, Indonesia* (2007), and *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* (2008). He is co-editor of *Speaking in Queer Tongues: Globalization and Gay Language* (2004), a theme issue of *Ethnos* entitled “Bodies of Emotion: Rethinking Culture and Emotion through Southeast Asia” (2004), and a theme issue of *Anthropological Forum* entitled “East Indies/West Indies: Comparative Archipelagos” (2006).

The theoretical points I set forth in this essay originate above all in my activist experiences in Indonesia that are the basis of my books *The Gay Archipelago* and *A Coincidence of Desires*. I will move outward from those experiences to explore how a politics of similitude might contribute to forms of global sexuality activism. I am clearly far from the first activist anthropologist: my goal is to name and theorize longstanding forms of activism that are often omitted from ethnographic accounts, for political expediency or simply due to the difficult decisions all ethnographers face when deciding what to include in an analysis. I am specifically interested in one subset of what could be termed “outsider activism,” that which involves Westerners working in non-Western contexts. Some activists (myself included) engage in activism in “our own” communities, recognizing that belonging and membership are contested and fractured categories. Many activists also work in communities that are not in some sense “their own.” I will heuristically term this second kind of activism “outsider activism,” while underscoring that the insider/outsider binarism is one thing I wish to problematize—indeed, it is the central binarism troubled by the notion of ethnography.

The reality of global inequality means that when it comes to outsider activism, Westerners engaging with non-Western contexts are far more common than the other way around. My specific interest in this essay is the case of Western sexuality activists working in non-Western contexts, who engage in ethnographic research as part of that activist work. That might sound narrow, but it actually includes a vast range of activism, because even those Western activists who are not professional anthropologists or sociologists often engage in forms of research as part of their work. In addition, looking at this ostensibly narrow topic can cast light on a broad range of questions regarding knowledge, power, and difference. These are also questions of politics—because in the context of continuing worldwide inequality, Western sexuality activists cannot cede the global to those governmental, bureaucratic, and corporate entities that present themselves as holding exclusive provenance over it. How can sexuality activists who are in some sense Western in terms of ethnic/national identification, residence, or citizenship avoid ontologizing the local in ways that limit their political and social effectiveness, yet also avoid (or at least minimize) participation in global hegemonies that privilege the West?

In this essay, I will explore three possible responses to this question. First, I articulate a strategy of activist listening that works toward allowing non-Westerners to set the agenda for sexuality activism. Second, I set forth a

recursive (rather than reflexive) strategy for using Western privilege for non-Western agendas, without the impossible precondition that Western sexuality activists deny or discard their own motivations and investments in activism. Third, I develop the notion of a politics of similitude, a conception of sameness as well as difference as the foundation for Western sexuality activism in non-Western contexts. This third strategy has important implications for notions of coalitional work, and suggests that reconceptualizing the global can itself be part of sexuality activism and ethnography.

All of these strategies, and indeed the entire analysis of this essay, is not specific to sexuality activism: the points I raise are germane to any form of activism. There are two reasons for this. First, it is clear that there is no transhistorical and universal domain of human experience called “sexuality”: as classic analyses of the subject have long established (Foucault 1978; Weeks 1985), the domain of sexuality arose in the West at a particular time and has a range of meanings even in the West itself. “Sexuality activism” will always leak into other cultural domains, from gender to kinship, from health to politics. Second, the Western category of sexuality has set forth sexuality as burdened with an excess of meaning: “a general signification, a universal secret, an omnipresent cause” (Foucault 69). While sexuality is certainly important to many people around the world, it is not inevitably more consequential, taboo, or politicized than any number of topics. Worldwide, activists address issues ranging from environmental degradation to state repression, poverty, and ethnic violence. The methodological and ethical questions that arise when an “outsider” activist addresses such issues are not completely unrelated to the issues sexuality activists face. However, true to form as an anthropologist, I wish to build toward a more generalized analysis by tracing my own entanglements with sexuality activism.

### **Location Work: A Personal Activist History**

I was first introduced to sexuality activism as an undergraduate at Stanford University in the late 1980s. A number of queer students had formed a group, Queerland (playing off “Leland” Stanford Jr. University, the full name of the institution). I was taken by this diverse group’s efforts to claim public space and visibility for non-heterosexual people, and involved myself in this group’s activities during my latter college years. As graduation approached, many of my fellow students made plans to travel abroad—some as tourists pure and simple, but others to engage in various forms of social justice work. Having grown up in Nebraska with little international

experience in comparison to many of my more cosmopolitan (and usually wealthier) fellow Stanford students, I felt a need to gain a better understanding of life outside the United States and wanted to engage in social justice work if possible.

Seeking global activist connections, I had become involved in early 1991 with the newly-formed International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC), based in San Francisco, near Stanford. I eventually travelled with IGLHRC to Moscow in mid-1991 for a pathbreaking LGBT conference, stayed behind to help gay organizations in that city learn to use desktop computers IGLHRC had provided so they could publish magazines, and ended up using those computers to aid in the resistance to the attempted coup that resulted in the breakup of the former Soviet Union. That remarkable experience (see Boellstorff *Coincidence* 9–10) showed me the possibilities of activism to change the world, but two seemingly less-significant aspects of my engagement with IGLHRC had a more lasting impact upon my career.

First, it was through IGLHRC that I gained my first contacts with activist organizations in Southeast Asia (Pink Triangle, in Malaysia, and GAYa Nusantara, in Indonesia). Second, one San Francisco-based activist who participated in the 1991 IGLHRC conference was Pat Norman, Executive Director of the California AIDS Intervention Training Center (later renamed the Institute for Community Health Outreach (ICHO)). At that time, Pat Norman was already an important activist in LGBT and African-American communities, and would soon thereafter serve as National Co-Chair for the 1994 “Stonewall 25” event in New York City. She offered me the opportunity to become certified as a Community Health Outreach Worker at her organization, which would give me skills in HIV prevention education. (I would in future years become an intern and finally staff at ICHO, before turning to graduate school in anthropology.) ICHO’s model of Community Health Outreach was explicitly based upon an ethnographic model. It understood outreach workers to be participant observers who did not necessarily have to “come from” the communities they served (particularly because belonging was understood as achieved and contextual), but who did need to understand any community from the perspective of its members to the greatest degree possible.

In 1992, I made my first trip to Southeast Asia, travelling first to Malaysia and then to Indonesia. In Malaysia’s capital city, Kuala Lumpur, I was fortunate to participate in the work of a group of activists associated with

Pink Triangle. I learned much from their skilled work with limited resources (at that time, the organization was based in the apartment of one of its members). I used my training to assist Pink Triangle as it began outreach work to injecting drug users in Chow Kit, a district of Kuala Lumpur infamous for drug activity.

After a few months in Malaysia, I travelled to the city of Surabaya (in the province of East Java) to meet GAYa Nusantara, which at that time (and for many years thereafter) was based in the home of Dédé Oetomo, a legendary activist. The months I spent in 1992 with GAYa Nusantara and with the organization Citra Usadha in Bali were life-changing. As was the case in Malaysia, I was able in some small way to help in developing outreach programs for these organizations. Through working closely with these activists and the larger communities in which they participated, I started learning about the lives of *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians. Part of my education was learning that the Indonesian terms *gay* and *lesbi* were linked to the English terms “gay” and “lesbian” but were not merely derivative of Western subjectivities: they had their own histories and meanings as they were instantiated in the everyday lives of *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians.<sup>1</sup>

When I returned to the United States, these heady experiences had fostered an interest in learning more about the lifeworlds of *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians. My earlier political work in the United States had impressed upon me the importance of organizing across gendered lines: *gay* men had more access to public space than *lesbi* women, and were far more addressed in HIV/AIDS discourse, but I worked hard to socialize with *lesbi* women as much as I could, and to develop a gendered analysis that foundationally considered the perspectives of women and transgendered persons as well as men. My activism in Malaysia and Indonesia taught me that having a specific skill set could make me at least somewhat useful to groups outside the United States, and that activist work allowed me to participate in everyday life in an intense and rewarding manner.

These early experiences in Indonesia—which was colonized by the Dutch, not the British, so that English-language skills were comparatively rare—showed me that if I wished to continue this kind of work, it was imperative that I improve my skills in the Indonesian language. The US-

---

<sup>1</sup> It is for this reason that I italicize *gay* and *lesbi* throughout: I wish to clearly indicate that these are Indonesian-language terms, linked to but not simply derivative of the English-language terms “gay” and “lesbian.”

based Consortium for the Teaching of Indonesian (COTI)<sup>2</sup> organized a yearly Advanced Indonesian Institute in Indonesia itself. For many years this program had been held in the city of Malang in East Java, but in 1993 the program moved to the city of Makassar in South Sulawesi province. Sulawesi is a large island near Borneo at some remove from the political, economic, and social power concentrated on the island of Java. When I mentioned this institute to Dédé Oetomo, he encouraged me to attend. He explained that he had been corresponding with a group of *gay* men in that city who wanted to start an organization to address HIV prevention (and indirectly, address the social isolation and rights of *gay* men as well). Dédé asked me to go to Makassar and support this group as I could—not only for the sake of *gay* men in that city but because flourishing *gay* or *lesbi* groups beyond Java and Bali would help legitimate *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians as not limited to any one part of the archipelago. At that time, Dédé's organization (GAYa Nusantara) was collaborating with the newspaper Surya: he worked out an arrangement that allowed me to live for three months in a small room in the converted house that served as Surya's bureau office in Makassar. This saved me money, but also crucially provided a small space free from supervision (the other students attending the course were housed with local families).

During my months in Makassar in 1993, I studied the Indonesian language in formal classes during the day, and at night spent time in the parks and salons where many *gay* men socialized. These men had a difficult time finding a place where they could speak privately about their hopes and dreams, and I offered them the small front room of Surya's Makassar office. The building was only about a mile from Karebosi, the town square that was one of the most popular places for *gay* men to socialize, and the reporters all left the office in the afternoon, so that I had the building to myself at night. I remember when I rode around town on the back of a motorcycle with a *gay* friend, passing out invitations to a special meeting to be held at the Surya office. That night about twenty men crowded into the small room; an animated discussion ensued about their isolation, their need to support each other, and their need to better understand HIV—at a time when no one knew any fellow Indonesians infected with the virus and it seemed a disease of the West. They decided to form an organization, and I remember when

---

<sup>2</sup> Later renamed the Consortium for the Teaching of Indonesian and Malaysian (COTIM).

one man said “let’s call it The Pathway Foundation!”—a name the organization used ever since.<sup>3</sup>

For the rest of my time in Makassar, I involved myself in this new group’s activities. One illustrative example: in 1993 the only “*gay* disco” in Makassar was located in a large four-story building that functioned primarily as a (female sex worker) brothel. The “*gay* disco” took place on Thursday nights on the third floor of this building. Members of the Pathway Foundation knew that one of the greatest barriers to *gay* men using condoms for anal intercourse was not accessing condoms themselves, but accessing water-based lubricant. Indonesia’s massive family program had ensured that condoms were relatively inexpensive and ubiquitous, but these condoms were only lightly lubricated, since they were intended for vaginal intercourse.<sup>4</sup> The Indonesian condom companies manufactured the lubricant on those condoms, but did not sell lubricant separately (and would not do so for many years thereafter). In 1993, the only way to obtain water-based lubricant was to purchase imported XY Jelly. Many pharmacies sold KY Jelly, so it was relatively accessible; it was rather expensive for the average working-class Indonesian, but not prohibitively so.

Based on the knowledge Pathway Foundation staff (at this point all volunteer activists) had acquired through their engagements with *gay* men in Makassar, it was clear that the primary barrier to accessing lubricant was that *gay* men were embarrassed to ask for it. In Indonesia at that time, KY Jelly was associated not with condoms and sex but with childbirth; it was most commonly used to lubricate the birth canal during delivery. Why would a man who was not a doctor walk into a pharmacy and ask for it? *Gay* men spoke explicitly of embarrassment in the face of the disapproving “lady behind the counter” (*ibu apotek*) as the reason they would never attempt to purchase KY Jelly, even though this meant they would either forego condoms for anal intercourse or use oil-based lubricants like body lotion, which often caused condoms to break.

Since the *gay* disco provided an opportunity to reach out to a relatively large number of *gay* men in a safe environment where (unlike a park) there

---

<sup>3</sup> Because this is a smaller organization; I have changed its name for anonymity. I discuss the work of this organization in “Nuri’s testimony: HIV/AIDS in Indonesia and bare knowledge,” *American Ethnologist* 36:2 (2009), pp351–363.

<sup>4</sup> Many Indonesian men prefer “dry” vaginal sex, with a minimum of lubrication (this was not necessarily preferred by their female partners, but the Indonesian state, unsurprisingly, paid less attention to the perspective of women). For further discussion of Indonesia’s family planning program, see Dwyer 2000.

was little fear of being overheard, the Pathway Foundation activists decided it would be a good venue for talking to *gay* men about the importance of lubricant. The owner of the disco (and the brothel) agreed we could do something, but given that the disco was an entertainment venue, the activists decided that a humorous skit would be more effective than a formal presentation. The activists settled upon a script that involved a *gay* man going into a pharmacy and asking for KY Jelly. The “lady behind the counter” would stare disapprovingly at the man and question why he wanted lubricant, but the *gay* man would be unfazed and politely insist that he did not need to explain himself and just wanted to purchase KY Jelly. I was impressed with this creative and highly contextual approach to HIV prevention, but was taken aback when the Pathway Foundation staff asked me to play the role of the “lady behind the counter,” in drag. Their explanation was not that pharmacy staff were ever non-Indonesians (I would be speaking Indonesian anyway) but that my presence on stage would make the skit even more entertaining. While I was openly gay to the activists of the Pathway Foundation, I had never cross-dressed in the United States and had no real experience with drag. I trusted the activists, however, and acquiesced to their request.

Thus it was that one Thursday night at the disco, the lights dimmed and the DJ announced that the Pathway Foundation was going to present a show about sex and AIDS. Together with several members of the Pathway Foundation, I walked out onto the dance floor, in full drag, with a *kebaya* (“traditional” skirt), *sanggul* (“traditional” hairstyle, in this case a wig), and makeup that together marked me as impersonating a middle-aged woman. Two members of the Pathway Foundation, in far more regal drag than I, took the microphone and talked to those present—a mixed crowd but one in which *gay* men predominated—explaining that AIDS had already come to Indonesia, even to the island of Sulawesi, and people needed to be careful. One of the activist’s hands punctuated the air as he told the audience that if they had sex with other men, they should use condoms together with water-based lubricant. We then began our little skit: one of the activists took the role of a man entering a pharmacy to ask me, the “lady behind the counter,” for KY Jelly. When I rolled my eyes he stood firm: when I questioned his purpose in wanting to purchase lubricant, he simply answered that he wanted some and it was his own business. Afterwards, the Pathway Foundation activists were thrilled: they had shown that their new group could pull off an organized event and reach men who were otherwise ignored by the public health system. And I was happy that I had helped make the event memorable.



### Activist Listening

It has felt indulgent to devote so much space to my early activism, work I have never before discussed in print. I have taken the time to do so precisely because this activism took place before I became an anthropologist—indeed, was the inspiration for me to enter graduate school in anthropology (my undergraduate degrees were in linguistics and music). In later years, the range of my activism in Indonesia would expand, but the principles remained the same. I still helped provide space for groups to meet whenever I could, a precious resource in a context where few persons live alone. I did drag on a handful of other occasions for the purpose of HIV/AIDS entertainment events.<sup>5</sup> As my linguistic abilities progressed, I was able to conduct outreach worker trainings in the Indonesian language, helping provide activists with new skills. I was also able to help my activist colleagues learn how to use computers and to improve English skills through weekly language lessons. I have helped write many grants for *gay* and *lesbi* groups formalized enough to be registered as nonprofit organizations (NGOs); many (but not all) of these grants have been in the realm of HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, and include what is to my knowledge the first HIV prevention program in Indonesia specifically serving *lesbi* women. In some cases, activists would invite me to come with them to meetings with local or national officials, because the mere presence of an American (particularly one who spoke Indonesian) could help legitimate the activists and ensure they would be granted access. I serve on the advisory boards of the Pathway Foundation and GAYa Nusantara, and have participated in a range of national and transnational conferences to advocate for *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians. I also consider my academic writing on *gay* and *lesbi* culture to be a form of activism, helping legitimate the lifeworlds of these Indonesians, showing the complexity of their lives and its theoretical significance. In this regard I also regard as activism my efforts to get my first book published in Indonesian translation.

Given that I have spent far more time in Indonesia after 1992–93 than during that period, I clearly do not have space to detail all of my activist engagements with *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians, but my narrative thus far makes the rough outline of this activism clear. Throughout this work I have encountered surprisingly few ethical quandaries, despite always being conscious of my status as a white, male American. A few principles have

---

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, *A Coincidence of Desires: Anthropology, Queer Studies, Indonesia*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007, p106.

proven helpful in this regard. First, I engage in activist work not in isolation, but with local activists (of course, many of these “local” activists work on the national and international stage, as in the case of Dédé Oetomo and his colleagues at GAYa Nusantara). Second, I strive always to be aware that when I choose to work with one set of activists (be they a loose network, like the Pathway Foundation in its early days as described above, or a more formalized NGO), other groups in that local context might feel left out. While preventing all hurt feelings is not realistic, it is crucial to work with multiple groups to the greatest degree that one can. Third, I have always refused to take an official staff position in any Indonesian organization or group, paid or unpaid, regardless of the formality of the group in question. For a Westerner like myself who regularly visits but does not live long-term in Indonesia, a position like “Advisory Board Member” is the most appropriate formal role.<sup>6</sup>

A fourth principle I have found useful in mitigating ethical quandaries is what I term “activist listening,” and this principle has broader theoretical implications. In a rush to do good (or to make money, or any number of other motivations), we have seen a long history of Westerners attempting to impose their worldview in non-Western contexts. For instance, in HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment the notion of “best practice” has often been misused to imply that an approach effective in one place can be transplanted with minimal reworking. One thing I learned early in my own activism was the importance of listening to my Indonesian colleagues, and not just listening until I heard what I wanted to hear. Listening implies an investment of time: it can mean weeks or months of informal socializing. Listening also implies understanding the language being spoken, literally and metaphorically. It means patience and attention to context, allowing oneself to be transformed by a range of social actors, not only people who are known as leaders (or claim the status of leader), or people who can speak English.

Like the ethnographic method of participant observation itself, activist listening is an exercise in vulnerability, “a method of being at risk in the face of the practices and discourses into which one inquires... [a] serious nonidentity that challenges previous stabilities, convictions, or ways of being... a mode of practical and theoretical attention, a way of remaining

---

<sup>6</sup> The situation differs for expatriates: while bringing up a distinct set of political and ethical issues, there are numerous cases of expatriate Westerners who work with informal groups or even NGOs in non-Western contexts, often with very positive results.

mindful and accountable” (Haraway 190–91). What makes this listening “activist” is not any self-claimed identity of the listener, but that the listening actively engages with the social context in question. It means listening not just to stories, but to agendas. It means working as an activist in service of priorities set by persons who are otherwise in a structurally disempowered position. Activist listening, as I define it, is thus predicated on recognizing Western privilege but striving to put that privilege to work for non-Western interests. I do not mean that Western activists need disavow their personal and political motivations, but that these motivations be realigned given what non-Westerners say needs to be done. For instance, I went to Makassar at the request of Dédé Oetomo, but in Makassar I was not only able to improve my skills in the Indonesian language, but establish connections that led to Makassar becoming one of my primary ethnographic fieldsites.

This idea of realignment is predicated on the idea that “Western interests” and “non-Western interests,” themselves each internally diverse, are not inevitably opposed. For instance, I would argue that it is “in the interest” of Westerners that non-Western persons with non-normative sexual and gendered subjectivities and practices enjoy full legal rights and social affirmation. It is “in the interest” of Westerners that these non-Westerners enjoy these rights in cases where they do not have lexicalized subjectivities, or have subjectivities radically different from dominant Western notions of gay and lesbian identity. It is also “in the interest” of Westerners that these non-Westerners enjoy these rights in cases where they use terms derived from the English terms “gay” or “lesbian” to understand their sexualities and communities, rather than being dismissed as lackeys of the West or victims of global gay imperialism.

Listening is never truly passive, but I am here gesturing toward a practice of listening that takes into account how activists always come from a background shaped by personal motivations and agendas, regardless of the degree to which the activist is an “outsider.” For the Western activist working in a non-Western context, activist listening can be one way to counter, even partially, a colonial and capitalist history in which the West spoke and the non-West listened, or the West compelled the non-West to speak in a language intelligible to preexisting Western frameworks. It is a means to work against dynamics of global inequality, rather than seek paralyzing refuge in some fantasy of disengagement or separation. I contend that “activism” founded in what is often glossed as the “passive” stance of listening is theoretically, politically, and ethically preferable to either of the most common alternatives one encounters. The first of these is the idea that

activists stand in an automatic global solidarity that makes listening superfluous (because we all share universal values of human rights, equality, and tolerance). The second unsatisfactory alternative is that contemporary capitalist oppressions are so totalizing that Western activists can by definition never truly listen to non-Westerners, and thus that coalition-building across lines of inequality between West and non-West is impossible.

### **Privilege and Similitude**

My other two responses to the question of how sexuality activism by Westerners can effectively and ethically take place in non-Western contexts (so that we avoid ceding social action outside the West to corporations and development agencies) take the form of more general principles, but also originate in my activist experiences. Like the notion of activist listening, my second response—recursive privilege—originates in a sensitivity to power imbalances between Western and non-Western activists. In her work on advocacy in the wake of the Bhopal disaster in India, Kim Fortun notes that “reflexivity asks what constitutes the ethnographer as a speaking subject. Recursivity asks what interrupts her and demands a reply.... What is said in direct advocacy implicates what is possible and necessary to say in ethnography” (Fortun 22–23). As Fortun notes, “reflexivity,” a term much used in ethnographic writing of the 1980s and 1990s, usually refers to the constitution of the ethnographer as a speaking subject, the “I” of the phrase “I was there” that “establishes the unique authority of the anthropologist” (Rabinow 244). In contrast, the concept of recursivity typically indexes the latter half of that paradigm-defining phrase. It is concerned with the discursive constitution of the “there,” the location of ethnographic authority often termed the “fieldsite” (Gupta and Ferguson). Fortun emphasizes the agency of fieldsites: they can interrupt the ethnographer and demand a reply because they are not empty landscapes, but communities of persons to which activists should listen. Such listening, I would argue, is a form of ethnographic engagement.

With the phrase “recursive privilege” I simply mean that Western sexuality activists can acknowledge and leverage their privilege, rather than apologize for or disavow that privilege. The phrase “Western privilege” accurately names the privilege in question, because that privilege is not only a (reflexive) consequence of embodied subjectivity—gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class—but a (recursive) consequence of emplaced subjectivity as Western. Privilege is locational, not just existential, and locations can be decentered and enrolled in alternative geographies. As noted at the outset of

this essay, those parts of the world termed “Western” are not identical to each other, nor are they all wealthy or influential. However, taken as a whole, the West is hegemonic. Hegemonic power is not totalizing power: it is contested and partial, sustained through the manufacture of consent as well as through force, as emphasized by Gramsci in his classic analysis of hegemony. Western activists often have forms of power their non-Western interlocutors do not—skills in English, in computer use, in grantwriting; financial resources and networks that make travel easier; access to resources for education and advocacy. Claims to solidarity that deny these forms of privilege are problematic. Even as a jobless activist in 1992, I had access to forms of privilege that I could put in service of my Indonesian colleagues’ agendas. Thus, one key to Western sexuality activism in non-Western contexts is to account for one’s privilege as a Westerner, and then permit non-Westerners to “interrupt” this privilege and deploy it for goals they articulate.

My third response to the question of how sexuality activism by Westerners can effectively and ethically take place in non-Western contexts, a politics of similitude, might seem to contradict the notion of recursive privilege just discussed, wherein I emphasized the value of acknowledging a relative position of power. However, my activist and ethnographic experiences convince me that the problematic assumption of an “automatic global solidarity” mentioned earlier is not the only way to conceptualize similitude. In the understandable rush Western sexuality activists may feel to acknowledge difference, we do not want to lose sight of the forms of similitude that make “difference” comprehensible. In terms of effective and ethical activism, I cannot overemphasize the importance of developing a theory of similitude, which does not assume that apparent sameness is a symptom of homogenization or a betrayal of the authentic and indigenous. If, say, some non-Western men use an identity term derived from the English word “gay,” or like to wear blue jeans, listen to Madonna, or use Facebook, it is politically and theoretically unacceptable to presume that such men are less authentic than non-Western men who reject the term “gay” or wear traditional clothing.

Effective Western sexuality activism in non-Western contexts requires a politics of similitude that does not prejudice questions of authenticity and belonging. If we assume that the relationship between “Western” and “non-Western” is inevitably one of alterity, we foreclose crucial forms of coalition-building. If we assume that outsider activism of any kind effaces difference, we lose sight of the ways that such activism, like globalization more

generally, can result in new forms of difference. A politics of similitude has been absolutely vital to my work in Indonesia. To dare to take the stage with my Indonesian colleagues, to help them write grants or develop an outreach program for sex workers—all these things and more are predicated on the idea that some shared ground exists between the Western and non-Western sexuality activist.

Crucially, there is an ethnographic dimension to this politics of similitude. As Matti Bunzl has noted, while the dominant understanding of fieldwork set forth by Bronislaw Malinowski in the first decades of the twentieth century had many salutary aspects—including an unprecedented commitment to listening—one damaging legacy has been the assumption of “the constitutive need for displacement and the consequent experience of alterity as foundational to the fieldwork process” (Bunzl 436). This presumption of “Othering” is now sometimes assumed to be an inevitable dimension of ethnographic thinking, but Bunzl emphasized that the tradition linked to Franz Boas (and to many of his activist students, from Margaret Mead to Nora Zeale Hurston) framed fieldwork in a manner that:

...does not rest on a distinction between ethnographic Self and native Other but, instead, draws its analytic leverage from a rigorous historicity that refigures the question of Otherness in terms of temporal rather than cultural alterity... such a stance in no way implies the denial of the existence and paramount importance of cultural difference. What it seeks to suspend, however, is the performative naturalization of cultural difference as the constitutive element of ethnographic fieldwork. (Bunzl 437, 440)

The politics of similitude, then, is a methodology of similitude as well, and this has consequences for conceptualizing activism in the context of ethnography. It is not obligatory that ethnographic research be predicated upon what Bunzl above terms “the performative naturalization of cultural difference.” It can proceed instead from an emergent dynamic of similitude and difference, a dynamic that opens up new possibilities for activism not predicated on the stark and overly simplistic binarism of self/other.

### **Conclusion: the Non-Activist Ethnographer**

The issues I have raised in this essay are personal—originating in my activist work in Indonesia and beyond—but clearly resonate with dilemmas and debates that are not unique to the topic of sexuality or to the Southeast Asian region. Activist listening, recursive privilege, and a politics of similitude

are all heuristics that I have developed in the context of many years of activist anthropology. However, I do not wish to leave the reader with a sense that activism is absolutely necessary for good ethnography.

Speaking for myself, activism and ethnography are two sides of the same coin: from methodological and ethical perspectives, I find it difficult to imagine not engaging in activism. I simply do not know what I would do with myself in my everyday life in Indonesia if I did not engage in activist work. Nonetheless, not all good ethnographic research must involve the kind of activism I discuss here. There exist top-notch ethnographies, going back to scholars like Malinowski and Mead, that are based upon fieldwork for which, at least part of the time, the researcher did not engage in recognizable activism. There are myriad ways in which ethnographers give back to the communities in which they conduct research that may not be named “activism.” And even the most activist ethnographers do not engage in activism every minute of the day, or with every interlocutor they encounter.

My two key conclusions are not about activism as an obligatory component of ethnographic work, but about broader questions of power, knowledge, and politics with regard to activism and ethnography. First, activism and ethnography can be powerfully synergistic. Fieldwork need not be bifurcated into time spent “doing activism” and time spent “doing ethnography.” Many of the ethnographic insights that led to my most fundamental theoretical claims with regard to the lifeworlds of *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians originated in activism. The activist work was ethnographic work at the same time.

Second, while there are certainly political and ethical concerns when Westerners engage in activism in non-Western contexts, attempting to avoid such translocal connections carries political and ethical concerns of its own. Forms of “global disconnect” (Ferguson) can be as problematic as forms of engagement. Globalizing forces are expanding, regardless of what activists do. Corporations, mass media, governments, non-governmental organizations, religious movements, and a range of other actors refuse to limit themselves to the nation-state as the ultimate spatial scale. There is no easy “outside” to globalization and a stance of refusal acts only to trap activism in a reified (and often romanticized) notion of “the local,” a form of “spatial incarceration” that was crucial to the colonial forms of governance that laid the groundwork for the contemporary global order (Mamdani).

In my activist work in Indonesia, I have always been struck by the ways in which the West is present in Indonesia, whether Western activists are in the archipelago or not. That presence—a material and discursive presence—is in myriad ways embraced, rejected, and transformed by Indonesians themselves. My goal is to listen to how *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians engage with that presence, as well as how they engage with the nation-state, local cultures, and other forms of translocal power (like the “world religions” of Islam and Christianity). That listening is an activist act and can engender other forms of activism. Linked to a politics of similitude, such activism can be a powerful means for Westerners to use their privilege in service of social justice. Such activism can, at the same time, be a powerful means for effective ethnographic research, research whose activist effects include contributing to a better understanding of both unique and shared aspects of the human journey.



## Works Cited

- Boellstorff, T. *A Coincidence of Desires: Anthropology, Queer Studies, Indonesia*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.
- . *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.
- . *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.
- . *The Gay Archipelago: Seksualitas dan Bangsa di Indonesia*. Jakarta: Q-Munity Press, 2009.
- . "Nuri's testimony: HIV/AIDS in Indonesia and bare knowledge," *American Ethnologist* 36:2 (2009), pp351–363.
- Bunzl, M. "Boas, Foucault, and the "native anthropologist": Notes toward a neo-Boasian anthropology." *American Anthropologist* 106:3 (2004), 435–42.
- Dwyer, L. "Spectacular Sexuality: Nationalism, Development, and the Politics of Family Planning in Indonesia." *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation*. T. Mayer, ed. Pp. 25–62. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Ferguson, J. *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.
- Fortun, K. *Advocacy After Bhopal: Environmentalism, Disaster, New Global Orders*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.
- Foucault, M. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*. Translated from the French by R. Hurley. New York: Vintage Books, 1978.
- Gramsci, A. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Translated and edited by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith. New York: International Publishers, 1971.
- Gupta, A. *Postcolonial Developments: Agriculture in the Making of Modern India*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998.
- Gupta, A., & Ferguson, J. "Discipline and Practice: "The Field" as Site, Method, and Location in Anthropology." *Anthropological Locations:*

*Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*. Eds. A. Gupta & J. Ferguson. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

Haraway, D. *Modest\_Witness@Second Millenium. FemaleMan\_Meets\_OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Mamdani, M. *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.

Rabinow, P. "Representations are Social Facts: Modernity and Post-Modernity in Anthropology." *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Eds. Clifford & G. Marcus. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.

Weeks, J. *Sexuality and Its Discontents*. New York: Routledge, 1985.