



Engaged Anthropology: Politics Beyond the Text. A Conversation with Stuart Kirsch

written by Ilana Gershon
September, 2018



How can an anthropologist who teaches at a university work towards helping indigenous people in their efforts to make their lives better? Many turn to publishing as an answer, but Stuart Kirsch in this book explores various strategies by which being an anthropological expert can support indigenous communities in their legal battles against extractive corporations and governments. He describes



the paths he took as an activist, and explores the ethical possibilities and pitfalls in becoming an engaged anthropologist. Ilana Gershon sits down with Stuart Kirsch to discuss his new book [*Engaged Anthropology: Politics Beyond the Text* \(University of California, 2018\)](#).

Ilana Gershon [IG]: You ask in your book whether engaged research is good for anthropology. I was wondering if you could talk a bit about where this question comes from for you, and some of the paths you took towards making up your own mind about this.

Stuart Kirsch [SK]: The question is provoked in part by the kinds of things you worry people might say when they read your tenure or promotion file, or tell your graduate students when your back is turned. I used to have a dean who always introduced me as “Stuart, our *engaged* anthropologist,” said in a way that reminded me of the Talking Heads’ *Psychokiller* (“Qu’est-ce que c’est . . . Run run run run run run away . . .”). Or as I mention in the book, when I was still a visiting professor without a tenure track position, I had a colleague who told me that jobs in the academy were reserved for scholars who think great thoughts, not for anthropologists who chase ambulances.

So I wanted to tackle the question head on: Is this kind of work good for anthropology?

Answering the question poses a challenge. When we become advocates in the field, does this invalidate our research or distort our results? If I’m a supporter of indigenous land rights, can I possibly be fair to New Zealand sheep farmers (Dominy 2000, Dominy and Walford 2001), or to creole gold miners in the interior rain forest of Guyana?

One way to shut down engaged anthropology is to argue that the results are biased, but I think with greater reflexivity you can maneuver your way around that, and the language of bias presumes a concept of objectivity few of us in the social sciences would be comfortable with. Another way to shut down engaged



anthropology is to assert that taking a position will limit who you can talk to, although the people actually doing this kind of work have found that doing engaged research provides them with access to a much broader range of people (Kirsch 2002; Sawyer 2004; Loperena 2016), including those who might shut the door on anthropologists who assert their neutrality.

But the other part of the question is whether people who are advocates in their research, who do engaged anthropology, produce “good enough” ethnography (see Scheper-Hughes 1992)? By this I mean research that is valuable beyond the immediate context. And that’s a question that runs throughout the book, and is to some extent its *raison d’être*. I didn’t want to answer this question via arm-waving or citing French philosophers; I wanted to answer it through concrete, ethnographic examples that show both the challenges and shortcomings of engaged research but also the insights that can emerge in these contexts, ideas that travel beyond the problem at hand. I wanted to provide readers with the evidence needed to answer the question: “Is engaged anthropology good for anthropology?”

IG: How would you compare your experiences of long-term engaged research with your more short-term experiences?

SK: Downstream from the Ok Tedi mine, where I have lived and worked for thirty years, people know me and I know them. In many cases, I know their parents or they remember meeting me when they were children. For many years, during the long-running lawsuit (1994 to 1996, and again from 2001 to 2004), against the Australian mining company BHP, the case was pretty much all people wanted to talk about with me, which was somewhat limiting.

But that work built on my earlier dissertation research, during which I learned to speak their language, learned about things like their responses to sorcery and their male initiation myths, etc. (see Kirsch 2006). When people ask me about their interactions with the environment, I have things to say, rather than having to look up the answers in a book or an article written by an earlier anthropologist,



or make essentialist claims about Papua New Guinea, which is especially ill-advised.



Hydraulic mining on the Mazaruni River, Guyana. Photo by Stuart Kirsch

But that's never going to be the case in short-term projects. I have to work with an interpreter if they don't speak English. I will never have deep familiarity with their relationships to the environment. And to claim that what happens in Guyana is the same as what happens in Papua New Guinea because they are indigenous is to turn one's back on the discipline's fundamental understanding of the importance of cultural differences.

Nonetheless, being politically engaged offers a set of shortcuts. You have a common goal: to produce an expert report or document their perceptions and



experiences of a problem in a way that will support their cause or claims. People mobilize themselves to help you achieve this goal. You aren't there to obtain a holistic overview of society, but clues do drop out of conversations and from visiting the places where the problems are. I always like to experiment with methods, and focus groups are a key component of how I'm able to do short-term engaged research.

It is surprising how much you can learn in a short, concentrated burst of fieldwork when people are motivated to work with you.

I'm equally conscious of the fact that getting beyond that initial level of understanding acquired in a few weeks would require proper Malinowskian fieldwork, starting with the language but including digging in for a year or more. The trade-off is that I get the benefit of first-hand access to comparative knowledge when I move between fieldsites. And the community gets the benefit of an expert opinion or report, etc., that contributes to their political struggle.

IG: One thread in your book that I didn't expect was a prolonged discussion of how affidavits function as a genre, and how anthropological research should be presented anticipating a court as audience. What are some of your suggestions for future anthropological writers of affidavits?

SK: I do write a lot for lawyers and courts. In some ways, the principles of good writing are the same: be clear, provide examples, be persuasive, and as Igor Kopytoff once advised me, "Don't be wishy-washy." But you also need to let go of some of our disciplinary habits, especially extended use of specialized vocabulary. Actually, you can use whatever technical terms you like as long as you define them. But when I write for the courts I always whisper to myself: "Don't fall down any rabbit holes." Anthropologists are like Alice in this regard: the magic comes *precisely* when we enter a new world! But when writing for the courts, you need to keep moving forward, minding the odometer, so to speak. There isn't time for those lovely, scenic detours that make the anthropological journey so memorable.



In fact, writing for the courts has some similarities to the genre of proposal writing as we try to teach it to our graduate students.

In this case, imagine someone reviewing thousands of pages of testimony and other legal documents; how do you capture and hold their attention? Part of the answer, I think, is that anthropologists have the ability to take a complex situation and do the following two things for their readers: (1) Show them that their everyday assumptions, their ordinary ways of thinking about the problem, are insufficient, and (2) Provide them with a productive way of seeing the issues in a new way, which is relevant to the decisions they will have to make. Don't just add facts, provide them with the means to organize or frame the information in the case. If you can accomplish that, your work for the courts will be valued, and hopefully be of value to the people whose stories and experiences you are sharing.

IG: Not all your accounts of engaged anthropology involve traveling overseas to communities who have requested your presence and anthropological expertise. You also have a chapter on being an engaged anthropologist at home. What insights or cautions would you give other anthropologists and/or activists trying to transform institutions based on your experience?

SK: I have a colleague who is critical of campus protestors, colleagues and students who act up and act out in a safe space rather than tackling problems in the real world, which is a lot more perilous. I wanted to disabuse him of this notion for two reasons. First of all, as readers of Victor Turner know, the liminality and communitas of public protests can move beyond their initial context to provoke real structural change, and protest movements in universities have done this in many times and places.

But the second reason is that while participating in campus politics may occasionally earn you an appreciative nod, it can also alienate other colleagues. Certain doors will swing shut as you speak out. For example, the people running an initiative on ethics declined to fund a project that examined the influence of corporate investments on campus because I wanted to talk about specific



examples of the mining industry's presence, including BHP's logo on the engineering school's solar car, a key symbol of the university's commitment to sustainable development (see Blumenstyk 2007).[\[1\]](#)

Or to take an example I discuss at length in the book, some of my colleagues were critical of the support I provided to a group of graduate students trying to provoke discussion on the archaeology museum's policies towards the repatriation of Native American human remains. The irony is that even though that situation subsequently turned 180 degrees around, to the point that the museum now receives praise and offers of collaboration from the Native American community in Michigan, nobody comes back and says: "Sorry, we realize everything the graduate students were saying was true." Or acknowledges that speaking up on these issues helped to bring about a positive solution to the problem.

But I'd like to end on a positive note: that even as some doors may swing shut, others will open up. For every opportunity that might be foreclosed, I receive another invitation to speak or write something, or gain access to new opportunities because of my willingness to do this kind of work. For every colleague who might object to or belittle engaged anthropology, there are many others who support it. And if your work doesn't make at least a few people uncomfortable, or even occasionally upset, you may not be doing a good job! These are signs you are helping things change.

[\[1\]](#) A side note: the logo is no longer there. □

Stuart Kirsch. 2018. *Engaged Anthropology: Politics Beyond the Text*. 328 pp. Pb \$29.95. University of California Press. ISBN: 9780520297951.



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Featured image: [Donatus Moiwend](#), 'Politics' (Photo (cropped) by Rosa Moiwend)