



# Personalizing Personalizing Praxis

Access,

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Anthropology trained us to identify systems of oppression, those “invisibilized” dimensions of culture that reek of prejudice, privilege, and disproportionate power dynamics. These are the very theoretical and methodological orientations we bring to bear now in this public reckoning.

Participant-observation—to sit ‘outside of’ and ‘within’ at the same time, is the central paradox and promise of ethnographic fieldwork. Paired with self-



reflexivity, this praxis has been an acknowledgement, if not absolution, of bias, an excuse to avoid the personal dimensions of anthropological work. We carry the privilege of embeddedness and separation, the “unbearable lightness” (Redfield 2012) of ethnographic mobility, which allows practitioners to move between fieldsites. This moment is rent by the perceived tension between the personal and the political—that idiom of feminist advocacy blending ethnographies of the particular, as it were, with institutional, structural analysis. Far too often, an individual’s scholarship and contributions to the discipline have been used as a defense against their misconduct. A professor’s prominent reputation in one field of study can be used as a protective shield against critiques of the dubious behaviors they personally adopt, while simultaneously condemning the very same power structures in the classroom or in a journal article. The professors who attend sexual harassment trainings or unconscious bias workshops and debate the facilitator on the politics of consent and difference, use their academic training as a shield, to avoid considering how they have themselves exploited their positions of power.

*What worth is your mastery of Foucault, that Panoptic gaze wandering everywhere but inward?*

The injustice of such an inflection point is not the stripping away of ‘Ivory Tower’ honors from those accused of misconduct. Our attention should instead be focused on the scholars who never got to join the conversation because of harassment and abuse, such as [latent racism](#), misgendering, benevolent sexism, [ableism](#). Those who weren’t able to access research because of paywalls; anachronistic conceptions of ethnography in the exotic and the elsewhere; the belief that anthropology could neither be for or by them. Not to mention the way that power metastasizes between professors and their students, or the forms of judgment that percolate between intellectuals fortunate enough to secure positions in academe and those who work outside of academia because of their personal politics or [professional precarity](#). For indeed, a scholar’s investments in particular kinds of ethnographic inquiry because of their identity is often seen as



invalidating or undermining the veracity and rigor of their approach.

*We are too close to the subject—because we never allow the subject to be ourselves, despite all the exhortations of emic and etic.*

But the anthropologists-in-training were always watching. We saw how anthropology was good to think with, just as we learned which modes of being with the theory were considered legitimate. Our bodies, as delicate instruments of ethnography, needed to be perfectly calibrated to the intellectual and cultural expectations of the classroom and the conference hall, learning how to code our difference through the texts we'd been assigned to read. At the same time, we versed ourselves in the politics of passing—encrypting our critiques of disciplinary culture, collecting fieldnotes of all the ways our unruly bodies, our unruly thinking-bodies, were regarded as disruptive. I say 'unruly' because it bespeaks a restlessness, a disquiet, an unwillingness to bow easily to discipline or order. Unruly also hints at the ways that scholars with more personal or radical politics, as students, are often treated as wayward, failing to abide by the strict rules of the classroom.

Requests for pedagogical interventions like trigger warnings are not excesses of affect or sensitivity—they represent calls to recognize that there are personal stakes in our scholarship, as well as consequences. These consequences might manifest as the physical and epistemic risks of fieldwork, or considerations of intellectual and bodily safety, hazards often borne by the most vulnerable or the least secure in the discipline.

Anthropology essentially issues a challenge. It asks us to sit with uncertainty, to listen attentively and with care, to make spaces for the worlds not yet privy or ready to be hailed. It is a quiet call to rethink and remake the conditions that surround us. This is how we were trained—to disrupt and make plain, through personal stories and discourses, the possibility of multiplicity through alternative moral registers and subjugated forms of knowledge. The disciplinary structure of academia has often protected those who exploit their positions, while failing to



reward those junior scholars working to enact the engaged, barefoot anthropology central to reframing our ethical paradigm at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

We must continue to take up that challenge, studying up and down and within, recognizing that such multiplicity is also generative of opportunity and possibility. In the act of destabilization, we discover a new center of gravity, a fresh physical and epistemic footing amidst familiar terrain. #Hautalk is emblematic of the slow-motion crisis at the heart of the discipline—old problems of marginality folded and repeated in the cadences and rhythms of our work, punctuated by moments of outcry

*So let us begin with our own margin work.*

## Works Cited

Redfield, Peter (2012). The Unbearable Lightness of Expats: Double Binds of Humanitarian Mobility. *Cultural Anthropology* 27, no. 2: 358-382. <https://culanth.org/articles/28-the-unbearable-lightness-of-expats-double-binds>