Introduction
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Although this activity appeared to follow the standard “academic workshop” format of papers-discussion-conclusions, it also departed from that format in important, formative, at times radical ways. The Coalition Against Police Abuse (CAPA) offices, located in the heart of South Central, are a living museum of 30 years of ongoing community struggle for social justice, with a primary emphasis on the lives and struggles of African Americans. A mural on one wall depicts this history in Diego Rivera style; another on the adjacent wall memorializes the “gang truce” between the Crips and the Bloods, which CAPA helped to forge in 1992. Pictures, posters, and other artifacts of community activism fill every available space in the main conference room. Directly across from the table where we worked for the two days hangs a frame, with pictures of two Black men who the police shot down on the UCLA campus in the days of Black Panther activism. As our first session began on Friday morning, Ruthie Gilmore briefly remembered one of these men, John Huggins, her cousin, who had been like a brother to her. This moment of reflection drove home the deeply felt personal and political immediacy of the workshop, and set the tone for the discussions that followed.

My own notes from the L.A. Workshop on Activist Scholarship, CAPA, April 2003

Strong passions are necessary to sharpen the intellect and help make intuition more penetrating. . . . Reality is a product of the application of human will to the society of things. . . . Only the man who wills something strongly can identify the elements which are necessary to the realization of his will.

ANTONIO GRAMSCI, Prison Notebooks

The primary purpose of this volume is to provide a broad and grounded counterpoint to the standard admonition to students entering social science and humanities graduate training programs: “Welcome, come in, and please leave your politics at the door.” Some aspects of our message
are already conventional wisdom. It has long since become a truism, perhaps best illustrated in the biting satiric novels of authors such as David Small and Karin Narayan, that academic politics of the “small p” variety is rampant in our universities. More substantively, poststructur- alist theorists of varying affinities have delivered the basic critique forcefully and persistently over the past three decades: all knowledge claims are produced in a political context; notions of objectivity that ignore or deny these facilitating conditions take on a de facto political positioning of their own, made more blatant and unavoidable by the very disavowal.1 Further, if we consider the full spectrum of affiliations that the word political entails, we find politics in academe at every turn as high-level professors shuttle back and forth between the university and government or private sector pursuits. Nevertheless, graduate students and junior faculty members are regularly warned against putting scholar- ship in the service of struggles for social justice, on the grounds that, however worthy, such a combination deprives the work of complexity, compromises its methodological rigor, and, for these reasons, puts career advancement at risk.

This volume advances the opposite argument—that research and political engagement can be mutually enriching—and offers a wide range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives on how the two have been brought together. The essays collected here are meant to chart some paths taken and to inspire others to follow, not by glossing over difficulties and contradictions, but by confronting them head on. One of the principal reasons for the skeptical reception of activist scholarship within the academy in the past has been the tendency for proponents to make the case in terms that sound overly celebratory or sanguine. In contrast, by naming and confronting the contradictions from the outset, we deflect the common objection that activist scholars seek reductive, politically instrumental truths at the expense of social complexity. Another principal reason that activist scholarship of the type documented here has made only small inroads in our universities is that the institutional powers that be find it threatening. Such conflicts are real and at times daunting. Yet the essays here in general emphasize a different scenario, in which modest institutionalization of activist scholarship, as one option among many, can help universities resolve specific problems and can enrich the entire spectrum of scholarly and pedagogic goals that universities encompass. The fact that support for this volume came from the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) constitutes a resounding vote of confidence in this pluralist scenario; such support illustrates
broader trends in the United States and internationally, to be revisited later in this introduction, that substantiate the steady increase in legitimacy and recognition of activist scholarship today.

At the same time, activist scholars, at least in North America and Europe, are still mainly located at the margins of mainstream academic institutions and often prefer to speak from these locations. The contributors to this volume, for example, are predominantly scholars of color, many of whom are associated with ethnic studies programs and have greater affinities with imagined political-intellectual communities revolving around feminist theory, critical race theory, and activist scholarship itself than with the disciplines in which they were trained. The preponderance of scholars of color in this volume stems neither from a superficial celebration of diversity nor from a facile elevation of experience as a privileged source of analytical insight and political authority. Rather, it is the expression of a basic principle: for people who feel directly and personally connected to broader experiences of oppression and to struggles for empowerment, claims of objectivity are more apt to sound like self-serving maneuvers to preserve hierarchy and privilege; and the idea of putting scholarship to the service of their own communities’ empowerment and well-being is more apt to sound like a sensible, if not an inevitable, way to practice their profession. For those, like myself, who do not claim such experience-based connections, the move is one of active alignment, avoiding the righteous fervor of a convert/traitor while rejecting the privilege-laden option to remain outside the fray. Activist scholarship, in this sense, is inevitably (at least for the foreseeable future) a practice from the margins, undertaken for us all out of motives that variously combine necessity and choice.

The essays gathered here are intended to till a field, not to fill a container. A review of the literature on activist scholarship, known by an array of specific names (action research, participatory action research, collaborative research, grounded theory, public intellectual work, engaged research, and the like), yields a large number of works of the "container" variety: attempts first to stake out definitional ground and then to establish rules, procedures, and best practices, often in the tone of a “how-to” manual. Such texts have their place, but they can also be constraining. In contrast, the challenge here is to provide a general mapping of how people think about and practice activist scholarship, while leaving the research process fully open to contradiction, serendipity, and reflexive critique. The authors in this collection have met this challenge by taking a strongly experience-based approach: explaining what they
do, what the consequences are, and how a certain kind of scholarship has emerged from their own particular blends of political commitments and research practice. Some of the essays are more general and programmatic, others more empirically focused, and taken together they constitute not a unified method but an open field with a fair amount of shared ground.

At the risk of unwarranted enclosure of the field, this introductory chapter attempts to identify the shared ground and briefly to explore some of the implications that follow. Each author makes her or his political alignments explicit, rejecting the assertion that this would somehow undermine scholarly rigor. Alignments with specific groups of people, in turn, foster a commitment to listen closely to them, to assign special importance to their agency and standpoint. This requires a certain practice of qualitative research methods, not as a sole defining feature, but as a necessary element to ensure that these people’s voices are heard. The practice of qualitative research methods is not sufficient, however, given the further principle that the people who are subjects of research play a central role, not as “informants” or “data sources,” but as knowledgeable, empowered participants in the entire research process. Once the research topic has been determined through horizontal dialogue of this sort, the participants assume a special responsibility for the validity of the research outcome, knowing that it is apt to have direct applicability in their own lives. For all the variation in discipline, empirical focus, and method represented here, this last feature stands out as fundamental: activist scholars work in dialogue, collaboration, alliance with people who are struggling to better their lives; activist scholarship embodies a responsibility for results that these “allies” can recognize as their own, value in their own terms, and use as they see fit. In this way, activist scholarship redefines, and arguably raises the stakes for, what counts as high-quality research outcomes; this, in turn, gives it the potential to yield knowledge, analysis, and theoretical understanding that would otherwise be impossible to achieve.

This summary is intended not to close discussion but to invite critical scrutiny and reformulation, some of which will come from these very pages. To make the invitation complete, the argument needs to be filled out, especially in relation to three assertions embedded in the preceding paragraph, regarding methodological rigor, scholarly privilege, and theoretical innovation. Each can be framed and explored in relation to a countervailing challenge. First, how can activist scholarship claim methodological rigor while rejecting the positivist notion of objectivity that
has been the lynchpin of such claims throughout the twentieth century? Second, once political engagement has been established as a defining feature of one’s scholarship, doesn’t this mean relinquishing the control necessary to ensure a high-quality outcome? Third, isn’t activist research more accurately portrayed as the “praxis” side of the theory-and-praxis combination, which in turn leaves it poorly suited to yield theoretical innovation? In the pages that follow, I briefly recount the genesis of this volume, from a proposal to the SSRC-sponsored International Peace and Security (IPS) program to its current state. I then draw on the essays in this volume to elaborate on the assertions and to address their countervailing challenges, devoting one section to each.

HOW THIS VOLUME CAME TO BE

For me the account begins in revolutionary Nicaragua. During the 1980s I worked for about five years with a Nicaraguan organization called the Center for Research and Documentation on the Atlantic Coast (CIDCA), which carried out research and analysis in critical support of the Sandinista revolution. Simultaneously, I carried out research on my dissertation, focused on conflict between the Sandinista state and Miskitu Indians, and on the eventual negotiated settlement, sealed when the central government granted rights to autonomy for indigenous and black inhabitants of the coastal region. From this experience I gained an introduction to activist scholarship, became convinced of its promise (even amid intense contradictions), and developed something of an expertise in the broader topic of “ethnic conflict,” which would gain great prominence in global post–Cold War political and intellectual agendas. This expertise, combined with the practical, problem-solving orientation that activist research embodies, left me well suited to join the Global Security and Cooperation (GSC) program associated with the SSRC and funded by the MacArthur Foundation. First as a postdoctoral fellow (1989–91), and later as a committee member, I maintained a thirteen-year association with this program, participating in many of the yearly fellows’ conferences and later in the selection of fellows and, as the sole anthropologist on the committee, working with others to bring an anthropological and “human security” perspective to the program. Not until 2001, however, did the opportunity arise to make a direct connection between my activist research experience and the GSC program.

In 1999 the MacArthur Foundation renewed a five-year cycle of support for the GSC program, with a bold two-pronged methodological in-
novation. The new guidelines mandated a vigorous internationalization of peace and security studies and required fellowship research proposals to have a “collaborative” component, understood as research designed to cross the boundaries of distinct realms of knowledge production (i.e., academics in cooperation with nongovernmental organization [NGO], government, private sector, or social movement intellectuals). In keeping with the first objective of internationalization, the new thirteen-member committee had only two U.S.-born scholars and included a fascinating, dynamic roster of accomplished intellectuals who combined scholarly endeavors with political engagements of diverse sorts and sequences. In addition to fellowships and the yearly conferences, this GSC program allocated a certain portion of its budget to “field-building” projects, proposed by committee members, with the purpose of exploring and strengthening some facet of the program’s new mandate. After long discussions with others on the committee, especially Dani Nabudere and Francis Loh, I submitted a proposal for a field-building project to explore the contributions of “activist scholarship” to the broader rubric of “collaborative research.” This proposal, which included a workshop and commissioned essays for a volume, was finally approved in our biennial committee meeting of early September 2001.

That turned out to be the last selection meeting that the GSC program ever had. Global turmoil in the months after the 9/11 attacks and new leadership in the MacArthur Foundation converged to produce an abrupt change of course in the foundation’s nearly two-decade program of support for the progressive transformation of “security studies.” While the pre-9/11 programmatic goals had included decentralization of U.S. dominance in security studies, methodological innovation, and distinctly plural notions of security, the post-9/11 MacArthur funding, we were informed, would shift (back) to terrorism, technology, weapons of mass destruction, and other U.S.-centered definitions of the field. While commitments already made would be respected, all remaining funding would be reallocated toward these new goals, and the GSC Committee would be disbanded. By the time of the activist scholarship workshop in Los Angeles (April 2003), the GSC program was closing accounts, and the audacious alternative vision of security studies, while arguably more urgently needed than ever before, had lost a major source of both economic backing and institutional legitimacy. The SSRC continued to support this book on activist scholarship, even though forces of global change had conspired to eliminate the stimulating programmatic setting from which the idea had originally emerged.